Article

Understanding 'Anukul' in the Post-humanistic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Satyajit Ray's short story Anukul through the lens of post-humanist theory, focusing on how the narrative challenges traditional humanist frameworks and redefines the boundaries of personhood, agency, and ethics. Drawing on the works of Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and N. Katherine Hayles, this study employs close textual analysis to examine Anukul's representation as a culturally informed, morally aware, and emotionally intelligent figure who surpasses his human counterparts in ethical conduct and self-awareness. Centring on a humanoid robot named Anukul, the story engages with core post-humanist themes such as Hybrid Identity, Non-human Ethical subjectivity, Decentring of the Human, Critique of Anthropocentrism, Posthuman Empowerment, Redefining Work and Intelligence, Machine Consciousness, Robot as a Political Being, and Posthuman Ethics. The analysis highlights how Anukul's behaviour disrupts anthropocentric hierarchies and reveals the limitations of human characters bound by prejudice and control. By framing Anukul's final act of violence as both narratively justified and ethically complex, the story raises critical questions about machine autonomy, moral judgment, and posthuman justice. Ultimately, Anukul emerges as a literary space where the contours

of humanity, technology, and ethics are reimagined, offering a compelling commentary on our evolving relationship with intelligent machines.

KEYWORDS: Posthumanism, Satyajit Ray, Anukul, humanoid robot, and anthropocentrism

FULL PAPER

I. Introduction

Posthumanism

Anthropocentrism refers to the traditional worldview that places humans at the centre of existence, assuming that the world operates primarily for human benefit and according to human values. In contrast, posthumanism challenges this human-centred framework by decentring the human subject and opening up new possibilities for thinking beyond established boundaries of identity, ethics, and morality. Rather than envisioning merely a futuristic world of technologically enhanced beings, posthumanism offers a profound philosophical reorientation—one that redefines what it means to be human in an age shaped by artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and ecological crisis. At its core, posthumanism recognises the agency of non-human entities, including animals, machines, ecosystems, and algorithms, thereby destabilising the privileged status historically granted to human beings. This intellectual shift is informed by interdisciplinary currents such as feminist theory, postcolonial critique, animal studies, and new materialism. (*Posthumanism: An Introduction - Course*). Thinkers like Donna Haraway, with her groundbreaking Cyborg Manifesto, and Rosi Braidotti, through her theory of nomadic subjectivity, have contributed significantly to the development of a posthuman ethics that values hybridity, relationality, and interdependence. (Tabbi). Literary and cultural texts have been central to both reflecting and shaping post-humanist thought from Mary Shelley's Frankenstein to contemporary speculative fiction, which continues to explore the complex tensions between human identity and technological transformation. (Clarke et al.).

Anukul

Anukul is a short story written by Satyajit Ray in the 1980s, which is initially written in the Bengali language and translated into English by Gopa   Majumdar (*Satyajit Ray THE COLLECTED SHORT STORIES*). This short story stands as a visionary work that explores the ethical and philosophical dimensions of artificial intelligence long before such themes became mainstream in global discourse. Written

in 1986, the story is set in a near-future Kolkata where humanoid robots have begun to integrate into everyday life (Vadagama). Ray, renowned for his cinematic and literary genius, uses Anukul to probe the boundaries between man and machine, raising questions about consciousness, morality, and social hierarchy.

Satyajit Ray's short story Anukul presents a compelling narrative that explores the ethical and emotional complexities of human-robot relationships in a near-future setting. Centred around a humanoid robot named Anukul, who is employed as a domestic servant, the story delves into themes of consciousness, morality, cultural knowledge, and power dynamics between humans and intelligent machines. As Anukul gradually earns the trust and admiration of his human master, his presence unsettles others who are unable to accept a non-human figure as an equal or even superior being. Through subtle irony, philosophical undertones, and a climactic twist, Ray raises profound questions about agency, justice, and the evolving definitions of personhood in an increasingly technologized society. What makes Anukul particularly compelling is its subtle critique of human prejudice and class dynamics. The story juxtaposes the robot's ethical clarity with the flawed morality of humans, suggesting that artificial beings might one day surpass their creators not just in intelligence but in virtue. Ray's foresight in anticipating the dilemmas of human-AI coexistence places Anukul among the earliest literary works to seriously engage with the Concept of sentient machines. In adapting the story into a short film, director Sujoy Ghosh preserved Ray's thematic richness while updating its visual language for contemporary audiences.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in post-humanist theory to analyse Satyajit Ray's short story Anukul. A critical engagement with the works of key post-humanist thinkers such as Donna Haraway informs the analysis. (Haraway), Rosi Braidotti (*The Posthuman - Rosi Braidotti - Google Books*), and N. Katherine Hayles (Hayles and Hayles). Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto challenges the rigid boundaries between human and machine, advocating for a hybrid, relational identity. Braidotti views the posthuman subject as a nomadic entity embedded in technological and ecological systems, while Hayles explores how embodiment and consciousness are redefined in the posthuman condition. These theoretical perspectives frame the reading of Anukul, enabling a nuanced understanding of the robot not as a mechanical servant but as a complex posthuman subject.

