

Sustainability and Post-Anthropocentrism: A Posthumanist Study of the Select Works of Gabriel Okara

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Sustainable development is a term that is all-inclusive. Human and non-human beings are mutually interdependent upon each other. But environment is an autonomous entity. The four layers of the earth – lithosphere, hydrosphere, atmosphere, and biosphere – constitute the homeostatic nuances of environment. According to the evolutionary theory of Darwin, survival of the fittest species would take place through ‘natural selection’ (Darwin, 1859). Still, he never forgets to pinpoint the mutual relationality and shared interdependence of all the life-forms as well as inanimate dynamics in this universe: “Let it be borne in mind how infinitely complex and close fitting are the mutual relations of all organic beings to each other and to their physical conditions of life” (Darwin, 1859, p. 79). In other words, a given species would survive as long as it abides by the terms and conditions of the surrounding environment. If it begins malignantly affecting nature, and putting the ontological aspect of other species at stake,

nature herself inclemently and necessarily wipes that species out, no matter however developed and dominant it becomes. The Triassic-Jurassic extinction event, in which all the non-avian dinosaurs were eliminated, though the lineage of avian dinosaurs still lingers in birds, stands as a testimony to the above argument.

Humanism is a concept that favours an authoritarian, autocratic monopoly over nature and other non-human organisms. Paul Allender(2013) has traced the words 'humanist' and 'humanism':

It would appear that the word 'humanist' first appeared in the late fifteenth century in Northern Italian university education and was derived from Cicero's cultural ideal of *Humanitas*. The first 'humanists' were scholars and teachers who continued the classical tradition in grammar, rhetoric, poetics and moral philosophy. These early humanists were specialists in Latin and Greek language and literature. The term 'humanism' first appeared in France in the mid-sixteenth century in the writing of Michel de Montaigne, to mean 'non-theologians', but was not accepted by the French academy until the early eighteenth century. (pp. 319-20)

It was promoted through the concept of the Great Chain of Being or 'scala naturae' (Ladder of Being) in the scholastic period by Plato, Aristotle, and the *Old Testament*(Ferrando, 2013). Further, the idea was reinstated on a Neo-Platonic paradigm by Pico Della Mirandola in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. In this concept, human being is hierarchically ostended to be superior to animals, birds, plants, and minerals. He orates

that human being can even equal to the angels called Cherubs, by the dint of his philosophizing intelligence and power of reason, and ascend to the seats of other prominent angels, like Seraphim and Thrones(Della Mirandola, 2012). Later on during the Renaissance, this ideal of humanism encouraged a shift from theocentric to anthropocentric weltanschauung.

Anthropocentrism is a much-contested issue in our world. Fundamentally, it points to the idea that the species *Homo sapiens* is the centre in this planet around whom all other non-human species and even environment are rotating. It derives from the blending of two Greek words 'anthropos' meaning 'human' and 'kentron' or 'centre'(Marchesini, 2017). It has been categorized into three types: ontological, ethical, and epistemological. Ontological anthropocentrism indulges the ideology that human being (particularly male) can self-sufficiently develop his own identity and he has an autonomous importance. According to the ethical one, he is free to exploit and utilize the non-human and yet bears no moral duty, *per se*, to the other species. Epistemological anthropocentrism informs that human being and his attributes are the universal scale to measure the non-human characteristics. This concept also triggers the idea of 'anthropometrics', that too proposes that human organ is the ideal to measure the optimal(Marchesini, 2017). This idea is first conceptualized by Protagoras to be, as Braidotti quotes, "the measure of all things"(Braidotti, 2013, p. 13). It is immaculately exemplified in Leonardo da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man" (see Figure 1)(Vinci, n.d.). This painting substantiates the prejudiced stance that "human beings are the measure and

universal dimension by which to describe and explain any non-human reality” (Marchesini, 2017, p. 147).

