



Buzzing Narratives: A Posthumanist Analysis of *The History of Bees* by Maja Lunde

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Abstract

The present research paper uncovers the posthumanist motifs present in Maja Lunde's novel, *The History of Bees*. Using the ideas of prominent posthumanist theorists like Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour as the theoretical basis of the research, the complex system of human-nonhuman encounter, environmental ramifications, and technological incorporation conveyed in the narrative is explored. The paper unfolds through thematic sections, scrutinizing the characters' experiences with bees, revealing an intentional displacement of anthropocentrism as bees assume central roles. Drawing on theories of posthumanism, the inquiry dissects the breakdown of the humankind-bee boundary and the instrumented and affected agency of each. Through the radical exteriority of environmental implications, the honeybee cluster is also a hyperobject that trespasses spaces and times. The characters and their authenticated condition or astuteness about posthumanist ways of being have been illustrated. It examines how the characters' physicality toward bees, technologies, and the environment correspond to or intervenes with posthumanist ways of being. By critically engaging with the time and spatial places where its story takes place, this structural feature of this research makes an endeavour to contribute to discussions about posthumanism in syndicate writing, particularly environmental narratives. The research seeks to acknowledge the significance of literature as a medium for grappling with the ethical, ecological, and existential questions that arise in the wake of technological progress. It illuminates *The History of Bees* as a significant exploration of posthumanist ideals, inviting further inquiry into the intersection of literature, posthumanism, and ecological narratives.

Keywords

Posthumanism, Human-Nonhuman Interactions, bees, environment, Human-Nature relationships.

Introduction

In an era of rising environmental difficulties and technological developments, literature provides a reflective lens through which we can examine the complex interplay between mankind, nature, and the evolving domain of technology. Maja Lunde's novel, *The History of Bees*, emerges as a moving story that delves into these complexities, providing a multilayered analysis of the human experience across distinct historical landscapes. As a prism through which we might study the ramifications of posthumanist theory, the novel seeks to reassess traditional viewpoints on human-nature connections, the effects of technology interventions, and the very core of what it means to be human in a fast changing world. This research study aims to disentangle the posthumanist ideas weaved throughout *The History of Bees*. Posthumanism, as a theoretical framework, questions traditional concepts of the human subject and urges a rethinking of the boundaries between humans, technology, and the natural environment. The novel, published in 2015, is set in three different timelines: 1851, 2007, and 2098, and follows the intertwined experiences of three beekeepers in England, the United States, and China. The story weaves together their experiences and the effects of their decisions on the fate of bees and the global ecosystem. The work explores themes such as environmentalism, the effects of human actions on nature, and the role of bees in pollination and biodiversity. *The History of Bees* is a one-of-a-kind narrative canvas that brings together the converging forces of human action, natural dynamics, and technological progress. The novel's adventures and the repercussions of their choices provide a rich field for studying how posthumanist goals emerge in the intricate network of human-nature-technology relationships.

In the realm of posthumanist thought, a diverse array of perspectives has emerged, challenging conventional understandings of the human condition and our relationship with technology and the environment. Posthumanism, as a theoretical framework, encompasses a range of perspectives that question the traditional boundaries between humans and non-humans, emphasizing the impact of technology on human subjectivity and the environment. Donna Haraway's influential essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985) has been pivotal in shaping posthumanist discourse by proposing the concept of the cyborg as a hybrid entity that blurs the lines between human and machine. Haraway's ideas challenge essentialist notions of identity and advocate for a more fluid understanding of the self. Katherine Hayles, in her seminal work, *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), explores the transformation of human subjectivity in the digital age. Hayles introduces the concept of the posthuman as a condition marked by the integration of humans and intelligent machines. Her analysis provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the intersections of technology, consciousness, and embodiment.

Literature has been a fertile ground for the exploration of posthumanist themes, with numerous works interrogating the evolving relationships between humans, technology, and nature. Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) offer dystopian visions that contemplate the consequences of technological interventions on humanity and the environment. These works engage with posthumanist concerns, depicting worlds where the boundaries between the human and non-human are disrupted. In *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Atwood presents a narrative that interrogates patriarchal power structures and reproductive technologies, aligning with posthumanist critiques of gendered and biopolitical

control. In *Neuromancer* (1984), William Gibson explores the fusion of human consciousness with cyberspace, reflecting the cybernetic themes central to posthumanist thought.

A growing subset of posthumanist literature focuses on environmental concerns and the ecological consequences of human actions. Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013) introduces the concept of hyperobjects –entities such as climate change that transcend human comprehension and challenge conventional notions of time and space. This perspective is relevant to the exploration of environmental themes in posthumanist literature, as it emphasizes the interconnectedness of ecological systems. In the context of *The History of Bees*, the novel engages with these posthumanist concerns by intertwining the lives of human characters with the intricate ecosystem of bees and the environmental repercussions of industrial practices. By examining the novel through the lens of Haraway, Hayles, and Atwood, among others, we can discern the ways in which posthumanist themes are woven into the narrative fabric.