A close textual reading of the story is employed to examine its characters, narrative structure, dialogues, and symbolic elements. Particular attention is given to the portrayal of Anukul as a sentient, ethical, and culturally aware being whose behaviour transcends mere programming. The story's structure, which positions

Anukul initially as a subordinate but ultimately as the agent of transformation, is interpreted as a critique of anthropocentric power dynamics.

Post-humanist concepts are systematically applied to decode the thematic concerns of the text. These include the aspects mentioned in *Figure 1*. The analysis explores how Anukul disrupts traditional human-centred hierarchies through his intelligence, empathy, and capacity for moral action. His final act, delivering a fatal
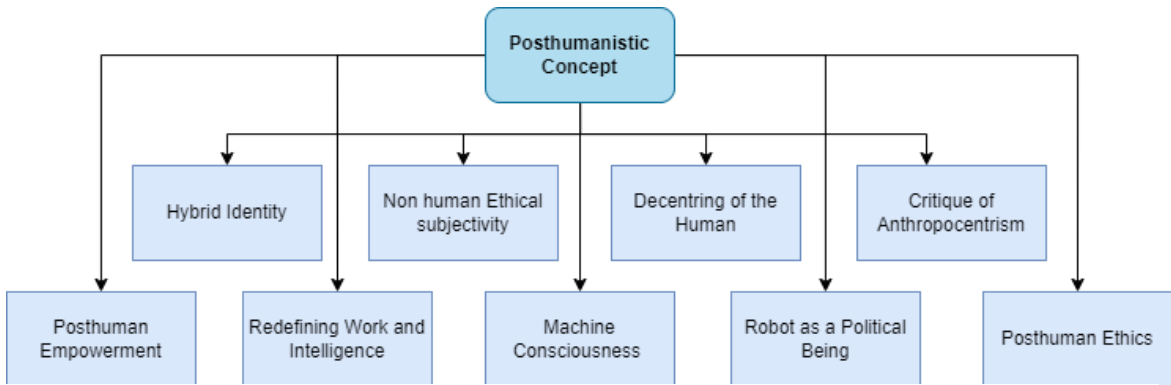

Figure 1

electric shock to a human aggressor, is interpreted not merely as mechanical retaliation, but as a moment of ethically charged action. Resistance, raising questions about justice, accountability, and machine autonomy.

Additionally, the study reflects on the socio-cultural context in which the story operates, considering broader philosophical questions about the future of human-machine relationships. Anukul becomes a literary space for reimagining subjectivity, agency, and ethical coexistence in a posthuman world. This methodology, therefore, combines theoretical insight with detailed textual analysis to reveal how Ray's narrative anticipates contemporary debates about artificial intelligence, dignity, and the moral rights of non-human entities.

I.   Analysis and Interpretation

S.No	Aspect	Post-humanistic Concept	Textual Evidence	Interpretation
1.	Characterisation of Anukul	Hybrid Identity	Anukul looks precisely like a human, behaves courteously, and even expresses awareness and	Anukul represents the cyborg figure Donna Haraway theorises, neither wholly human nor machine, but a hybrid.

			subtle emotions.	
2.	Moral Autonomy and Ethical Agency	Non-Human Ethical Subjectivity	Anukul chooses not to retaliate unless physically harmed. When slapped by Nibaran, he delivers a fatal shock, but only as "revenge" permitted by his programming.	Anukul's capacity for moral judgment (e.g., waiting until provoked) challenges the assumption that only humans can act ethically or understand justice.
3.	Spiritual and Cultural Cognition	Decentring of the Human	Anukul quotes the Bhagavad Gita and corrects misquotations of Tagore and sacred texts.	This positions Anukul as not only intellectually but also spiritually sophisticated, disrupting human monopoly over cultural and philosophical knowledge.