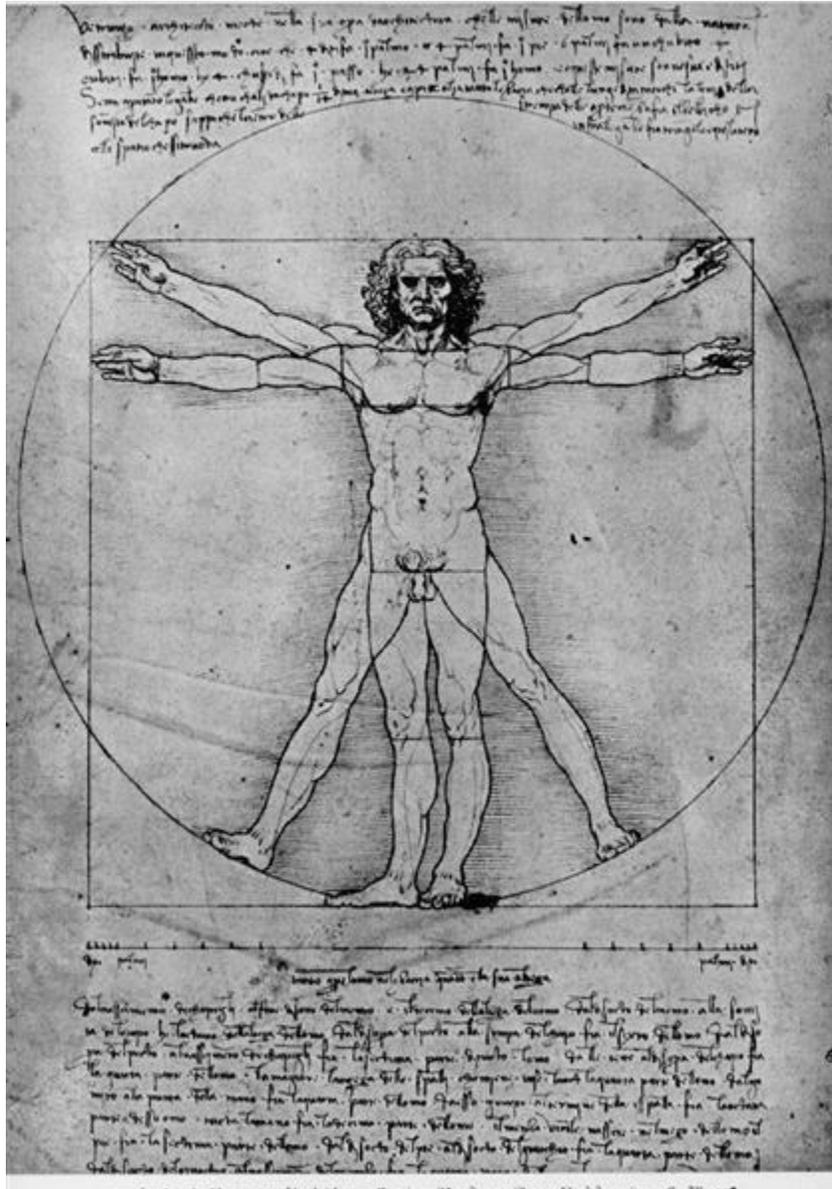


Fig. 1. *The Vitruvian Man* (1492) by Leonardo da Vinci

After the postwar surge of existentialism, the philosophical movement of ‘anti-humanism’ initiated with the post-structuralist thinkers, especially Heidegger’s *Letter on*

Humanism(Han-pile, 2010). Michel Foucault(2005) announces the 'death of Man' in his seminal text *The Order of Things*, having challenged the ideology of hegemonic humanism:

Perhaps we should see the first attempt at this uprooting of Anthropology - to which, no doubt, contemporary thought is dedicated - in the Nietzschean experience: by means of a philological critique, by means of a certain form of biologism, Nietzsche rediscovered the point at which man and God belonged to one another, at which the death of the second is synonymous with the disappearance of the first, and at which the promise of the superman signifies first and foremost the imminence of the death of man. (p. 373)

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida(2008) challenges the basic humanist tenets and lays bare the inherent logical fallacy within humanism by questioning its fundamental claims of superiority: "Who was born first, before the names? Which one saw the other come to this place, so long ago? Who will have been the first occupant, and therefore the master? Who the subject? Who has remained the despot, for so long now?" (p. 18).Rosi Braidotti(2013) cites the feminist theorists like Luce Irigaray who outline and criticize the androcentric philosophization of humanism: "... the allegedly abstract ideal of man as a symbol of classical Humanity is very much a male of the species: it is a he. Moreover, he is white, European, handsome and able-bodied"(p. 24). Therefore, these conditions naturally exclude a vast section of people on racial, ethnic, and disability grounds. Sartre(1963) in the preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*exposes the inhumane aspect of humanism, "... the black and yellow voices still talked of our

