Meme and Existential Posthumanism: Cultural Memory, Digital Dwelling, and Posthuman Becoming

Introduction

Posthumanism challenges the traditional conception of the human as a rational, autonomous centre. While much scholarship emphasizes the decentring of humans through technology, ecology, and non-human agencies, "existential posthumanism" focuses on self-inquiry within this broader landscape (Braidotti 49; Hayles 5). Rather than asking what replaces the human, it explores how subjectivity unfolds and adapts in mediated environments.

In the digitally interconnected era, internet memes have emerged as notable cultural expressions. Often seen as trivial or humorous, they circulate within complex assemblages where humans, algorithms, platforms, and "cultural memory" interact (Assmann 38). Memes can be understood as existential posthuman interfaces, mediating selfhood and reflection through "feedback loops" of creation and sharing (Hayles 11). Within "co-evolving techno-being assemblages", they both lighten and deepen awareness, hinting at "evolutionary continuity" and broader temporal perspectives like "Big History" (Haraway 55; Christian 2). In this sense, memes contribute to "posthuman becoming", making existential posthumanism an ongoing, relational experience (Braidotti 66).

Existential Posthumanism and the Reconfiguration of Selfhood

Posthuman theory is defined by its fundamental contestation with ontological anthropocentric assumption. By disrupting the notion of binary oppositions such as nature/culture and human/machine, Donna Harraway proposed the concept "cyborg-subjectivities" where identities are shaped by the integration of technology and organism. (Haraway, *Simians* 150) In the theory of "posthuman subject" Rosi Braidotti advances Harraway's proposition. (Braidotti 49–50) For Braidotti, solitary pursuit of individual autonomy is a secondary concern. Her philosophy makes space for a more relational, interconnected, embedded, and nomadic becoming of subjectivity.

But, a critical turn marked by "existential posthumanism" foregrounds an experimental standpoint of this ontological transition. (Braidotti 49; Hayles 5) Instead of focusing on complete displacement of human being, this framework inquires how techno mediated interactions contribute to the emergence of existential questions when existence is no longer tied merely onto isolated consciousness. In this ontological shift, identity, meaning, finitude, anxiety are confronted by the self whose existence is distributed across digital platforms (non-human systems).

This existence of the reconfigured distributed selfhood in the digital world resonates with Martin Heidegger's idea of "Being-in-the-World". (Heidegger 78) Heidegger defines this existence as situated engagement rather than essence. It refers that human existence is always embedded in and actively involved with a meaningful context. In the digital era, this world is networked, platform driven, relational, operated by algorithms. Here the boundary between "engagers" and "engaged" dissolve by becoming part of web communities. Thereby, Heidegger's notion of "dwelling" wrapped with the envelop of "existential posthumanism",

obtains a new term, called "digital dwelling", where selfhood unfolds across screens, interfaces, and circulating cultural forms—among which memes are particularly prominent. ((Braidotti 49; adapted from Heidegger 80; Hayles 5, 14)

Meme as Posthuman Interface

Apart from memes fundamental contribution in making viral content by cracking jokes and punchlines, they are semiotic interfaces within digital space. Affect, meaning and identity are mediated through these interventions. The "participatory networks" of human creativity, digital affordance, and algorithmic visibility co-produce memes. (Shifman 18; Jenkins) Their "distributed agency" closely aligns with posthuman assemblage. (Braidotti 51)

The internal existential states of mind like anxiety, uncertainty boredom, isolation, tend to externalize through memes. They are the existential posthuman interface through which users articulate their private individual existential concerns collectively. Thus, meme becomes a prosthetic mode of thought.

Moreover, the enactment of existential conditions is also done by memes. The act of scrolling, sharing, remixing, and responding situates the subject within a continuous process of meaning-making and deferral. This reflects a posthuman condition in which identity is processual, relational, and iterative, rather than stable or unified.

Feedback Loop and Distributed Agency

"Feedback loop" is one of the significant characteristics of meme culture. (Hayles 11) It is a cyclical process which comprises creation, circulation and reinterpretation. Memes thrive on mutation and replication, resulting the loss of fixed authorship. Each iteration retains traces of earlier meanings while producing new contextual resonances.