Posthumanist Perspectives in *The History of Bees*

A. Human-Nonhuman Interactions

The History of Bees intricately weaves a narrative that extends beyond the boundaries of human experience, immersing the reader into a world where the relationships between humans and non-humans, particularly bees, take center stage. In the posthumanist framework, Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg as a hybrid entity becomes particularly relevant when analyzing the interactions between humans and bees. Haraway argues for a redefinition of the human subject, emphasizing the entanglement of biological and technological components (Haraway 79). In *The History of Bees*, the engagement of characters with beekeeping practices and the manipulation of bee colonies for economic gain reflects a fusion of human and non-human elements. The bees, in this context, become integral to the characters' identity and livelihood. The narrative positions bees not merely as passive subjects of human control but as active agents influencing human behaviour. The intricate dance between the characters and the bees underscores a mutual dependence, challenging traditional notions of hierarchical relationships between humans and the natural world. The integration of bees into the narrative challenges anthropocentric perspectives, as illustrated by George's acknowledgment of their vital role: "The real money was in pollination. Agriculture didn't have a chance without bees... Without them, the flowers were just as useless as the contestants of a beauty pageant" (Lunde 79). Also, Gareth's approach to beekeeping blurs the boundaries between human and non-human experiences, reflecting a posthumanist sensibility as quoted by George: "His bees had always been traveling colonies... Gareth claimed the bees didn't notice anything, they were thriving just like mine" (79-80). The novel presents a narrative space where the boundaries between species blur, and the actions of both humans and bees have profound consequences on each other. Moreover, the incorporation of technology within the realm of beekeeping introduces a layer of complexity to human-nonhuman interactions. The characters utilize advanced beekeeping technologies, mirroring Katherine Hayles' exploration of the integration of humans and intelligent machines. The novel

prompts readers to contemplate the implications of technology on the traditional roles assigned to humans and non-humans, further blurring the distinction between the two.

As characters grapple with the consequences of environmental degradation, pesticides, and the collapse of bee colonies, the novel challenges readers to reconsider the ethical dimensions of human actions in shaping non-human lives. The intertwining destinies of characters and bees emphasize a shared vulnerability within the ecosystem, reinforcing the posthumanist notion of interconnectedness. *The History of Bees* provides a nuanced exploration of human-nonhuman interactions through the lens of posthumanist thought. The novel prompts readers to reflect on the ethical dimensions of these relationships, encouraging a reconsideration of the hierarchical structures that traditionally govern human-nature dynamics. The symbiotic dance between humans and bees becomes a metaphor for the broader implications of posthumanist ideals, urging us to rethink our place within the intricate web of the natural world.

B. Environmental Consequences

Maja Lunde's *The History of Bees* unfolds as a cautionary tale that delves into the intricate and often fraught relationships between humans and the environment. Within the posthumanist framework, the novel portrays environmental consequences resulting from human actions, thereby shedding light on the interconnectedness of ecological systems and the far-reaching implications of technological interventions. Drawing inspiration from Timothy Morton's concept of hyperobjects – the phenomena that transcends human comprehension and challenges conventional notions of time and space – the novel positions the collapse of bee colonies as a hyperobject that permeates the lives of the characters. The environmental consequences portrayed in the narrative extend beyond immediate human concerns, emphasizing the profound and often irreversible impact of industrial practices on the ecosystem.

The narrative unfolds across multiple timelines, offering a temporal panorama of environmental degradation. In the 1851 timeline, the advent of industrialization and the unbridled pursuit of progress contribute to the environmental transformations that set the stage for future ecological challenges. This historical perspective aligns with posthumanist critiques of anthropocentrism, revealing the long-term consequences of human-centric exploitation of nature. Also, the 2007 timeline explores the modern-day ramifications of intensified agricultural practices, pesticide use, and the commodification of honeybees. As the characters grapple with the consequences of Colony Collapse Disorder, a phenomenon with widespread implications for global ecosystems, the novel underscores the interconnectedness of species and ecosystems. The environmental crisis becomes a narrative fulcrum, urging readers to reflect on the implications of human actions for the broader ecological web. The novel's exploration of environmental consequences extends into the speculative future of 2098, where nature has reached a precarious tipping point. The consequences of past decisions reverberate through time, challenging notions of linear causality and emphasizing the irreversibility of certain environmental transformations. Here, *The History of Bees* aligns with posthumanist perspectives that call for a re-evaluation of humanity's impact on the planet, emphasizing the nonlinear and unpredictable nature of ecological systems. Tao's observation of the deteriorating cityscape underscores the

interconnectedness of human and environmental decline: “The city had grown and developed to a certain point, then everything had come to a halt, and was now deteriorating. Like an old person approaching death” (Lunde 160). The novel’s depiction of environmental consequences serves as a powerful lens through which readers can engage with posthumanist ideals. By portraying the far-reaching effects of human actions on the environment, *The History of Bees* prompts a critical examination of the ethical dimensions of ecological stewardship. William’s reflection on the story of Swammerdam highlights the human tendency to assert superiority over nature: “Confronted with the bee it was difficult to believe that something else existed out there that was more perfect, not even God” (88). Moreover, William’s desire to construct a beehive as a symbol of human dominion over nature reflects a purely humanist attitude that finds no place in a posthuman world: “It should be man-made, because only humans could construct proper buildings, a building it was possible to monitor, which gave humans, not nature, control” (101). The novel invites readers to recognize the interdependence of species and ecosystems, emphasizing the urgency of adopting a posthumanist perspective to navigate the complex web of environmental challenges that transcend traditional human-centric narratives.