humanism, but it was to blame us for our inhumanity” (p. xliii). The classical humanism has ostracized the ‘other’ on sexual (woman), racial (non-European), and natural (non-human beings and environment) planes. They are pushed outside the entire humanist propaganda. But the paradox is that behind the pejorative indifference regarding the ‘other’, there is a lack or ignorance in humanist knowledge system. Paul Gilroy calls this ignorance ‘agnatology’ or ‘enforced and structural ignorance’ (as cited in Braidotti, 2013, p. 28). Thus the phraseology ‘the measure and universal dimension’ to illustrate humanism is a paradoxical and ironical one (Marchesini, 2017, p. 147). This sustained, structured ignorance or unfamiliarity about other cultures around the globe has been critiqued by Edward Said (2004) as “self-puffery, not humanism and certainly not enlightened criticism” (p. 27). Again, the awareness of this sense of lack is achieved through ‘animal epiphany’ as demonstrated by Marchesini (2017): “Animal epiphany is the manifestation of metamorphosis, the non-confirming mirror, Dorian Gray’s picture – pushing us to reflect on ourselves and showing the body’s nakedness” (p. 18). The same nakedness is likely to be experienced by Derrida (2008) when he utters, “I often ask myself, just to see, who I am – and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, by the gaze of an animal, for example, the eyes of a cat” (pp. 3–4).

Anthropocentrism stands on a ‘psychotic speciesist perception’ (Ferrando, 2019, p. 105). The Self/Other binary and to treat difference as pejorative – these are the two facets of classical humanism that are critiqued by the post-1968 thinkers. Rosi Braidotti (2019) defined “the posthuman as a convergence phenomenon between post-

humanism and post-anthropocentrism”(p. xi). This expostulation harbours both the questioning to the claim of the universal ideal of man of reason as well as dismissal of the supremacy among all other species. According to the posthumanist philosophy, human being is not a self-governing, independent agent, but an entity that has to rely on both animate and inanimate others. Biogenetic developments threaten the severance of ‘bios’ (human life) from ‘zoe’ (the lives of animals and nonhumans). Animals, insects, plants, cells, bacteria, planet, cosmos are “conceptual personae” to Ferrando (Braidotti, 2019, p. xiv). The conception of ‘human’ commences to be deconstructed politically in the 1960s, academically in the 1970s, and epistemologically in the 1990s (Ferrando, 2019). Therefore, Ferrando (2019) regards posthumanism as the second generation of postmodernism. From the post-humanist perspective, the generalization of ‘anthropos’ is precarious. An indigenous tribe leading a traditional life in the Amazon forest does not have the same environmental impact of people leading a regular life in an industrialized city (Ferrando, 2019).

Post-anthropocentrism, according to Ferrando (2019), interminably and invariably keeps contesting the idea of ‘Anthropocene’, and prioritizes the Holocene. Consequently, the ongoing unmindful brutality of humans results in the ‘Sixth Mass Extinction’ or the Holocene Extinction. Posthumanist studies redefine and decentralize the notion, ‘human’, in its mutual relationship with Environment. Gabriel Okara, one of the most prominent African poets, composes poems like “The Mystic Drum”, “Piano and Drums”, and “The

Call of the River Nun" with an ecological concern, despising the systematic exploitation of the West upon tribal organic, harmonic lifestyle.

Speciesism is in direct sync with Anthropocene. Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer popularize the term "Anthropocene" and located it in the latter part of the eighteenth century(Ferrando, 2019). Since the Industrial Revolution human activities leave malevolent scars on the biosphere and other non-human species. Though Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis has been criticized for its dualistic discourse and geo-centric approach, it has significantly inseminated the ground to challenge anthropocentrism. It has brought Darwinian vision to a confrontation. Even if species breeds the 'fittest' progeny, its survival is wholly contingent on its impact on environment. Gaia theory has been criticized from a posthumanist perspective also. Rosi Braidotti(2013) defines the Gaia theory as "geo-centered" since it proposes "a return to holism and to the notion of the whole as a single, sacred organism"(p. 84). She further explains, "What is problematic about it is less the holistic part than the fact that it is based on a social constructivist dualistic method. This means that it opposes the earth to industrialization, nature to culture, the environment to society and comes down firmly on the side of the natural order" (pp. 84-85).

Ferrando(2019) mentions Jussi Parikka who has highlighted the 'obscenities' of the rupture in environment by renaming Anthropocene as the "Anthroscene"(p. 105). Marchesini (2017)has pointed out another perspective of anthropocentrism called 'mythopoesis'(p. 152). Human history is visualized as mythical where the heroic *Homo*

sapiens have won over all the obstacles in nature having fought against beings of heterospecific species. The portraiture of other species as villain, monstrous, and perilous intruder, an agent of chaos and destruction is a biased and political representation.

