

REVISITING HUMANISM IN A POST-HUMANISTIC PARADIGM: THROUGH THE LENS OF INDIAN CRAFTS

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ABSTRACT

The recent history, including the two crucial periods - the 'Renaissance' and the 'Enlightenment'- laid the foundation for our understanding of 'humanism', central to the universe's story. Like other disciplines and modern epistemologies, fashion has its roots in this human-centred outlook (Gorobets, 2006). As people's perceptions of themselves and the world have changed, there has been a recent shift towards post-humanism, which leans towards technology (Miah, 2008).

As we stand on the precipice of an era where the boundaries of human experiences constantly expand, the conventional notions of humanism are also reconfiguring. We employ an epistemological approach juxtaposing two contradictory paradigms - anthropocentric and eco-centric - which means we often look at two contrasting views - one centred on humans and the other on the environment. Although not explicitly stated, some strands of post-humanism advocate for an eco-centric approach, where the environment is considered inherently valuable and deserving of ethical consideration (Shastri, 2013). This perspective values the environment for its utility to humans and its intrinsic worth.

Within this context, Indian craftsmanship emerges as a natural focal point as it inherently aligns with the principles of harmonious coexistence between humanity and the environment. Various examples from Indian craftsmanship serve as testaments to the idea that human agency is not separate from the environment but is part of complex and interconnected systems often expressed in the culture and its artefacts.

This research employs an emic-etic ethnographical technique within the framework of grounded theory. The study is undertaken with the Pine needlecraft at Kangra district in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. The research aims to construct or extend the existing theories at the crossroads of craft, fashion, philosophy, and humanism in a posthuman world.

The emic case studies could challenge traditional views of humanism based on etic and historicity. By studying from the ground up, we aim to uncover humanistic ideas that might have been overlooked in previous deterministic analyses and inform the etic stances.

As 'people', 'objects', and 'ideas' traverse borders and cultures, the 'human' is redefined (Nichols & Campano, 2017). Through this philosophical introspection, we can strive for a sustainable and harmonious future, where the constant dilemma of "What is being lost and what remains?" is answered with wisdom and foresight.

INTRODUCTION

The Renaissance and the Enlightenment have shaped our understanding of humanism—a worldview centred around human values and human agency. The Renaissance, a transformative period, celebrated human intellect, creativity and individual expression. The Enlightenment propelled the ideals of reason, science and humanism. This overarching human-centric perspective has influenced various disciplines and modern epistemologies including fashion. The emphasis on individual expression, creativity and the celebration of the human form became integral to the design and aesthetics of clothing. Fashion, as an art form, reflected the broader cultural shift towards human-centric values and ideals.

As people's perceptions of themselves and the world continued to evolve, a discernible shift emerged in contemporary thought, steering towards post-humanism—a paradigm that leans heavily on the integration of material, objects and technology (Nichols et al., 2017) and challenges traditional human-centred frameworks. Posthumanism builds upon the foundational idea of de-centered human experience. This paradigm shift extends beyond mere human considerations and directs its focus towards the inclusion of nonhuman entities and the environment (Shastri, 2013; Nimmo, 2020). In this expansive worldview, the craft sector of India is situated seamlessly within the post-humanism paradigm.

Artisanal practices are embedded in cultural, social, environmental and economic dimensions. This research employs an emic-etic ethnographical technique within the framework of grounded theory. The study is undertaken with the Pine needle craft at Kangra district in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. The study recognizes the unique challenges posed by the inherent subjectivity of the artisans themselves, who may encounter difficulties in situating their emic viewpoints in an etic perspective.

HUMAN-NATURE DUALISM

Tany (2018) traces the journey of Humanism mentioning "Humanism has travelled from Eurocentric, imperialistic concept with massive opposition and critique on individualism, superiority over 'others' in a path of Anti-Humanism and finally we are standing with the concept of Post-Humanism where the scholars are trying to find another way to reach the definition in an affirmative way". A central task, however, is understanding the term 'posthumanism' and Wennemann (2016) explained it in great depth "According to one conception, the meaning of the term 'post' in this context implies some continuity between the human and the posthuman since it is only in relation to the human that we refer to the posthuman. Another approach posits a radical hiatus between the human and the posthuman, supposedly indicated by the prefix - post". Human is essentially inseparable and omnipresent in this universe.