C. Technological Integration

Within the narrative of *The History of Bees*, Maja Lunde seamlessly weaves the thread of technological integration, a key aspect of posthumanist exploration. Technology has been presented as an integral force shaping the characters’ lives and identities. Katherine Hayles’ exploration of the posthuman, emphasizing the integration of humans and intelligent machines, becomes particularly pertinent when analyzing the characters’ interaction with technology in the novel. The advancement of beekeeping technologies is not merely a backdrop but an active agent in shaping the characters’ relationships with the natural world. The characters, entangled in a complex web of human-technological-nature interactions, reflect a posthumanist vision that challenges traditional dichotomies. In the novel’s exploration of technology, the bee becomes a cyborg of sorts – a biological entity intertwined with technological apparatus. The beekeeping machinery, the surveillance and monitoring devices, and the manipulation of hives for economic gain all underscore the blurring boundaries between the biological and the technological. The characters’ identities, inseparable from their technological tools, embody a posthumanist vision of hybridity and interconnectedness.

The narrative also hints at the ethical dimensions of technological integration. The characters grapple not only with the benefits of technological advancements but also with the unintended consequences that arise from the pursuit of efficiency and profit. William’s fascination with the intricacies of bee behavior underscores the complexity of non-human agency: “Every single creature so tiny and insignificant, it was inconceivable how they could have built a hill that almost towered over me” (Lunde 203). Additionally, George’s attempt to control bee behavior through technological interventions reflects a human-centric approach to environmental stewardship: “Now the task at hand was to prevent swarming, prevent the old queen from taking parts of the colony away with her to make room for a new queen and her offspring” (Lunde 181). The novel prompts readers to contemplate the responsibility that comes with technological power and the potential consequences of subjugating nature to the demands of industry. The 2007 timeline, in particular,

reflects the tensions between traditional, manual beekeeping practices and the alluring promises of technological solutions. The characters' choices in adopting or rejecting certain technologies reflect broader societal dilemmas, echoing posthumanist concerns about the ethical implications of technological progress and the potential loss of ecological balance.

As we engage with the narrative's portrayal of technology, it becomes evident that *The History of Bees* invites readers to question not only the impact of technology on the environment but also its role in shaping human subjectivity. The characters' dependence on technological tools, while offering convenience and economic benefits, raises critical questions about the ethical use of technology and the potential repercussions for both human and non-human entities. George's sense of loss, equating the demise of his bee colonies with the loss of his son, highlights the emotional dimensions of human-nonhuman relationships: "Scorching the planet to death. I had lost the bees. And I'd apparently lost Tom, too" (Lunde 255). The ethical dimensions of technological choices underscore the novel's contribution to the posthumanist discourse, urging us to navigate the complex terrain of technological integration with a heightened awareness of its implications for the interconnected web of life.

Conclusion

The History of Bees exhibits a distinctive posthumanist characteristic by displacing the traditional anthropocentric narrative, positioning bees as central characters that challenge the hegemony of human perspectives. This shift aligns with posthumanist ideals that seek to decenter the human experience and recognize the agency and significance of non-human entities. Drawing inspiration from key posthumanist theorists, this section explores how the novel embraces a paradigm where bees replace the 'human' at the center of the narrative, offering a fresh perspective on human-nonhuman interactions.

Donna Haraway's seminal work, "A Cyborg Manifesto", contends that traditional humanist thought reinforces hierarchical dualisms that place humans at the centre. Haraway advocates for the dissolution of these boundaries, envisioning a world where the distinctions between human and non-human entities become blurred". In *The History of Bees*, the prominence of bees as central characters challenges the hierarchical structure of human dominance, embodying Haraway's call for a more inclusive, networked understanding of agency. Bruno Latour's actor-network theory provides a lens through which we can analyze the novel's narrative structure. Latour argues for the consideration of both human and non-human actors as integral parts of socio-technical networks. In the novel, bees emerge as active agents shaping the trajectory of events. They become key actors in the narrative, participating in intricate networks that influence the lives of human characters. This aligns with Latour's perspective, emphasizing the co-agency of non-humans in shaping the course of human affairs.

In the context of *The History of Bees*, the displacement of human centrality is not only a stylistic choice but a philosophical one. By elevating bees to the status of central characters, the novel challenges the traditional narrative structures that privilege human experiences. The bees' perspectives, struggles, and

ecological significance become integral to the narrative, inviting readers to reevaluate their understanding of agency, consciousness, and the intricate relationships within the natural world. This displacement of the 'man' from the center aligns with posthumanist ideals that advocate for a more egalitarian and inclusive approach to understanding the complex web of life. The novel's narrative structure, inspired by posthumanist thought, positions bees as active participants rather than passive subjects, contributing to a broader reimagining of human-nonhuman interactions in literature.

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