

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL CULTURE AND AI ON HUMAN IDENTITY IN WONDERLAND AND UGLIES: A POSTHUMANIST ANALYSIS

Ayesha Shabbir

M. Phil Scholar, The University of Faisalabad.

ayeshashabbir241@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: *

Ayesha Shabbir

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the transformation of humans from flesh to code by analyzing movies *Wonderland* and *Uglies* through the lens of Post humanism. It discusses the impact of Artificial intelligence and technological advancement on human's sense of identity. The visionary perfect world that technological advancement claims in terms of appearance, equality, communication and almost every aspect of human life makes people feel insecure about their real lives and their natural selves. Over-reliance on technology does not only assist humans but also imposes threats on humanity by altering the actual meaning of being human. Through a close analysis of character's circumstances in movies *Wonderland* and *Uglies*, it discusses the multiple ways through which technology is destroying pure connections of love and friendship among humans. Technological advancements are supposed to help and facilitate humans not to replace them. The study suggests that machines and technological elements cannot eliminate the true essence of humanity. This research emphasizes the need for a balanced and ethical relationship between humans and machines as stated by the Posthumanism theory. This study is relevant to today's social and global concerns and will also help the researchers and educators who want to explore and further study the theory of Posthumanism.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Artificial intelligence, *Wonderland*, *Uglies*, Technology, Humans, identity

INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of technology and integration of digital media in every aspect of human life, concerns about the role of machines and their impact on human identity and human connections have also been raised in recent decades. What does it actually mean to be a human in an era where technology is continuously affecting human life and the question of human connection and social interactions has become a heated debate in the 21st century. In his work *Literature and Post Humanism* Jeff Wallace (2010) also talked about the development of relation between literary studies and post humanism which he examined in the recent years (Wallace, 2010).

Considering this change in today's society, the focus of cinemas and film producers have also shifted in terms of their themes and plots. Movies like *Wonderland* and *Uglies* that have been released in 2024 richly explore the themes of post humanism.

Post humanism is a philosophical and intellectual movement that emerged in the 1990s. The literal meaning of post-humanism is "after humanism" or "beyond humanism" and it rejects the human centered notions of anthropocentric worldview and argues that our present and the coming future is technologically integrated and in that scenario placing only human as the center of the universe or

considering humans the top species existing, does not make sense. Bolter defines posthumanism in his article “posthumanism” as:

post humanist theory claims to offer a new epistemology that is not anthropocentric and therefore not centered in cartesian dualism. It seeks to undermine the traditional boundaries between the human, the animal, and the technological. (bolter, 2016)

The first movie that is to be discussed in this article through the lens of posthumanism is Wonderland written and directed by Korean filmmaker Kim Tae-Yong. This movie masterfully shows a technologically mediated world and highlights both the positive and negative aspects of relying on technology and there can be seen an interplay of identity, human connections and technology in a rapidly evolving digital world. The story of the movie follows a group of people who become a part of an artificially created virtual world, Wonderland in order to interact with their lost loved ones. One main character of the movie is Jeong In who is a flight attendant and becomes a customer of wonderland service when her boyfriend Tae-joo falls into a coma but the turning point comes when his boyfriend wakes up but she feels more attached with the AI version of him. The second customer is archeologist named Bai Li who joins the service of Wonderland to keep in touch with her daughter Jia after death.

The second movie that will be studied in this article through post-humanist lens is Uglies based on a novel written by Scott Westerfeld. The story is set in a dystopian society where every human is considered ugly until he or she turns 16 and undergoes a cosmetic surgery which is definitely a product of technological advancement. The protagonist of the movie is a teenage young girl named Tally who is very desperate to become pretty but things changed when her friend introduced Tally with The Smoke, a place where people lived freely without having beauty standards and self-insecurities. This portrayal of two contradictory worlds in the movie explores the evolution of human to posthuman.

1.1 Research Statement

Movies examined in this article i.e Wonderland and Uglies deeply explore the relationship between humans and technology and show the possible dystopian societies that are likely to emerge in the future considering the day to day increasing

dependency of human beings on machines and artificial intelligence. By using posthumanism as a theoretical lens to analyze these movies, this research study sheds light on the the dark side of AI dominated world and also discovers the complex interplay of identity, humans, technology and relationships, contributing to the ongoing discussions of machines being a threat to human intellect and history.