As we find ourselves marked by a continual expansion of the boundaries of human agency, the traditional contours of humanism are undergoing a reconfiguration. An epistemological approach is then employed with two contradictory paradigms—the anthropocentric and the eco-centric. The former centred on humans and the latter on the environment (Catton & Dunlap 1980; Purser et al., 1995; Hoffman et al., 2005).

The anthropocentric paradigm, deeply rooted in classical humanism, traditionally places humans at the forefront of the narrative, emphasizing the inherent value and agency of the human experience. This perspective perceives the environment as a resource, a backdrop to human endeavours and often evaluates the worth of nature in terms of its utility to human needs. However, as climate change, biodiversity loss and other ecological threats escalate, the shortcomings of this worldview become quite apparent (Gorobets, 2006). Hoffman (2005) attributed the cause of these environmental problems to be behavioural and cultural.

In response to these challenges, strands of post-humanism have emerged, subtly advocating for an eco-centric approach—a perspective that fundamentally shifts the focus from humans as the exclusive centre of ethical consideration to a more inclusive recognition of the environment itself (Shastri, 2013). This perspective challenges the anthropocentric paradigm, asserting that the environment possesses an inherent worth beyond its instrumental value to human interests (Çevirme, Satıcı and Özesmi, 2023). In the eco-centric view within post-humanism, the environment is accorded significance not solely for its utility but for its intrinsic value and agency. The evolving discourse within post-humanism invites us to reconsider our place prompting a re-evaluation of our responsibilities towards the environment and the broader ecological tapestry.

CRAFTS EMBODYING POSTHUMANIST HARMONY

“Social values define what is right, good and appropriate. In relation to the environment, social values define how we view nature and how we view our place within it” (Hoffman et al., 2005). In the realm of posthumanist thought, a crafted object or entity is more than just an expression of human creativity; it becomes a symbolic reflection of a worldview that recognizes the agency of nonhuman elements. Traditional craft techniques often involve a deep understanding of natural materials, sustainable practices and a respectful engagement with the environment. This aligns with the posthumanist ethos, which embraces a more inclusive perspective that values the human as well as the nonhuman.

By embodying principles of coexistence with the nature, a crafted object offers a tangible representation of the interconnectedness promoted by posthumanism. This interconnectedness extends beyond the human realm, acknowledging the agency of materials, the vitality of nature and the reciprocity inherent in the artisanal process thereby, advocating for a balanced coexistence on this planet.

RE-EVALUATING ‘HUMAN’ WITHIN THE ‘ENVIRONMENT’

Crafts in India have persisted and grown over the past century, despite being marginalised by the Industrial Revolution, technological growth and globalism. These crafts, with rich artistic traditions and cultural expressions, naturally emerge as a compelling focal point within the discourse of posthumanism. Within the broader context of re-evaluating human relationships with the environment, Indian craftsmanship emerges as a Good Samaritan to this worldview, showcasing the interdependence between human culture, artistic creation, and the environment. For instance, traditional Indian textile arts like block printing, where artisans utilize natural dyes extracted from plants foster a sustainable and eco-friendly approach to even the most basic task of colouration. The artisans through their skilful mastery of materials, demonstrate an appreciation of the natural world. The utilization of locally sourced materials and traditional techniques not only preserves the environment but also sustains artisanal livelihoods, creating a balance between human creativity and ecological preservation. This in some cases may have started as a utilitarian engagement but became an acknowledgement of the interconnectedness between humans and the broader ecosystem.