This process exemplifies what N. Katherine Hayles describes as the co-evolution of humans and technical systems, where meaning emerges from interaction rather than origin. The meme's ontological significance lies not in its initial creation but in its circulation and reinterpretation. Users function simultaneously as producers, interpreters, and transmitters, dissolving distinctions between subject and object.

Existentially, this "feedback loop" mirrors contemporary selfhood—caught between agency and automation, expression and repetition. (Hayles 11) Sharing a meme becomes an act of existential alignment, a way of positioning oneself within a collective affective landscape. The self thus exists not only as embodied presence but as distributed traces across digital networks.

Meme and Cultural Memory

The role of "cultural memory" is crucial in understanding the existential posthuman function of memes. (Assmann 38) "Cultural memory", as theorized by scholars such as Jan Assmann, refers to the shared symbolic reservoir through which societies remember, reinterpret, and

transmit meaning across time. In digital culture, memes act as dynamic carriers of "cultural memory", condensing historical references, popular culture, political events, and collective emotions into repeatable visual forms.

Memes do not preserve memory in a static archival sense; rather, they activate memory through repetition and transformation. Each reuse recontextualizes the past, allowing "cultural memory" to remain fluid and "participatory". (Assmann 38; Shifman 18) This process aligns with posthuman temporality, where linear historical progression gives way to recursive, networked time.

Existentially, "cultural memory" embedded in memes enables individuals to situate personal anxiety within collective experience. (Assmann 38) Memes transform private existential concerns into shared cultural expressions, thereby mitigating isolation while acknowledging uncertainty. In this sense, memes function as memory interfaces, mediating between individual selfhood and collective history within a posthuman framework.

A Bengali Mythological Meme as Micro–Case Study

To examine how "existential posthumanism" operates at the level of lived digital practice, this paper adopts a micro–case study approach by analysing a single Bengali mythological meme. (Braidotti 49; Hayles 5) Rather than aiming for representational generalization, the focus here is on theoretical density, treating the meme as a cultural node where mythology, digital mediation, and existential inquiry converge.
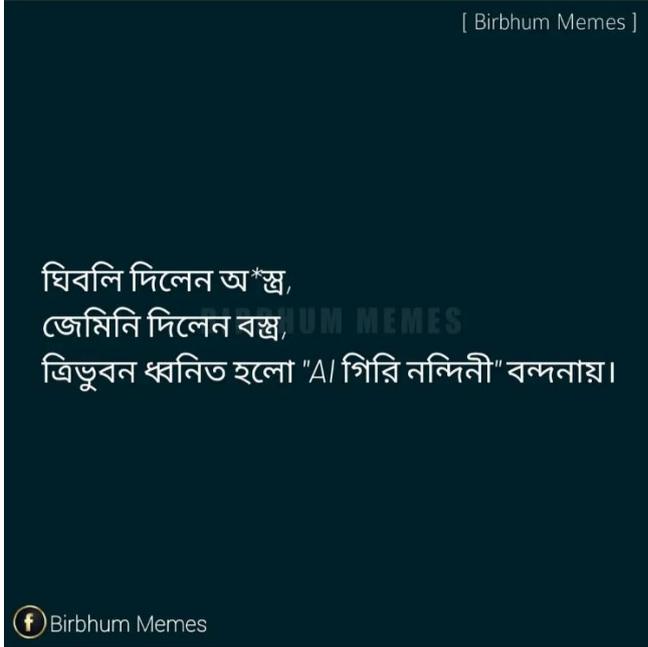
In this Bengali meme the first line says, Ghibli is providing the weapon; Gemini has offered the attire; "Tribhuvan" is a Sanskrit word. it literally means the three worlds ("tri"-three, "Bhuban"-world) comprising the entire universe that is heaven, earth and netherworld/underworld. So, the English translated version of the third line would be like the profound Universe (Tribhuvan) is resounding with the divine prayer "AIGiri Nandini."

This meme maker posted this meme in the Facebook page called *Birbhum Memes* dated 19 september,2025--- during Durga Puja festival specially in West Bengal. This three lines-meme instantaneously reactivates Bengali "cultural memory" by referencing Birendra Krishna Bhadra, whose *Mahishasuramardini/Chandipāth* narration has long been canonized as the soundscape of Mahalaya. (Assmann 38)

Interestingly this was the year which also had offered the first-hand AI-experience of Ghibli and Gemini to the pan Indian social media users.