1.2 Research Objectives

The objectives of this research paper are to:

- Explore posthumanism in movies Uglies and Wonderland
- Understand how over reliance on technology is affecting human identity and destroying human relations
- Investigate posthuman condition in the 21st century cinema

1.3 Research Questions

- What are the dark aspects of becoming over reliant on technology?
- How does the artificial perfect world of AI affect the natural identity of characters in Wonderland and Uglies?
- How can artificial intelligence be incorporated into digital world to enhance quality of human life without fostering identity erosion?

1.4 Significance of the study

This study is relevant to today’s social and global concerns and contributes to the contemporary arguments on the role of technology on human’s lives. By employing posthumanism, it advocates for a balanced interaction between humans and non-human entities existing in the universe in order to avoid turning the world into a dystopian society. This study will also help the scholars, educators and researchers who further want to work on artificial intelligence, technology and Posthumanism.

2. Literature Review

Crellin & Harris (2021) share in their article “What difference does Posthumanism make” that posthumanism has multiple approaches and it has been understood and misunderstood in many ways. Martin in his work “Re-programming Lyotard: From the Postmodern to the Posthuman condition” examines the concept of inhumane given by Lyotard in “Postmodern condition” and

interprets that Lyotard was not optimistic while describing the integration of technology and machines in a digital and computerized society (Martin, 2009)

Badmington (2004) in his work *Alien Chic Posthumanism and the Other Within* shares the incident that when he showed a clip of alien hatred movie to his students, they started laughing and he realized that although the narrative of movie show the binary opposition of human vs inhumane but the reaction of younger generation shows the environment of acceptance of technology which leads to a world of posthumanism. Neil explained that he did not name his work as *Alien love* but *Alien Chic* because he understood that at the end of day the idea of us versus them will always remain. Hayles in her book *How We Became Posthuman* emphasizes the idea that posthumanism should not be taken as something that will lead humanity to disaster but it should be seen as a friendly and cooperative future which will support the survival and benefits of humans as well as other species existing on Earth (Hayles, 2000).

Foucault (1975) in his famous work *The order of things* presents the idea that there is a possibility that 'man' might be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea. In the article *Posthumanism in Film and Television*, researchers Hauskeller, Philbeck and Carbonell discuss the contribution of Ihab Hassan in introducing posthumanism (Hauskeller, Philbeck & Carbonell, 2015). Hassan talks about the arrival of posthuman culture in his article "Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture"? in 1977. He claimed that:

That the human form – including human desire and all its external representations – may be changing radically, and thus must be re-visioned. We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism. (Hassan, 1977)

Goodly (2014) in his article *The posthuman* discusses the ideas shared by researcher Braidotti who emphasized that the normal notions of being human bring forth the discrimination in society such as the people with disabilities grapple with the issues of acceptance in society of normal beings and their families also struggle along with them. Simon (2003) in his work *Introduction: Toward a Critique of Posthuman Futures* presents the ideas given by Fukuyama who shared that although

advancement of technology is a need of the world but it alters the real essence of being human and can be devastating if not taken under control. Weaver in his famous work *To What Future Do the Posthuman and Posthumanism Turn Us* discusses the role of Posthumanism in education and Knowledge production. (Weaver, 2014) Ranish (2014) in his book *Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction* affirms that due to the rapid ongoing advancement in genetics and technology, humanism is going through a crisis. Nicolae in his work *Cybersecurity, Artificial Intelligence, and Posthumanism: A Convergence of Frontiers?* argues that with the increase in dependence of people on artificial intelligence, there is also an increase in cyber attacks and spying which raises concerns among people (Nicolae, 2024).

Rossini (2016) in his famous published work *the Cambridge companion to literature and the posthuman* examines how posthuman characters are being represented in different digital media including novels, movies. Ferrando (2015) in his article "of posthuman born: gender, utopia and the posthuman in films and tv", focuses on movies and tv shows that represent the views of posthumanism and encourages humans to embrace other varieties of being an Indian blog writer s. Poorvaja (2024) in her movie review of *wonderland* titled 'wonderland' Korean movie review: an intriguing premise that needed better writing shared that thorough three different stories of people who have signed a contract with *wonderland*, the movie actually show that how artificial intelligence and technology is gradually making its way into each and every aspect of human life including even grief. Petros (2015) in his article named "What have they done to you now, Tally?" stated that the protagonist of the story Tally did not lose her sense of humanity after going through surgery which makes Tally a Posthuman. In his work *What Makes us Human?*, Godowski (2013) also shares this idea that Tally's transformation from human to posthuman while keeping her human characteristics and consciousness intact shows that personal freedom, sense of identity and self-determination will remain a part of a posthuman future. Trilogy concluded that despite living in a technological AI dominated world, the characters of the story were able to retain their identity such as the group of *The Smoke* (Gough & Phillip, 2010).

