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# REDEFINING NORMS: ACCEPTING THE "OTHER" IN JOHN WYNDHAM'S "THE CHRYSALIDS" AND "THE MIDWICH CUCKOOS"

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**Abstract**
The paper focuses on exploring Wyndham's novels 'The Chrysalids' and 'The Midwich Cuckoos' using the theme of posthumanism. The objective would be to make an analogy between humanism and posthumanism and concentrate upon the shifting of focus or decentering from the human to the other non- human entities and study through different perspectives other than the human. The persistent shifting of borders to include a greater number of brings in the network or web of existence is the key matter running throughout the paper. The ever-plying transcendence towards the frontier or periphery and no concrete demarcation between the ontological boundaries is the aspect that we need to give light to and make our subject of study. How Wyndham's works do so even without making use of the very term posthumanism is to be looked upon with an amazing sense of wonder. What draws more attention is how schools of thought resemble highlighting a similitude and cutting borders.

**Keywords:** human, posthuman, analogy, shift, deviant

Wyndham makes the theme of purity and superiority of humans almost explicit in "The Chrysalids" using epigrams like "Only the image of God is man", "Watch thou for the Mutant", "The Norm is the will of God"; "Reproduction is the only holy reproduction". The fringes are the regions to which the deviants are confined to as an aftermath of being mutants. Any innocuous desire to obtain any deviation from "the image of God" is considered to be blasphemous. The protagonist's wish for one extra hand made his father to be severely miffed and ask for forgiveness from God. The protagonist was also asked by his uncle Axel to keep his art of telepathy with his cousin a secret as that would make him a mutant. A small extra toe of Sophie supposedly harmless was a cause of grave concern for her family as it would make her a deviant from the image of God. Slight alterations in size also made individuals or creatures to be mutants punishable by being exiled to the Fringes. A tailless cat was also instructed for destruction as an offence as it had not simply lost its tail but had never possessed one. Mutants sullied the purity of a community. The community practised eugenics. The finding of a new territory termed as Sealand is an acceptance of these mutants in a new area. The telepaths and Sophie are excited about finding people of their own 'kind'.

*The Chrysalids* is a science fiction story by John Wyndham, a popular twentieth-century British writer. It takes place in the future , many years after a nuclear war has devastated large areas of the

world. The society of Waknuk in Labrador has survived, but it is a primitive agricultural theocracy reminiscent of Salem witch hunts. However, in Waknuk it isn't witches but mutants that people fear. Radiation from the war still causes frequent mutations in plants, animals and humans and the people adhere to a strict religious code which does not tolerate deviation of any kind. Their religion demands that anything born with any type of imperfection be destroyed. Imperfect crops are burnt and animals slaughtered. Human 'Deviations' are either killed or exiled to a lawless area called the Fringes which lies to the south. Beyond these lie the Badlands where the whole of nature is distorted, and further south still are the Blacklands where everything is burnt and nothing will grow. Few people have any curiosity about what lies beyond, though there are rumours of other countries inhabited by strange people.

The story is told from the point of view of David, the son of one of the most vehement adherent in upholding the strict and cruel religious code. As a child, David makes friends with Sophie, a girl who has six toes on each foot. Her parents have hidden her from the authorities and they beg David not to tell. When their secret is accidentally discovered, David sees at first hand the relentless cruelty of the society in which he lives. However, he has his own secret. David is one of a group of children who can communicate with each other telepathically. He is, therefore, himself a 'Deviation'. He also has strange dreams of a city with skyscrapers, horseless vehicles and flying machines. David and the others struggle to keep their telepathy a secret, but eventually they come under suspicion when it becomes clear that David's younger sister, Petra, has even greater powers. Being a young child, she has little ability to control her thoughts and no real awareness of the dangers they present. Eventually the authorities come to arrest the group and they have to flee into the Fringes pursued by David's father and the other men. This very distinction of these characters from normal humans attributes them with posthuman terminology. Petra after fleeing into the Fringes starts receiving telepathic communications from someone a very long way away. The others cannot hear the messages, but Petra says that they are coming from a woman in a place called Sealand far to the south. It transpires that this is the advanced industrialised society of David's dreams, where everyone is telepathic. The woman rescues them by helicopter in the middle of a battle between the people of the Fringes and the men from Waknuk. It is to be noted that no amazing technological inventions of the future and no other spatial setting other than Earth are required for the advent of posthumanism. There is no particular temporal or spatial separation needed to demarcate humans and posthumans. Both the stories of John Wyndham take place on Earth, often an Earth which has gone wrong in some way, and they deal with ordinary people coming to terms with extraordinary circumstances. Both are written in the first person from the human perspective for the normal reader to connect with it and this gives them an immediacy that has had lasting human appeal pondering on a posthuman viewpoint. The deviation of the posthumans here is both visible as well as invisible though strongly manifest. *Sophie's* six toes are a feature of her appearance whereas the telepathic abilities of David and the other children are of far greater potential. Yet all these people, if they may be deemed so escape persecution for years before moving to a greater world of enlightenment. This shows how similar humans and posthumans are.

