



Beyond Human Pre-eminence: A Post-human Ecocritical Reading on Non-human Agency and Interdependent Power Relations in Jonathan Stroud's *The Amulet of Samarkand*

¹Dr. P. Roopana, ²Ida Raja Kumari,

¹Assistant Professor & Research Supervisor, ²Research Scholar,

¹PG & Research Department of English, ¹Government Arts College (Autonomous), Nandanam, Chennai 600 035, India.

Abstract

This paper examines the interdependence of power relations and non-human agency in Jonathan Stroud's *The Amulet of Samarkand* through the framework of posthumanism. The novel relates to an alternate London where human magicians hold the dominant socio-political authority while exploiting the non-human spirits. The theories that have been incorporated were intended to bring in the essence of how human beings are not entirely powerful and the spirits are not mere tools. The power is unbalanced and often divided. Focusing on the relationship between Nathaniel and Bartimaeus, Rosi Braidotti's Nomadic Subjectivity challenges the fixed binaries; identity is not produced by isolated individuality but through relations asserting the nomadic subjectivity contributing to their fluidity in nature. Through Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory, the authority practised by the human magicians is a paradoxical dependency on the subordinates that destabilizes the fixed notion of magical networking; and Timothy Morton's Strange Stranger conceptualizes that the entanglement of the humans and non-human others does not diminish the distinct identity of a non-human while challenging anthropocentric notions in an attempt at control over the non-human agents. Through the intersection of these theoretical approaches, Stroud's *The Amulet of Samarkand* subsequently presents the interconnectedness of human and non-human existence by challenging the assumptions of human exceptionalism and agency beyond the assumed boundaries.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, Posthumanism, Nomadic Subjectivity, Non-human agency, hierarchies.

I. Introduction

The cultural humanist overall lens has often situated the human subject as a core of knowledge, culture, agency, and a profound ethical consideration that establishes a hierarchical difference between the human and the non-human. In such a case, within anthropocentric frameworks, non-human agency is downgraded to the level of mere instruments, objects, or closer to inactive entities whose essentiality is classified on the basis of being productive to human beings, precisely the magicians in the book of *The Amulet of Samarkand* (2001). Posthumanism arguably challenges the prioritising of the human by investigating the supposition that agency, power and subjectivity are the defined selective attributes of the human. This reading is grounded in posthumanism. Scrutinising the non-human agency in Jonathan Stroud's *Amulet of Samarkand*.

The anthropocentric approaches are being collectively challenged, and the conceptual framework analyses the unstable and interdependent power relations between humans and non-humans in the selected text, *Amulet of Samarkand*. Human Pre-eminence is the belief that humans are placed above all forms of life. Human supremacy, in short, the stronger claim showcasing human domination over other beings, while, on the other hand, there is beyond human pre-eminence that questions or rejects human superiority. The novel *Amulet of Samarkand* puts forth the post-humanist argument.

The critical discourse on anthropocentrism and the posthuman has visibly restructured literary studies, specifically on human and non-human relations. Rosi Braidotti's post-human theory on nomadic subjectivity rejects the idea of a stable, autonomous human rigidity, instead proposing a fluid identity shaped by multiple forces. This established centre of the human race challenges the notion of human exceptionalism. On the other hand, Timothy Morton introduces strange strangers and depicts non-human entities as irreducibly other and alienated or unknowable by destabilising human claims to knowledge, control and power. Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory reconceptualizes power as emerging from networks of both human and non-human actors, including material objects. This disrupts the traditional subject-object hierarchies and emphasizes relational agency. Val Plumwood critiques anthropocentrism as a hierarchical dualism that separates humans from nature, as a passive and exploitable system of control and ecological denial; equipped as a central force in examining power structures in literary texts. These frameworks are well established in ecocriticism and posthumanism. Their application in fantasy literature remains unexplored. In this context, *The Amulet of Samarkand* provides a threshold for analysis. The magician's independence and domination over djinni, the spirits, reflect anthropocentric hierarchies while noiselessly exposing their instability. This sets up a significant research gap and positions the text within the contemporary posthuman and eco-critical database.