Although a number of impactful works have been done on the theory of Posthumanism through multiple perspectives of great scholars, the application of this new paradigm has not yet been tried out on Movies. Particularly, the movies *Wonderland* and *Uglies* have not been analyzed through the lens of posthumanism. This research aims to fill this gap by studying and examining these recently released movies, their posthuman themes and issues of identity and delusion that the characters of posthuman world living in a technologically dominated world have to grapple with living in a technologically dominated world.

3. Research Methodology

Qualitative research approach has been used in this study to analyze Posthumanism in movies *Wonderland* and *Uglies*. A deep content analysis of the characters and dialogues was conducted to investigate every incident and character portraying the themes of Posthumanist theory. The movies in this research are the content of study and they have been researched after watching them and reading their scripts and reviews from different platforms. Literature review was conducted by reading and analyzing a number of research articles written on the theory.

3.1 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this research is based on the posthuman theory with focus on the concept of cyborg given by Donna Haraway in her famous essay titled “a cyborg manifesto”. According to her, cyborgs represents a hybrid identity that rejects the traditional and rigid dualism of man versus machines and blurs the boundaries between humans and machines emphasizing that identities are fluid and interconnected. According to Haraway: “the cyborg would not recognize the garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust”(Haraway, 1985).

Edema & hall (2016) in their study emphasize that the ways we think, act and interact with this world need to be changed otherwise one cannot be called a post-humanism. Similarly, Wolfe in his article “what is posthumanism?” Stated this idea that “the nature of thought itself must change if it is to be posthumanist”. (wolf, 2010)

Using posthumanism and the concept of cyborg as a lens, this study will analyze the representation of characters and their interaction with technological

elements. The research will also focus on the threats and disasters that society and humans undergo while living in a digital world. Posthumanism not only advocates for integration of humans and machines but also discusses the concerns and pitfalls of living in a posthuman world. It reflects how being over reliant on technology raises privacy issues and makes people alienated to the world, their loved ones and even to their own selves. Being surrounded with constant surveillance also induces fear in people and disrupts their freedom of living in their own way. Posthumanism encourages and tries to foster an ethical and responsible relationship between humans and technology while maintaining the pure human connections because machines cannot replace them.

3.2 Assumptions

- It is assumed that Posthumanism blurs the boundary between humans and machines, contributing in the erosion of human identity.
- Digitally mediated interactions can weaken the genuine interpersonal relationships which may leads to social fragmentation.
- Technological advancements and artificial intelligence are not inherently dehumanizing. Their impact on human identity and human connections depends on the way they are used, designed and implemented.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. *Wonderland* showing new landscape of Grief in a Posthuman digital world

Wonderland is a movie from South Korea that was released on Netflix on July 26, 2024. In the story, there can be seen a number of people who cannot process the grief of losing their loved ones and try to remain connected with them through a computerized system because naturally it is impossible now. This innovative service is called *Wonderland* where people can call the AI version of their loved ones who are dead or out of touch. The founders of this programme are two individuals Hae-Ri and her junior Hyeon-Su who want to make people comfortable and to say those things that they were not able to share while they were alive: “If we get to meet again, there’s still so much that I want to say to my parents” (scene 00:01:57-00:02:00 minutes)

The movie through its character lives and emotional capacity portrays that technology has

gradually become a mandatory thing for humans. In this movie, people take help from technology and AI to handle their grief. This explains the Posthuman future, humanity is heading towards current times. The setting of the story is a society of distant future where people get a chance to maintain a virtual relation with their lost people through technology and people are actually accepting and embracing this technology by becoming customers of this service. Instead of being strong and facing the reality of the death of their loved ones, they decide to use technology as a replacement for their lost ones. This scenario of the movie very richly explores the themes of posthumanism which emphasizes the merging and integration of humans and non-humans. The characters of the movie are all engaging with technology as they engage with humans just like communicating with artificial AI versions of people they loved as they are real without pondering upon the boundary between real human and AI generated versions of humans. The story first shows the emotional trauma and suffering that people feel after losing their loved ones. They feel regret of not doing things they loved while they were alive and not sharing feelings with the people they loved: "I wanted to see you again even in a dream but it never happened". (scene 00:02:39)