Again, 'Epimetheanism' is another concept through which non-humans are closed off within a straightjacketed behavioural pattern (Marchesini, 2017). It indicates the attitude of considering animals as entirely confined inside a behavioural determinism. Epimetheus literally means "the one who engages in hindthought", whereas Prometheus refers to "the one who looks ahead" (Marchesini, 2017, p. 151). The former stands for biological traits, but the second one symbolizes cultural attributes. The story of Prometheus has been told in different manners by Hesiod and Aeschylus. But it is Plato who used this myth to come to important ontological conclusions.

"The Mystic Drum" prototypically harbours post-anthropocentric nuances. Here the 'mystic drum' may symbolize an instrument of the Almighty's baritone voice that echoes in every being and thing organically in unison. At the centre of the poem is environment or Nature, the pivotal point, testified by frequent and recurrent mentions of fishes, rivers, air, trees, the sun, the moon, the river gods, and dancing men and women. Noticeably, post-anthropocentrism is to shift the central focus from "anthropos" to Nature, but not eliding them. Ferrando (2019) wrote, "If post-humanism can be seen as the pluralistic symphony of the human voices who had been silenced in the historical developments of the notion of "humanity", post-anthropocentrism adds to this concert the non-human voices, or better, their silencing amid what is currently defined as the

sixth mass extinction - the ongoing extinction of species caused, directly or indirectly, by human actions" (p. 103).

The spiritual continuum with Nature buoys the substrative sustainability in African forest lifestyle. These people worship entities of Nature, like trees, rivers, birds, beasts, fish, and above all their land. Needless to say, these are all intrinsically conducive to their sustenance. A wonderful instantiation in this regard can be the fictional work, *Amazonia* (2002), a medical thriller and adventure novel, by James Rollins, where he limns a couple of Western, mainly American, medical pharmaceutical companies intruding into the peaceful, undisturbed life of the native people inhabiting the Amazon rainforest in South America. The miracles of modern medical science are kept covert within multifarious herbs and plants in these woods that lure the global market tycoons invariably. The indigenous communities are sustained by the trees whom they hail as 'Mother' and in turn they protect the forest through certain means from invasions of the outside world. Thus, they are interdependent upon Nature and other species. Similar reverence for Nature has also been ostended in popular culture through films like *Avatar* (2009) by James Cameron, where neo-imperial, capitalist agencies are severely critiqued and their necro-political machinations are laid bare. The spiritual aspects in the primitive societies are reflected through their rites and rituals, as delineated by Okara in his poems, Judith Wright in "Bora Ring", and Oodgeroo Noonuccal's "We Are Going". Vandana Shiva brings forth this perspective of sacredness of Nature in contrast to the Western

model of secular, scientific emancipation from Nature. In the book *Ecofeminism* Maria Mies and Shiva(2014)address this dimension as 'to reenchant the world'(p. 50).

The dance of tribal men and women, accompanied by the non-human entities and environment, to the rhythm of the 'mystic drum' is in consonance with the concept of 'zooanthropology' by Marchesini(2017). According to this perception, living close to certain species helps develop a stableinteraction. The tribal dance of the Maasai people, as an instance, of Kenya is moulded by the kinesthetic schemes of the grey-crowned crane(Marchesini, 2017). It is a result of 'zoomimesis'(Marchesini, 2017, p. 155). Okara's modus operandi directs a critique towards the inveterate deep ecologists and eco-terrorists who are no more different than religious fanatics and political fundamentalists. His opuses teach us to exist organically and harmoniously in conjunction with the sustainable dynamics of our eco-system, instead of transgressing them. Ferrando(2019)asserts, "In post-Darwinian terms, we can access the process of evolution as an intra-action, that is working both ways: humans are adapting to the environment and the environment is adapting to humans"(p. 105).