Arguably, the theories that have been incorporated were included to bring in the core ideology that humans are not fully powerful, spirits are not tools, and power is unbalanced and often divided. Literature has long been sculpted by anthropocentric assumptions in which human beings are the top tier in the hierarchy of power, eloquent definition, and agency, which contradicts the growth of non-human entities into meek objects or instruments of the human race. Nevertheless, contemporary conceptual developments in Post-humanism and ecocriticism debate how the social hierarchy accentuates the agency, vitality, and broader impact on non-human agency, proceeding towards the call for rethinking the correlation between humans and the non-human world, carrying past the power structures.

II. A Post-human Ecocritical Reading on Non-Human Agency and Interdependent Power Relations:

Anthropocentrism specifies that humans are the centre and important beings in the world. Anthropocentrism assumes humans are superior to non-humans; nature prevails only for humans' needs. Non-human entities have worth only when they profit human beings. Kopnina et al. describe anthropocentrism as a human-centred system of valuation in which nonhuman beings are treated as means to human ends (109). Precisely, *Amulet of Samarkand* by Jonathan Stroud focuses on the Byronic hero Nathaniel, who summoned the non-human entity, the djinn Bartimaeus, for the mightiest task. Driven by a desire to avenge Simon Lovelace, an ambitious and influential figure in the Government ministry, emotionally repressed Nathaniel is agitated by Lovelace's humiliation, which leads Nathaniel to secretly study advanced magic beyond his age limit. The djinn was ordered to execute the task of stealing the powerful artifact, *the Amulet of Samarkand*, without the knowledge of his master, Arthur Underwood. Bartimaeus harnesses the skill of thousands of years of experience at shifting between planes of perception to navigate the defence strategy. The planes of perception are the core part of how magic and the spirits work altogether. Those planes exhibit the layers of reality, and the spirits exist on multiple layers.

In this Bartimaeus series, the spirits are ranked on different levels based on their power and hierarchy of magical entities. The levels range from the lowest to the highest were: Imps, Foliots, the Djinn, Afrits, and Marids. These rankings generally serve best in defining their abilities and their dangerous entity to humans, though the human magicians control them. The magicians summon the spirits with certain precautions to avoid any unfathomable situations, precisely the forthcoming danger. Despite the jeopardy, the magicians summoned the spirits to run the government; they were the superior beings known to mankind.

'How many classified types of spirit are there?'

Nathaniel replied without a pause. 'Thirteen thousand and forty-six, sir.'

'And unclassified?'

'Petronius postulates forty-five thousand; Zavattini forty-eight thousand, sir.'

'What is the modus operandi of the Carthaginian subgroup?'

'They appear as crying infants, sir, or as doppelgängers of the magician in his youth.' (Stroud 105)

The Bartimaeus series tests the anthropocentric assumptions by illustrating the spirits as autonomous. Those non-human agents were extremely exploited, which mirrors humans' attempts to make the spirits inferior more than the human world. Anthropocentrism can also be viewed as domination over spirits that led to the recognition of non-human agency. In *Amulet of Samarkand*, Nathaniel's summoning of minor spirits and the djinn Bartimaeus, and Simon Lovelace's squad of the forces Jaruk and Jabor, the djinni were typically exploited for the sake of self-comfort and to gain a major position in the ruling government as the Government of London was being taken over by the magicians. The novel *Amulet of Samarkand* questions the dominance

of human and other forms of existence. Here, Jonathan Stroud uses magic as a medium to expose anthropocentrism as a political ideology rather than a natural order. Through the posthuman theories of Rosi Braidotti and Timothy Morton, the novel could be critically analyzed through the lens of anthropocentrism, human exceptionalism, and the agency of non-human beings.

Anthropocentrism is the belief that human beings occupy the epitome position in existence, while other beings exist for human benefit; this very ideology has been incorporated in the minds of magicians in *The Amulet of Samarkand*; the magicians considered themselves to be a supreme to all mankind. Anthropocentrism privileges human interests and tends to treat nonhuman beings primarily in relation to human ends (Kopnina et al. 109). Magicians are powerful, true that! But their authority relies upon the enslaved spirits from Other Place. Human civilizations are never self-sufficient; they are always dependent entirely. In this novel, the magical government presents itself as a prime source of power, masking its tendency toward vulnerability behind supremacy. Jonathan Stroud exposes its flimsiness rather than celebrating human excellence in modesty, pointing that humans are autonomous rulers of the world. Magicians use the spirits as a patrol for surveillance and crime control while using them as a triumph card in achieving their progression by trapping the freedom of the spirits.