Main customers of Wonderland service include Bai Li, Song Jeong-ran and Jeong In. The First story is of Jeong-In and her boyfriend. Jeong-In is a flight attendant and she decides to get service from Wonderland when her boyfriend Tae-joo goes into an unconscious state of coma. She starts having conversations with the AI generated version of Tae-joo through video calls on daily basis. This artificial Tae-joo is an astronaut and keeps in touch with Jeong-In in a lively and soulful way. They share with each other every small detail of their everyday life and behave like a romantic real couple. Soon Jeong-In gets very much attached with the illusion that she created with the help of AI. The actual problem starts when Tae-Joo wakes up from coma and Jeong-In feels emotionally detached from the real Tae-Joo. On the contrary Tae-Joo is very eager to start that former relationship with Jeong-In.

Jeong-In now feels it very hard to stay in a romantic relationship with the real Tae-Joo because she now feels more connected with the artificially created online version of him. Even after Tae-joo's recovery, she does not discontinue the service of Wonderland. Although Jeong-In feels guilty that

she is deceiving her boyfriend, she can't help it. This description of the story very deeply shows how machines can be a threat to true human connections. When Tae-Joo finds out about the wonderland service that Jeong-In used, he left her politely. However at the end of story, Jeong-In is able to get rid of her fake illusion and attachment and she decides to discontinue the service. This ending of Jeong-In and Tae-Joo shows that living in a posthuman era and being a posthuman makes you feel detached from real humans but humans have that power of choice to choose between illusion and reality.

The other main customer of Wonderland is Bai Li. She is a founder manager who joined Wonderland service so that she could be able to talk and interact with her young daughter Jia even after her death. During her life, she remained a busy mother and was not able to give attention to her daughter she deserved. This became an extreme regret of Bai-Li and she used the service of Wonderland to spend time with her daughter even if it was through online video calls. Mother of Bai-Li also helps her in this act. The AI version of Bai-Li is an archeologist and she travels all around the world. The AI artificial version of Bai-Li tries to come into the real world but feels disheartened to know the reality of her existence.

The third customer of Wonderland service in the movie is an old woman Song Jeong-ran who gets the subscription to Wonderland to stay connected with her departed beloved grandson Choi Jin-gu. The AI version of grandson is a young man who is working in a theatre in England. Jeong-ran keeps in touch with him through video calls and feels very comforted and happy to see her grandson happy. He tells her about her experiences of living in a foreign country. In this way, the old lady gets to forget about the trauma of her young grandson's death and feels less alone. Seeing his grandmother's love for him, Choi starts to demand things and money from her. She also gives him money to get his ideal car. This point of the movie gives another disaster of technology that humans might face which is manipulation. When the founder of wonderland movie finds out about this, she decides to end the communication between Jeong-ran and her grandson by telling the grandson that his grandmother has died and can't fulfil his demands anymore.

Hae-Ri is the founder of Wonderland service in the movie and she is a young pretty woman. She also

uses her own created AI service to communicate with her deceased parents who tell her to have a boyfriend. She asks her junior Hyeon-soo to pretend to be her boyfriend in front of her parents so that they feel comforted. While operating Wonderland and helping people connect with their lost loved ones, Hae-Ri very deeply feels the futility and uselessness of this technologically created service. The online video calls from illusionary fake sources are not able to give people feelings of pure warmth that are the essence of real human beings and there is always a need for real connections in human life which technological advancements cannot fulfil: "In just the blink of an eye, everything that seemed real turns fake. It only takes a second". (Scene 1:27:18).

Thus, the movie Wonderland through different stories explores human's quest to find real connection in a posthuman world and how technological advancement and artificial intelligence have the capacity to destroy these pure mutual connections between humans. All the characters in the story embrace and integrate with technology representing the posthuman theme but later find themselves in a complex interplay of real connections, machines and identity crisis. They find out that illusion can never be equal to reality and decide to end their dependence on technology to process their grief.