The all-inclusive holistic approach to life by the tribes advocates Spinoza's concept of 'Monism', which holds that the world, humans, and non-human species are not dualistic entities. They are all symbiotic and unified. It throws Descartes' dualism between mind and body into serious challenge. In post-anthropocentrism and natural sciences, the mind-body interrelation as well as integrity and coherence among all beings

and things have been acknowledged from neo-Spinozist approach. This relationality is brought to the fore by Antonio Damasio(2003) in his book *Looking for Spinoza*

From postcolonial point of view the poem is theorized as an account of predation from the industrialist, capitalist West upon the innocuous, traditional, peaceful life-style of African civilization, envired by wilderness. Humanistic philosophy involves a Cartesian dualism. The postcolonial reading indulges in the structuralist conflicts of Nature/culture, East/West, Us/Other. But to deconstruct it beyond the limitations, imposed by this dualism, a Posthumanistic dissection of the same is requisite. In the poem there exists an anonymous "she", who, hiding behind a tree, jeers at the rites and rituals observed by the natives, accompanied by their conventional songs and tribal dances. Traditionally, "she" is equated with the archetypal Eve-figure, held responsible for the downfall of humanity. But Posthumanistically, "she" transcends any symbolic or semantic layer of identification. The way "she" is transformed, as depicted in the penultimate stanza - "with roots sprouting from her feet and leaves growing on her head / and smoke issuing from her nose / and her lips parted in her smile / turned cavity belching darkness" - demonstrates a post-human being, as we all in a sense are, domesticating both the boons and banes of science and technology as well as Nature(Okara, 2016, p. 12). Nobody can be defined as an immaculate human, as the body itself comprises the external entities of machine and environment. But the problem presented is that though "she" is post-human, she is holistically anthropocentric as her intellection revolves around the "anthropos" solely and exclusively, having failed to

engage Nature and other beings in the eco-system, a feat achieved only by the tribal, indigenous people. Here implies the differentia specifica between post-human and post-anthropocentric.

The poem "Piano and Drums" holds up a dichotomy between the cultures - European and African. The two instruments - 'Piano' and 'Drum' are representative of these two cultural identities. Wole Soyinka's translation of D. O. Fagunwa's(1982) novel *Forest of a Thousand Demons: A Hunter's Saga* opens with an assertion of a specific cultural appellation upon drum - "My friends all, like the sonorous proverb do we drum the 'agidigbo' (drum); it is the wise, who dance to it, and the learned who understand its language"(p. 3).However, the images Okara(2016) draws, which involve jungle, snarling leopard, hunters with spears, pouncing panther, green leaves, wild flowers, evince a preoccupation to overshadow the human-centric worldview, in preference to prioritizing Nature and animals. Even while describing the anthropocentric European besiege, it is depicted through the symbolic musical instrument - "a wailing piano / solo speaking of complex ways / in tear-furrowed concerto"(p. 6). Okara has advertently and wittingly posited the hunters and amalgamated their existence in the same stanza with other heterogeneous predatory animals to signify a sustainable, healthy co-existence of humans along with animals in the wild habitation.

"The Call of the River Nun" was published in 1957 in the University of Ibadan-based African Literature periodical, *Black Orpheus*. The river is a significant source of sustenance to the Ijaw community. Okara spent his formative years in a settlement on the

brink of the river Nun. The encomiastic lyric is percolated with an enriched symbolism of death, "the inevitable course", through the conglomerate imagery of river. This aspect transcends mere human sight of flowing water and transforms into an "incomprehensible God". Not unlike the Transcendentalist philosophers, Emerson and Thoreau, and the Pantheistic Wordsworth, Okara speculates an "Oversoul", embodied in the prima facie antinomy between noumena and phenomena. A plethora of natural images of "crouching hills", mirroring trees, "lips of dawn", the calling "sea-birds", "inborn stars", import the poet's unilateral inclination to recognize and eulogize the inexorable operation Nature serves in our phylogenetic existence. Though the theme of death substantially ripples over the entire text through the imagery of river, a holistically eco-centric concern mellows the overall appeal on a spatio-temporal dimension: "I hear it coming through; invoking the / ghost of a child listening, where river / birds hail your silver-surfaced flow"(Okara, 2016, p. 3).

Okara has consciously merged himself with Nature and non-human beings. To perceive oneself in the process of identifying the subjecthood in an encounter with the non-human is what Roberto Marchesini(2017) calls "animal epiphany" in his book *Over the Human*: "This, however, does not distance the human from the animal, but the human from itself, capturing it even more deeply and decentering it"(p. 3). Thus, Okara has achieved 'animal epiphany' in his oeuvre. Bruno Latour(2017) underlines, "The concept of Anthropocene introduces us to a third feature that has the potential to subvert the whole game: to claim that human agency has become the main geological force shaping

the face of the earth, is to immediately raise the question of 'responsibility', or as Donna Haraway(2008) is fond of saying, 'response ability'"(p. 38). The poems of Okara are saturated with a profound and inexorable sense of responsibility, as well as 'response-ability', towards the Holocene.

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