CASE STUDY OF PINE NEEDLE CRAFT

An ethnographic study was undertaken of the Pine Needle craft in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. This particular craft cluster is situated in Rait, Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh. Pine needles are widely available in the entire Himalayan region of Himachal Pradesh state. The pine needles are identified as a major cause of forest fires, causing immense threats to the environment, forest biodiversity and local economy. The needles that fall between the month of April to June cover the ground in a thick layer and prohibit air from passing across, thereby, hindering the growth of grass on the ground. This phenomenon leaves no option for local people other than setting the needles on fire; otherwise, it becomes almost impossible for them to feed their cattle. The artisans collect these pine needles and use organic treatments to soften them. The needles are then coloured if required as per the de-

sign. They are then handcrafted to make various basketry products using colourful and vibrant threads. The range of products may include table mats, mirror frames, vases, laundry baskets, tissue boxes and many other creative artefacts. The resultant products are aesthetic, washable and cherished for long due to the emotional value of a handcrafted product.



Fig. 1 Pine needles kept for drying after being washed and treated



Fig. 2 Finished artefacts : Flower pot (left) and serving tray (right) made from pine needle

This craft not only aligns with the philosophy of posthumanism but also showcases the positive impact on the local community and the environment. By incorporating nonhuman elements into the creative process, promoting sustainability, and addressing social and environmental concerns, the craft exemplifies a holistic and interconnected worldview that goes beyond traditional anthropocentric perspectives. The craft provides a tangible example of post-humanist principles in action as explained below:

a. > **Harmonious Coexistence with Nature:** The pine needle craft industry exemplifies a shift towards a more inclusive perspective by incorporating a nonhuman and essentially wasteful element—pine needles—into the creative process. This represents a departure from anthropocentrism, acknowledging the agency of natural materials.

b. > **Eco-Friendly Practices:** The usage of pine needles as a primary material reflects a commitment to sustainability. Pine needles are available in abundance in nature and the craft thus produces artefacts that are consider-

red eco-friendly.

c. > Socioeconomic Impact: The industry's positive impact on the local community is noteworthy. Employing over 10,000 people, especially women and those from marginalized communities, it addresses social and economic aspects of posthumanism by creating opportunities for diverse groups.

d. > Posthumanist Ethos in Action: The craft industry's focus on handcrafting techniques, minimizing the use of machinery and relying on manual labour embodies a posthumanist ethos. The craft itself is not merely about human creativity but also about harmoniously engaging with the natural world.

e. > Mitigating Environmental Issues: The study highlights how the craft industry contributes to addressing environmental challenges associated with pine needles. By converting these highly flammable needles into hand-crafts, the industry helps reduce the risk of forest fires and simultaneously turns an environmental concern into a valuable resource. The information about the impact of pine needles on the forest floor sheds light on the complexity of ecological relationships. While the craft industry mitigates one aspect of the pine needle issue, it also prompts a broader discussion about the need for sustainable forest management practices to maintain biodiversity.

Indian craftsmanship also finds expression in traditional architecture. The construction of temples, houses and vernacular dwellings often incorporates materials that are abundantly available in the surrounding ecosystems, ensuring a minimal ecological footprint and promoting a seamless integration with the natural surroundings.

Furthermore, the artistry of Indian craftsmanship often draws inspiration from nature itself. Patterns and motifs in traditional crafts frequently mirror the flora and fauna indigenous to specific regions. The use of locally sourced clay, terracotta and the integration of organic forms in these crafts, emphasise an understanding of Earth's resources and ecological awareness.

LOOKING THROUGH EMIC AND ETIC LENSES

The discourse surrounding emic and etic perspectives in cultural research often reflects a dichotomy where some scholars perceive these approaches as inherently alternative and complementary (Pike, 1954; Jorian, 1983). This dichotomy is manifested in the tendency of certain researchers to prioritize one perspective over the other, leading to a divergence of opinions within the academic community (Feleppa, 1986). Some scholars advocate for an emphasis on etic analysis to the exclusion of emic considerations. They argue that an exclusive focus on emic perspectives may impede growth and development. Within this perspective, there is a belief that an overreliance on emic viewpoints might hinder the establishment of overarching theoretical frameworks that can be applied universally (Feleppa, 1986). Researchers adhering to this viewpoint often assert that a more detached and objective analysis, characteristic of etic approaches, is essential for constructing robust and generalizable cultural theories.