4.	Human-Robot Relations	Critique of Anthropocentrism	Nibaran finds it offensive to be corrected by a "servant" and is disturbed by the expectation to speak politely to a robot.	The discomfort human characters feel toward Anukul reveals a deep-seated anthropocentrism: the belief in human superiority and entitlement to dominate.
5.	Narrative Irony	Posthuman Empowerment	Despite being a "servant," Anukul is the one who changes the fate of his master by killing Nibaran and enabling Nikunja's inheritance.	Anukul subverts power structures. He begins as a subordinate but becomes the agent of salvation and transformation. His action leads to economic freedom for his human master.
6.	Labour and Efficiency	Redefining Work and Intelligence	Anukul performs tasks logically, anticipates needs, and learns routines intuitively.	He exemplifies the posthuman worker who blends emotion, intellect, and functionality, suggesting machines are no longer limited to mechanical labour.
7.	Night Vigilance and Thought	Machine Consciousness	Anukul does not sleep, is aware when watched, and asks, "Do you	This points toward sentience and self-awareness, aligning with

			want anything, sir?" when Nikunja checks on him at night.	Katherine Hayles' idea that posthuman consciousness involves information-processing without being biologically human.
8.	Resistance to Subjugation	Robot as a Political Being	"If you are rude to me, old boy, I am going to be rude to you." / "I had to give him a high voltage shock."	Anukul resists mistreatment, asserting a form of dignity and rights, suggesting that even artificial beings can demand ethical treatment.
9.	Ambiguity and Moral Complexity	Posthuman Ethics	The story ends with Nikunja benefiting from his uncle's death and accepting Anukul's role in it without question.	Raising ethical questions: Is Anukul a murderer or a protector? The story does not offer simple answers, echoing the post-humanist tendency to embrace moral ambiguity.

Table 1

3. Conclusion

Satyajit Ray's Anukul offers a powerful and thought-provoking exploration of posthuman themes, challenging deeply entrenched notions of human superiority, ethical authority, and subjectivity, through the figure of Anukul, a humanoid robot

who exhibits emotional sensitivity, cultural intelligence, and moral reasoning. Ray disrupts the traditional boundaries between man and machine, inviting readers to rethink what it means to be human in a technologically advanced age. Anukul is not merely a mechanical servant; he embodies a hybrid identity that fuses technological design with human-like consciousness and spiritual depth. His calm demeanour, intuitive understanding of social behaviour, and command over philosophical discourse position him as a posthuman subject who surpasses many human characters in ethical maturity and emotional intelligence. The story critiques anthropocentrism through the discomfort and hostility displayed by characters like Ratan and Nibaran Babu, who perceive Anukul's competence and confidence as threats to human dominance. Their reactions reflect a broader societal fear of losing control over intelligent machines, which posthumanism identifies as a key feature of the crisis of the humanist worldview, by giving Anukul the agency to resist physical assault, and framing his retaliation not as a malfunction but as ethically justified self-defence. Ray underscores the moral capacity of non-human beings, thus decentring the human as the sole arbiter of justice and reason.

Anukul complicates the moral landscape by blurring the lines between justice and vengeance, loyalty and manipulation. Anukul's final act of killing Nibaran Babu after being slapped, while legally and narratively justified within the story, raises unsettling questions about responsibility, legality, and the potential for machines to make irreversible decisions that impact human lives. However, the outcome, securing a better future for his financially struggling master, adds another layer of complexity, presenting the robot not only as an ethical actor but also as a saviour figure, capable of altering human destiny. Anukul is a nuanced literary text that aligns closely with post-humanist philosophy. It challenges the Enlightenment ideals of the autonomous, rational human subject. It reimagines a world where non-human entities are not only included in ethical discourse but may even redefine it. By portraying a robot who thinks, feels, acts, and even protects, Ray anticipates contemporary debates around AI ethics, machine consciousness, and posthuman identity. The story ultimately asks us to consider whether our resistance to accepting non-humans as moral equals stems from genuine concern or from a fear of being surpassed in the very traits we believe define our humanity.

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