Rosi Braidotti is a major contributor to contemporary arguments on the Posthuman subject. She put forth the challenges of the posthuman condition who seize the opportunities for fresh social bonding and community building while pursuing viability and to conquer power. According to Gumanay's observation, Humans evolved as a pinnacle of existence (116). Posthuman is a complex and broader branch of study and contesting the existence of non-human agents. Through a materialist and deconstructive reading of a cultural politics that undermines the actual representation of the posthuman and the process of ongoing post humanization, it helps to envisage alternatives and their mutually informing relationship by reflecting an unstable socio-political structure where Dominion depends on exploitation rather than inbuilt pre-eminence. The Posthuman identity, unlike human narrators, Bartimaeus constantly shifts forms; his identity is fluid rather than fixed. Braidotti argues that the posthuman identity is dynamic and nomadic; this really fits well with Bartimaeus, as he cannot be confined to one body rigidly or one stable self. When Bartimaeus got caught in the orb, "The orb had become uncomfortably tight once more, so I downsized again, this time to a scarab beetle." (230)

The belief where the domination begins with naming through the hierarchical classifications. Stroud refuses to portray spirits as mere magical elemental objects; instead, they are represented as a post-human subject. In the Bartimaeus series, the spirits are classified as djinn, foliots, afrits, and marids. These hierarchies situate their worthy value to the magicians, and the summoning rituals bind the spirits in a limited space: circles, star-shaped summoning graphs, names, contracts, and discreet commands. The domination of knowledge has become the instrument of power. In the *Amulet of Samarkand*, Nathaniel, who had been treated as an amateur and average little boy who learns the art of magic at his master's home; but little did they know that Nathaniel summoned a fourth-level, 5,000-year-old djinn, Bartimaeus, to seek the revenge on behalf of his foster family. The naive boy's knowledge is a domineering strategy to seek what he wants, and this is often classified as colonialism, where identity becomes the source of control. But, as discussed earlier, Braidotti rejects the myth of independence of human identity. Every magical action, including combat, war, construction, transportation, protection, and theft. London depends on the invisible slaves who were the spirits. If not, the London-Utopian culture would have collapsed a long time ago.

Stroud exposes the spirits as a representation of subjects in post-humanist studies. Nomadic Subjectivity is one of the core concepts of Nomadic Subjects (1994) and *The Posthuman* (2013), which is a literary contradiction to Nomad in which Braidotti critiques that Nomadic Subjectivity resists fixed identities, rigid boundaries, and transcends into continuous transformation, contributing towards the free-flowing of nature. Indicating that identity is not constant or singular but a consistent fluid that evolves when one makes the interactions with others and nature. This vivid representation of Nomadic Subjectivity is seen in Bartimaeus the djinn and the very traces in the protagonist Nathaniel; this novel also questions the attributes of how the belief of a human in an unchanging rigidity by making it stable and the superior human natural identity in the characters whose identities are constantly negotiable rather than predetermined. As discussed earlier, Bartimaeus cannot be embedded in Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity. In contrast to human nature, Bartimaeus, the djinn, significantly changes his shape relevant to the situation. He chose countless forms; among them were a bat, a child, a crow, a crocodile, a crow, a beautiful woman, a grotesque creature, and Ptolemy throughout the book. These transformations indicate the fluidity in symbolism with fluidity of identity that Braidotti associates with relational subjectivity.

Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT) acts as a bridge in complementing Braidotti's relational subjectivity. ANT tests the standardized presumptions that agency exclusively belongs only to humans and that actions are claimed through the networks formed by the heterogeneous actors and that includes human,

non-human objects. In essence, the productive framework of Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory investigates the designs of power and the non-human agency's forced suppression. In the magical society of *The Amulet of Samarkand*, power is not entirely in the possession of magic and magicians; it is produced through a complex network involving magicians, magical objects, and importantly, the spirits. The affiliation between Nathaniel and Bartimaeus is a network of symbiotic influence rather than a master slave agreement. Although Nathaniel exhibits his authority over Bartimaeus, Nathaniel's magical power entirely relied on the spirit's knowledge and capabilities. In Stroud's magical world, the magical spells, magician books, and the intuitions contribute to the networking maintenance of magical authority. The amulet is more than a static object, the amulet acts as a spine of authority in the political networking of the London government, enabling the magical action of the power hungered Simon Lovelace, where the amulet is the network bridging human intention with the non-human forces.

Further disclosing the deconstructive approach to the binary between human and post-human. In *Amulet of Samarkand*, magicians are positioned as masters who are defenceless physically and intellectually restricted without the assistance of spirits like Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus rebels against the notion of spirits as passive tools and reveals himself as a vigorous agent. Though bound by the magical constraints, Bartimaeus modified his autonomy and defiance by proposing a critical awareness. Altogether, the novel envisions an alternative concept that power is relational and identities are fluid, and tend to blend and flow accordingly. This highlights the ongoing technical condition of post-humanization. Rosi Braidotti argues that the human is not a discrete unit but exists through complex relationships with multiple forms of life, directly pointing to the hierarchies between Magocracy and the Spirits; the spirits are denied freedom and legal rights, decreased as mere instruments in surveillance, guards, and memory assets, and are valued only for their usefulness, indicating the fluid nature of Bartimaeus.

And there in front of him stood Simon Lovelace, shouting orders to his slave. One hand was pressed against his chest; the other was outstretched, still holding the summoning horn. 'See, Ramuthra?' he cried. 'I hold the Amulet of Samarkand, and I am thus beyond your power. Every other living thing in this room, be it human or spirit, is yours! I command you to destroy them!' (448)

Here, Braidotti also rejects the myth of human identity. The bourgeoisie magicians class appears dominant because the unnoticed non-human beings perform every magical task that is impossible for mankind. The British Empire in Jonathan Stroud's London would combust into flames and collapse. Thus, human superiority is entirely an illusion maintained through mistreatment of the spirits.

Bartimaeus has a rigid refusal in accepting the imposed identity upon him by the magicians who summoned him. Where the magicians appraise him as a mere djinni, precisely a magical slave who carries forward the robust command and dares to defy them, but in the contradiction, Bartimaeus resists the reduction. The autonomous consciousness he possessed was revealed through his sarcastic narration, historical memories, and independent judgments. Bartimaeus wasn't an object that could be easily controlled by humans, but Bartimaeus is excellent at exceeding human classifications in mental reasoning and emotional state; he had mastered the art of survival as an entity. The numerous transformations Bartimaeus adopted were not entirely a disguise alone; it marks the fluidity of identity that is associated with Braidotti's post-human subjectivity. Bartimaeus was not an object but a subject with feelings whose identity has been surpassed by the humanised fundamental classifications, marking that his thinking capabilities have exceeded human reality. Essentialism has been rejected by the nomadic subject as the argument put forth by Braidotti. The human has a constant hold on a stationary and permanent essence. Bartimaeus has centuries of experience and encounters with different civilizations, empires, and importantly, the magicians, making his entire existence characterized by multiplicity; rather than one permanent self, unlike humans. Bartimaeus' identity has always been in a constant fluid where his memory stretches across ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Rome, and modern London, which completely makes Bartimaeus transcultural and transhistorical.