"Ghibli", as mentioned in the first line of this meme, is originally an Arabic word which means "a hot desert wind from North Africa". Studio Ghibli, a legendary Japanese animation studio, adopted this name to signify that a fresh and powerful creative style is being introduced in the domain of anime industry. And that was the "hot desert wind". The studio was co-founded by Isao Takahata and Hayao Miyazaki in 1985. It was known for their popular films in the genre of fantasy such as Princess Mononoke, Spirited Away etc. These artists had their distinct hand-drawn artistic style combining it with stunning dream like

visuals, fluid motions, detailed background which creates the effect of an immersive world. It shows a cinematic craftmanship where magical realism seamlessly blends the realistic ordinary features with the fantastical elements.

However, in India, Ghibli fever had taken over the social media only last year. As ChatGPT in their advanced version made available for their users a new feature where they can generate image by writing prompt and putting it into GPT model, people were insanely converting their real-world images into ai generated dreamy hand-drawn artworks inspired by Ghibli aesthetics.

As mentioned in the second line, "Gemini" refers to "the Gemini and Red Saree trend" which was popular in late 2025. It involved using AI on Google Search to transform photos into vintage, 90s Bollywood-style portraits with red sarees.

And the phrase in the last line "AIGiri Nandini" popularly known in Bengal by its opening line *Aigiri Nandini Nandita Medini*, occupies a unique position in Indian cultural consciousness. Though often identified as a Bengali song due to its deep association with Durga Puja and Bengali devotional life, it is in origin a classical Sanskrit hymn titled *Mahishasura Mardini Stotram*, traditionally attributed to Adi Shankaracharya. Over centuries, this hymn has transcended its textual origins to become a living performative tradition, particularly in eastern India. The enduring popularity of "Aigiri Nandini" lies in its successful fusion of literature, music, mythology, and ritual, making it one of the most powerful invocations of the goddess Durga in South Asian culture.

The hymn celebrates Durga as Mahishasura Mardini, the divine feminine force who destroys the demon Mahishasura and restores cosmic balance. In Hindu mythology, When the demon king Mahishasura defeated the gods (Devas) and drove them out of heaven, the Devas, led by Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, gathered to seek a solution. The combined power and rage of the divine trinity, along with the other Devas, coalesced into a blinding light, from which the magnificent goddess Durga emerged. Recognizing her as the supreme power capable of defeating the seemingly invincible demon, the Devas paid obeisance to her. To equip her for the epic battle, they each offered her their most potent celestial weapons (*astras*) and symbolic items. Armed with these divine implements, astride a fierce lion, Durga appeared before Mahishasura. A fierce war ensued, culminating in her triumphant victory as she slayed the demon, restoring cosmic order and the Devas to their rightful abodes [1].

The opening address, "Aigiri Nandini," literally means *the daughter of the mountain*—a reference to Durga as the daughter of the Himalayas and of King Himavan. From the very first line, the goddess is presented not merely as a mythological figure but as a cosmic presence whose joy sustains the earth (*nandita medini*). The text thus situates Durga at the intersection of nature, divinity, and moral order, reinforcing her role as both nurturing mother and fierce warrior.

Those celestial weapons(astras) offered by Devas from Mahisasur Mardini, are re-coded in this meme as a contemporary signifier, preserving its symbolic function through "cultural memory". (Assmann 38) However, deviating from the Hindu textual tradition of Mahisasur Mardini where none offered the attire directly to Goddess Durga, here in this meme, the reference of "Gemini" and "Ghibli" (as instead of Devas, "Ghibli" is offering the "weapon"), directs towards the AI-generated offering that illustrates posthuman mediation, where

algorithmic creativity reshapes sacred symbolism through "cultural memory" rather than scriptural authority. (Assmann 38)

