

The who, the what, the why of Posthuman Retellings : How Human rhetoric, Human mythology meet the Posthuman Narrators

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This paper picks up the terrains of mythology, and puts posthuman narrators at the center stage of it. The two novels that I have chosen are *Argos* by Ralph Hardy and *Stone Blind* by Natalie Haynes. *Argos* is a retelling of *Odyssey*, told from the perspective of Argos, Odysseus' dog. *Stone Blind* on the other hand is about reframing Medusa's story. Not only Medusa, her gorgon sisters are narrators, but also the snakes on her head, Gaia, the stone itself, become narrators of the story.

The three terrains of the paper are, the what - the who - the why. The "what" here is the act of retelling itself. The mythology of the human, where human greatness is immortalized have entered the territory of something that exists beyond the human. The "who" here is the storyteller. The narrator whose existence is intertwined within the very fabric of the narrative, and the writer who is anthropomorphising the posthuman trying to humanize them. One can mention that the act of humanizing posthuman creatures asks us the validity of measuring importance through a humanist binary. The why here is the act of challenging the established notions. The hero, more specifically the human hero becomes a problematised entity. We can no longer learn about *Odysseus* without *Argos*' active participation beyond the human world. We would not know the truth of *Medusa*, if we don't start questioning our own beliefs regarding who gets to define a monster.

What happens when a posthuman narrator is put at the center stage? The bridge between the self and the other can be connected at a halfway point. The binary between the 'human and the posthuman', the 'self – other', the 'who – what', the 'he/she/they – it', exists prevalently even within the act of anthropomorphising the posthuman. When one looks at the rhetorical use of such pronouns, it puts our daily usage of self identification into question. When we refer to an animal, we refer to the said animal as "it". But when Hardy's *Argos* is talking about his existence, *Argos* the dog becomes a "he". So we can ask the question: does *Argos* only get to become a he, because *Argos* is being anthropomorphised? So if a human writer is not giving voice to a posthuman or nonhuman narrator does it render them voiceless or does it take away their right to use pronouns that are only reserved for humans?

There is always the question of anthropomorphising and whether that act of doing so is even justified under the circumstances where humans have already declared themselves as the superior species. Even when we are discussing the importance of narrating a well-known story from a

posthuman perspective, the question of who gets to decide what is important still remains. At one point it was important to portray Perseus as the hero, therefore inevitably that act turned Medusa into a monster. Now we are in an epoch where even the connotations of a monster is getting redefined. Thus, now it becomes important to reinterpret the definition of a monster, and change the narrator altogether. Natalie Haynes, the author of the book mentions her reasons behind writing this retelling. One of those reasons was that, Medusa was not a killer and yet from Ovid's *Metamorphosis* to popular culture, Medusa's presence has been perceived as a vilified entity. Not only did Medusa suffer at the hands of her tormentor, but also she was denied dignity by the Goddess she believed in, therefore turning her into something monstrous. Haynes also points out how Perseus used Medusa's head to kill others, when she had no agency over how her Gorgon head is used. But when she herself had the agency, she refused to go out of her cave to protect others. When we focus on the act of adding snakes to someone's head, as if this act of an uncanny presence is all there is to indicate who should be a hero and who should be a villain. These retellings therefore ask us how far can we extend our human understanding till it breaks and reforms itself into a posthuman way of thinking.

There is irony cascading all around the narrative. In *Stone Blind*, Goddess Athena worrying about her owl being harmed by the Gorgon heads, Hera turning Zeus' conquests into animals of her liking, In *Argos*, Argos is establishing this posthuman network of communication to learn about Odysseus' whereabouts pointing towards his greater understanding of the world, and yet at the same time he is well aware of the insolent men being more horrendous than cyclops about whom he had heard horrific stories. The narrative repeatedly puts the reader in a position where they have to ask themselves exactly which entity gets the dignity of being understood and which entity gets discarded? By continuously challenging the preconceived ideas regarding beauty, monstrosity, humanizing the other, our own biases regarding the superiority of humans are challenged.

When posthuman narrators are given voice to narrate their stories on their own terms, it creates a space where the understanding of our own ethics is extended. Human rights, human laws, human understanding of ethics relies heavily on being different from that of animals, or rather being different from anything that is nonhuman. At that moment, when we consciously start asking why we should care about learning about Odyssey through a dog's perspective or why we should care to understand what the snakes were feeling on Medusa's head when Perseus killed her under false pretenses? We stumble upon a long narrative of human exclusivity and we try to untangle the thread of that exclusivity one retelling at a time. Therefore the act of becoming active readers trying to expand our understanding into the posthuman futures where the self and the other is not only defined by the humanised terms, helps us transition into a place of redefining our values. This act of understanding the retellings and their importance makes a case for granting posthuman voices a space beyond aesthetics and utilities adhering to human standards. Although, the subject of "granting" someone, or granting something inherently becomes problematic

because it assumes there is someone who is capable of granting and someone else capable of being granted. At each and every step that's why we have to become even more conscious in questioning the very rhetoric we are using to convey a different way of understanding.

Mythology in itself becomes an important factor in redefining preconceived notions. To mythologise someone or something, or rather in this case to challenge the particulars of popular myths, it creates a disparity between what is perceived so far as opposed what can be perceived from now on. In redefining what a monster is or who gets to define the monster, we have untangled the binaries between the victor and the victim. The slippery-slope of the need to humanize someone like Medusa to plead for her case, then to question itself again, who mythologises monsters in a way that monsters cannot be victims worthy of understanding and empathy unless and until we have found some sort of a humanizing quality within them. The further these questions get untangled, the more it becomes prominent, how our need to define not only the self but also the other in our own terms has seeped into our deepest understanding, even when the subject is not even human. This dominant way of thinking gets somewhat reworked when it comes to retelling. Firstly, the unfamiliar meets the familiar in the terrains of retelling. We know how Odyssey ends, we know the quest Odysseus takes up in his homecoming. But what we do not really focus on is the other agents involved in the story. Although in this case of retelling, we have to focus on everyone else. It is not like Ralph Hardy invented this character. Argos was always there, even in Homeric times. His waiting for Odysseus' return, his affinity to his master's house, it was always there. The difference here is that Argos has a voice now. Argos is an agent now who has established himself into the center of the narrative even though the story still essentially talks about Odysseus' homecoming. Medusa is still a Gorgon. She still has snakes for hair. But the difference is that now the snakes talk. They talk in a voice that confronts our own biases. Therefore the important task becomes to question our own ideas of self, to reinterpret our preconceived notions regarding anything that is not human, to question even the usage of 'someone' or 'something'. As active readers we are both interpreting the meaning assigned here by the authors and also simultaneously trying to understand who gets to be the assignee of meaning. Who gets to call a monster a 'monster'? And when we are to challenge the predominant understanding of that, how do we reconcile what has been said before to what needs to be said now.

So far, human mythology meets the posthuman narrators at a crossroads where human understanding is still being challenged. But as the act is still a continuous act and the act of retelling is becoming as prominent as ever, posthuman understanding gets a new stage where the demand for a better understanding, a more cohesive, more inclusive understanding that not only serves the humanised way of thinking but also reaches beyond in terms of acceptance and accessibility.