On the other hand, Nathaniel, under Nomadic Subjectivity, experiences a standard static graph towards nomadic subjectivity. It is indeed a clear view from the very start of the novel that he accepted the rigid identity imposed by the magicians who assigned the task to Nathaniel in the magician classes. Nathaniel was an apprentice to Arthur Underwood, the minor magician who worked for the London government and was Nathaniel's appointed foster parent. Every human, especially magicians, believed that their power depended upon controlling spirits and superiority maintained by the hierarchies. Nathaniel's magician apprentice education draws on such connotations and centers upon the anthropocentric and authoritarian values. It's entirely a confrontation: either he survives or is destroyed by the rigidity of its nature. In simple terms, it is a do-or-die. But Nathaniel's relationship sabotages his unyielding identity. Nathaniel begins to recognize that the spirits possess intelligence, emotions, and agency, which urges him to review his own standard of understanding the ideologies in which he had been moulded since his young age. When Nathaniel summoned

Bartimaeus, the five-thousand-year-old djinn, Nathaniel noticed something unusual that he had not come across in any of the texts he explored to summon the old djinn. Bartimaeus was never the kind of obedient, emotionless, mindless, or mere magical elemental spirit; yet he's witty, sarcastic, intelligent, and historically knowledgeable. He mocks, provokes, urges, nudges, and exposes the pretense of the authoritarian magicians. This very behaviour of Bartimaeus broke the assumptions of Nathaniel that destabilized his fixed identity.

Also, Bartimaeus first-person narrative often interprets Nathaniel's orders in skilful, productive ways, showcasing that he's not a passive instrument. Eventually, Nathaniel discerns Bartimaeus as an individual rather than an object. This shift in Nathaniel's perspective, where the spirit becomes the subject rather than a possession; enriching the identification with recognizing the spirits and makes him question the ideologies to which he had been tuned since childhood. Nathaniel's upbringing by the Arthur's family taught him that magicians deserve the power in which they are inbuilt naturally; obedience, domination, ethical to magicians, and importantly, hierarchy are necessary. Bartimaeus breaks these beliefs upon bringing the greater into Nathaniel, showcasing that magicians are entirely dependent on the spirits and the spirits' suffering, which binds them in superiority. Though Nathaniel does not completely reject the magician ideology in the first novel, *The Amulet of Samarkand* (2001), he slowly grows to understand, complementing the genre of bildungsroman. Subjectivity is an ongoing process rather than a completed identity (Braidotti, 2013). Throughout, he gradually grows to abandon the standardized rigidity that has been influenced on him by the magician class.

The theories of Latour and Braidotti are employed to view the theoretical observation and expose the mechanism of the central paradox: the system which stifles non-human agency is concurrently dependent upon it. When Braidotti's posthumanism raises questions about hierarchical ideologies which positioned humans above non-human entities. While, ANT exposes the construction of magician power through the networks of humans, non-humans, and their institutional actors.

III. Conclusion

In Humanist thinking, one's identity is entirely dependent on superiority. Technically, Nathaniel was made to believe that magicians are superior while the spirits are inferior; this hierarchical subjectivity is the key idea from Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity. Braidotti argues that these identities are created through relationships rather than domination; this could be anticipated through Nathaniel because, instead of existing independently, he develops through his relationship with Bartimaeus. In simple terms, Nathaniel's identity is a partnership through human-non-human interactions. Braidotti also argues in posthumanism that subjectivity also emerges through experience with non-human others. Therefore, Nathaniel's growth was not entirely dependent on isolation; it emerged through his relationship with Bartimaeus, a non-human intelligence, which typically makes that the subjectivity becomes rational rather than hierarchical. Although Nathaniel was pulled into the participation of a hierarchical structure of dominance, he has not failed to notice Bartimaeus's intelligence, historical consciousness, and a shift from a rigid humanist identity. It is rather more towards a rational understanding of a human-non-human coexistence, proving a way for a non-human agent. This novel, *Amulet of Samarkand*, brings in greater insight into Nathaniel's development, attributing him to a complete posthuman transformation.

Rosi Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity and relational subjectivity are the core of her feminist posthuman philosophy. In which, *The Amulet of Samarkand* can be placed as a critique of fixed human identities and anthropocentric power structures. Jonathan Stroud doesn't project subjectivity as a firm holding controlled possession but as a progressing network of relationships, questioning the binaries of human and non-human where the masters precede over the slaves and other elemental spirits that sustain the novel's political order. The novel consequently reimagines subjectivity, agency, and power as relational rather than exclusively only on human fantasy and magic. Thus, *The Amulet of Samarkand* offers a post humanist critique of anthropocentrism by foregrounding interdependence between human and non-human beings.

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