Thereby, drawing upon a familiar mythological figure from the Bengali cultural imagination, this meme activates a deep reservoir of "cultural memory". (Assmann 38) Mythological narratives in the Indian context function as long-term mnemonic structures, transmitting ethical, cosmological, and existential frameworks across generations. When such a figure is recontextualized within meme culture, "cultural memory" is not merely preserved but re-animated within a "technological assemblage". (Assmann 38; Haraway, *Staying* 4))

Crucially, the meme does not present the deity in a traditionally reverential mode. Instead, the figure is repositioned within a contemporary scenario. This displacement produces humor, but the humor is not purely desacralizing. Rather, it creates an existential compression, collapsing cosmic time and everyday digital temporality into a single visual moment. Through this compression, the meme foregrounds the posthuman condition in which human life is situated within scales far larger than individual agency.

From an existential posthumanist perspective, the meme stages a form of self-inquiry without introspection. The user does not ask philosophical questions directly; instead, existential uncertainty is negotiated through shared recognition and humor. The self aligns with the meme not as a sovereign subject but as a participant within a networked field of meaning. Here, the existential self is distributed across "cultural memory", visual repetition, and platform-mediated circulation. (Assmann 38)

The meme's circulation further exemplifies posthuman agency. Meaning is co-produced by the original creator, subsequent sharers, algorithmic visibility, and collective interpretation. Each act of sharing re-inscribes the mythological figure within a new contextual frame, sustaining "cultural memory" through iterative transformation rather than static preservation. (Assmann 38)

This single meme thus functions as an interface of "digital dwelling", where mythology, existential anxiety, and "posthuman becoming" intersect. (adapted from Heidegger 80; Hayles 14; Braidotti 66) It demonstrates how "existential posthumanism" operates not only as a philosophical framework but as a lived, everyday practice enacted through ordinary digital gestures such as scrolling, sharing, and recognition. (Braidotti 49; Hayles 5)

Big History, Humor, and Ontological Anxiety

Memes in digital culture gain deeper existential significance within the encasing of "Big History". (Christian 2) It situates human existence within a vast geological, cosmic, evolutionary timeline, resulting the disruption of the ontological centrality of humanist assumption. humanity is contingent here. And this existential awareness is often encoded by humor and irony. They juxtapose mundane everyday experiences, uncertainty, human struggles with cosmic insignificance. So, on one hand, this humor trivializes existential anxiety and on other, it amplifies its awareness of the finitude within the infinite cosmos.so this dual nature reflects the core contestation of "existential posthumanism": the self is both insignificant and deeply entangled within larger systems of becoming. (Braidotti 49; Hayles 5)

Humor functions as a strategy for digital coping, without trying to solve the existing problem, it actually enables the subjects to inhabit them. So, meme allows its users to dwell into the existential uncertainty, without chasing for solution. It reinforces posthuman acceptance of relational contingency.

Dwelling and Posthuman Becoming

In Heideggerian terms, dwelling involves meaningful engagement with one's world. In contemporary digital culture, this world is shaped by interfaces, platforms, and symbolic circulation. Memes play a central role in this "digital dwelling", structuring how individuals inhabit online spaces and relate to one another. (adapted from Heidegger 80; Hayles 14)

The posthuman self, as Braidotti suggests, is relational and embedded. Memes exemplify this by functioning as nodes within cultural networks, where meaning emerges through connection rather than individuality. Through memes, "existential posthumanism" becomes lived practice—enacted through everyday digital participation. (Braidotti 49; Hayles 5)

Conclusion

To conclude, memes function as existential posthuman interfaces that mediate selfhood, "cultural memory", and ontological inquiry within digitally networked environments. (Assmann 38) Embedded within "feedback loops" of creation, circulation, and interpretation, memes trivialize and deepen existential awareness simultaneously. (Hayles 11) When aligned with "Big History', they destabilize human centrality while foregrounding "evolutionary continuity". (Haraway, *Staying* 55)

By operating as carriers of "cultural memory" and facilitators of "digital dwelling", memes actively participate in the process of "posthuman becoming". (Assmann 38; adapted from Heidegger 80; Hayles 14; Braidotti 66) "Existential posthumanism" thus emerges not merely as a philosophical position but as a lived, relational condition—unfolding through the everyday practices of sharing, remembering, and becoming in the digital age. (Braidotti 49; Hayles 5)

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