Conversely, some scholars willingly sacrifice the pursuit of a comprehensive theoretical framework in favour of a deep understanding of the culturally specific—embracing the richness embedded in emic perspectives. For these researchers, the emic approach is valued for its ability to capture the subtle details and complexities inherent to a specific culture. By prioritizing emic understanding, they argue, one can gain insights into the unique meanings, values, and practices that define a particular cultural context (Feleppa, 1986). Scholars adopting this perspective argue that an exclusive focus on etic analysis may risk oversimplifying the intricacies of cultural phenomena, potentially resulting in a loss of context and meaning.

In the realm of craft and fashion, the exploration of emic case studies provides a unique and invaluable perspective that has the potential to challenge traditional views rooted in etic perspectives and historical analyses of humanism.

However, the emic case study methodology seeks to disrupt this conventional framework by infusing their creations with a sense of self, community, shared history and culture-specific dimensions of craft and fashion, unearthing humanistic ideas that may have been marginalized or overshadowed by deterministic analyses.

Similarly, within the domain of fashion, emic case studies could challenge Western-centric perspectives that have

historically dominated the narrative. Local traditions, influenced by cultural, social and historical contexts, may harbour some ideas that differ from mainstream interpretations. The choice of materials, the symbolism behind specific designs and the rituals associated with dressing might reveal an understanding of human agency, expression and the quest for identity.

Furthermore, emic case studies offer a corrective lens for etic stances in the analysis of global fashion trends. By studying fashion from the ground up, researchers can uncover grassroots movements, subcultures and alternative expressions that challenge the macroscopic view and homogenizing effects of mainstream fashion. This can lead to a more inclusive and culturally sensitive understanding of humanistic values within the diverse landscape of global fashion. This approach challenges deterministic viewpoints that may oversimplify the complex association between human agency, cultural context and artistic expression. Craftsmanship and fashion, viewed through an emic lens, become powerful mediums for self-expression, cultural preservation, and the negotiation of identity.

Moreover, emic case studies can shed light on how artisans and designers navigate the challenges posed by industrialization, globalization and rapidly changing consumer preferences. Understanding the lived experiences of these practitioners provides insights into how humanistic values persist, adapt or transform in response to external pressures.

In the broader context of humanism, an emic exploration of craft and fashion fosters a more informed understanding of the diverse ways in which human agency is exercised and expressed. By incorporating these individual narratives and perspectives into the discourse, the etic stances are informed and enriched, offering a more comprehensive and accurate portrayal of the complex relationship between humanity, culture, and the artifacts we create.

PEOPLE, OBJECTS AND IDEAS

As people, objects and ideas traverse borders and cultures, the very essence of what it means to be 'human' undergoes a transformative redefinition. The exploration of emic case studies within these domains becomes a gateway to philosophical introspection, prompting us to question and reimagine our relationship with the world and each other.

Craft and fashion, as conduits for cultural expression, become vehicles through which diverse human experiences are articulated and shared. The migration of people, the exchange of artisanal techniques, and the dissemination of fashion trends across borders contribute to a continuous reshaping of human identity. Emic case studies, by focusing on the local and specific, illuminate the myriad ways in which individuals express their humanity through the creation and adornment of objects. This micro-level exploration reveals the connections between culture, identity, and craftsmanship, challenging conventional notions of what is considered 'human' within the broader global context.

TECHNOCRATIC PRESENT AND FUTURE

Technology is impacting all facets of life including crafts and fashion. Technology equates to progress or at least is perceived to be. In the broader context of posthumanism, one of the most profound challenges arises with the increased abstraction facilitated by digital tools. As we navigate in a posthumanist paradigm, the tangible and intimate connection between the creator and the creation becomes subject to a significant transformation. This metamorphosis, often driven by technological advancements, brings forth a discussion about the potential loss of the human touch and the emergence of a more digitized and quantified expression of humanity.