4.2 A society defined by cosmetic surgeries in Uglies

The second movie to be analyzed in this article is Uglies which is based on the famous novel of Scott Westerfeld which he wrote in 2005. This movie was released on Netflix in 2024. The story of the movie is set in a dystopian society where pretty people rule the world. Every person has to go through an extensive cosmetic surgical process once they reach the age of 16. Until that time, they are considered Uglies. The protagonist of the movie is a young girl Tally who has a best friend from her childhood, Peris. They both live in dormitories which are located outside the city of pretties. The Uglies live under surveillance and control until they reach the age to become pretties. Both friends are very eager to become the perfect version of themselves and enjoy life together in the city but the situation changes when Peris goes to the city before Tally because of his older age. After becoming pretty, Peris forgets about Tally and his promise of keeping in touch forever which breaks

Tally's heart. This highlights the posthuman concept of Cyborg. After going through surgery, Peris becomes a Cyborg; a human having technology merged in it. Now, the cyborg Peris is not able to feel those emotions of love, friendship and loyalty towards his childhood best friend.: "All my life, I wanted to be Pretty. I thought it would change everything". (Scene "00:00:06-00:00:12)

Seeing her best friend's altogether different personality, Tally becomes skeptical about her societal standards. Soon, she makes a new friend Shay who is a rebellious young girl. She shares with Tally that she doesn't want to become pretty and also advises Tally to not be a conformist. Shay also tells Tally the route to enter The Smoke which is a place far from the city and people are confused about its existence. She also shares that she has met David who is a famous leader of the group. Shay ensures Tally these all statements about the smoke and David are mere superstitions and have nothing to do with reality. The Smoke consists of people who reject the ideas of the city and are not obsessed with becoming pretty. They embrace the process of aging as they embrace their youth. Shay also informs Tally that the surgical process that everybody goes through to become pretty does more harm to people than good. Even after knowing so much about the sinister agenda of Dr. Cable, Tally does not get ready to leave so Shay leaves her behind to join The Smoke. Dr. Cable stops Tally's procedure until she helps them find Shay. She also convinces Tally that Smoke will harm Shay. So, Tally goes to the place, The Smoke and there she finds a sparkling difference between the city and this place which seemed very close to nature and where everyone works and lives with their true selves: "Your culture, they trap you in front of screens. You never move". (scene "00:55:19 -> 00:55:22")

Tally also gets to meet the parents of David, Maddy and Oz who reveal the shocking facts in front of Tally. They tell her that they are the founders of cosmetic surgery but they found out after thorough research that the surgical process limits the emotional quotient of people who undergo it and also brainwash their mind. They become numb and inhumane because of that. After knowing all that and witnessing the true natural people's lives, Tally decided to rebel but The smoke group got captured by the City and at the end, Tally had to go through the surgical procedure. Although Tally becomes pretty, she manages to retain her humane

characteristics and emotional feelings intact alongside her scar. In this way, she becomes a true posthuman who embraces technological advancement but not at the cost of losing their own true selves: "I'm strong. "It took me a long time, but I... I know who I am now. I'm not gonna let them take that away from me". (Scene"01:28:12-01:28:22)

Tally did not allow the surgical procedure to change who she really was. She rebelled against conformity and established norms and found a way to be a better version of herself while not losing the old one. The movie *Uglies* shows that screens cannot become better than struggle and processed food cannot become equal in nutrition and taste to the natural fruits and vegetables people grow with their own hands as David mentions in the movie. Thus the artificial technologically dominated world cannot become a replacement to nature. In the end, the movie gives the perfect representation of posthumanism where the merging of technology and humanity can be seen in an ethical and responsible way.

Conclusion

After going through all the recently mentioned articles on posthumanism and analyzing the narratives of movies *Wonderland* and *Uglies*, it becomes very clear that humanity is going from the era of human to posthuman. Considering this recent transformation, the cinema of the 21st century is also evolving. The movies that are now being produced incorporate the themes of posthumanism in them such as the recent movies of 2024, *Wonderland* and *Uglies*. Although the characters of both movies became a victim of technology and its so-called visionary fake ideal standards, they somehow become able to get themselves out of the chaos. The characters do not hate machines but start to keep a balanced relation with them which is the core concept of Posthumanism.

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