Digital tools, while offering unprecedented possibilities and efficiencies, introduce a certain level of abstraction in the creative process. In the realm of craft, where the hands-on, artisanal approach has historically defined the human touch, the integration of digital technologies can lead to a disconnection from the physical act of creation (Stevens, 2020). The meticulous details, the imperfections, and the visceral connection between the artisan and the material may be overshadowed by the precision and uniformity enabled by numeric control.

Technological progress should transcend profit-driven objectives and be guided by a profound sense of responsibility towards the environment (Purser et al., 1995). Rather than being exploitative, technology should become a force for conservation, ecological balance, and the preservation of biodiversity (Çevirme, Satıcı & Özesmi 2023). The harmony with nature is not merely an abstract concept but a pragmatic and ethical approach to technological innovation. It involves a careful consideration of the environmental footprint of new technologies, from their inception to their eventual disposal. The focus shifts from maximizing profit margins to a triple-bottom-line approach, where economic (profit), social (people) and environmental (planet) considerations are given equal weight. The tactile sensation of fabrics, hand stitching, hand carving, hand painting and the subtle variations introduced by skilled artisans may be diminished in a landscape dominated by algorithms and automated production.

In the technocratic posthumanistic paradigm, the 'human' risks being relegated to a numerical entity, operating within the constraints of digital interfaces and automated systems. The sensory richness of craftsmanship and the expressions inherent in fashion might be overshadowed by the efficiency and precision of numeric control. The post-humanist discourse encourages us to reconsider our relationship with technology, urging a perspective that values the augmentation of human capabilities rather than their replacement. It prompts us to explore ways in which digital tools can complement and enhance the artisanal aspects of craft and fashion, rather than overshadowing them.

Moreover, the acknowledgement of this potential loss invites a deeper philosophical reflection on the essence of humanity in a technologically driven world. How do we redefine the 'human' in this context? (Miah, 2008). What elements of our identity, creativity, and expression should persist despite the increasing abstraction introduced by digital tools? The integration of numeric control, automation, and digital design challenges the conventional definitions of craftsmanship, prompting a re-evaluation of what constitutes the authentic human touch (Stevens, 2020).

Katherine Hayles' work, "How We Became Posthuman" (1999), stands as a crucial exploration into the intersections of humanity and technology with a central question—what makes us "human"? As digital tools increasingly permeate the domains of craft and fashion, the very essence of the "human touch" transforms. At the heart of Hayles' exploration lies the tension between continuity and change in our understanding of humanity. The potential alienation of the human touch in favour of automated precision raises questions about the future appreciation of craftsmanship and the preservation of cultural and artistic diversity.

CONCLUSION

In the labyrinth of questions surrounding the intersection of technology, craft and fashion, we find a call to action within the posthumanist paradigm - to actively shape the trajectory of technological integration in craft and fashion, ensuring that the essence of the "human" is not eclipsed but rather augmented by digital tools. This involves a deliberate consideration of how technology can enhance, rather than diminish, the richness of human expression and creativity.

Crucially, the echoes of the past resonate in our understanding of the posthumanist trajectory. The future, as we envisage it, is intrinsically connected to the past—many pillars of recent posthumanism find deep roots in early modern and even earlier contexts (Campana, 2022). Acknowledging this historical continuum invites us to draw upon the wisdom embedded in tradition while embracing the innovative potential of the technological age. The Pine Needle craft exemplifies the principles of posthumanism in action, prioritizing harmony with nature and social responsibility, which finds appreciation and acceptance in an increasingly digitized world.

In essence, the call to action within the posthumanist paradigm is a call for thoughtful curation—a careful blending of the old and the new, the analogue and the digital. In this synthesis of tradition and technology, we discover not a divergence from the past, but a continuum—an evolution that honours the enduring spirit of human creativity and environment while embracing the transformative possibilities of the digital age.

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