The very title, *The Chrysalids,* is of monumental singularity over here. The word *chrysalid* is derived from chrysalis, the stage which the larvae of moths and butterflies pass through before they become adults. It is a phase in which the insect appears dormant and unmoving, but changes are taking place inside which enable it to emerge from the chrysalis as a more advanced form of life. In the context of the novel, the word chrysalids most likely refer to David and other telepathic children. They could be seen as the intermediate stage between the people of Waknuk whose fear of the past has led to a stagnant, retrograde society (the human world) and the people of the free world, Sealand, who have progressed (the posthumans). Thus, every other stage other than the human is designated as the posthuman. In their escape to Sealand, the children are like insects leaving behind

their crawling caterpillar human existence to emerge from their chrysalis as free-flying posthuman butterfly entities. On the other hand, the whole society of Waknuk could be seen as a chrysalis, a dormant and stagnant intermediate stage between the earlier humans who caused the nuclear destruction and the mew enlightened and telepathic posthumans who live in Sealand thus, highlighting only a temporal and spatial separation between the two.

*The Chrysalids* takes as its starting point a world which has already been devastated by nuclear war. Although the people of Waknuk have few memories of the time of the Old People, they know that the division of the world into areas such as the Blacklands, the Badlands and the Fringes has come through a terrible war. The name of the place also indicates the happenings. Waknuk is in Labrador in Canada, which places the Blacklands, the worst affected area and, no doubt, the epicentre of the final nuclear explosion, in the United States. David's uncle Axel reports that sailors who go too close to land there become sick and die, which suggests a strong concentration of residual radiation. Sealand would seem to be New Zealand, far enough away from far enough away from the United States and the Soviet Union (perceived to be the likely opponents in a nuclear war) to have survived relatively intact. Thus, there is a perpetual tendency to spatially place posthumans far away from the humans. In the book, the effects of radiation are still felt in Waknuk, generations after the end of the war, with occasional mutations in crops, animals and humans resulting in the formation of posthumans. It is of exceptional significance that these mutants are the offspring of normal humans thus, portraying ambivalence regarding the separation of humans and posthumans into completely different beings. Minor characteristics like a certain deviation from the normal height also tends to throw people into the Fringes. A clear instance of this is David's uncle who is in the Fringes shows clear resemblance with his father Joseph Storm but with minute aberration. When David wishes for his telepathic ability to go away fervently praying for it and anticipating to wake up the next morning being 'normal' like others shows his longing to have a sense of complete belonging in the human realm. At the same time, his wish to associate with Sophie, not divulging her secret, failing to associate her with evil and deem her as blasphemy shows his broader acceptance of the Other. He also takes note of his uncle's semblance with his father but does not bring that topic up for discussion with his father. David, in particular and the society of Waknuk, in general provides abode to both humans and posthumans.

The society of Waknuk is dominated by a religion which is obsessed with perfection. Every Sunday, in church, the people recite a creed which declares exactly how many limbs a person must have. Anything which is different from this description is termed a Deviation and the people are told that God hates Deviations and demands their destruction. Before a baby is accepted, it must be examined by an inspector and given a certificate of perfection. A child that fails the test is killed and a woman who gives birth to three Deviations can be divorced by her husband and cast out. There is a clear normative distinction between humans and posthumans. This certification of perfection is a rigid measure to mark out the human and austerely maintain a lucid distinction from the abnormal posthuman comprising beings with aberrations.

In describing this rigid and heartless society, Wyndham is attacking the kind of religious or social intolerance that excludes anyone who is in any way different, making every mutant a posthuman. Uncle Axel tells David of countries beyond the Blacklands where the people look very different. Interestingly, they too believe that they look 'right', though it is unclear whether they are also intolerant of outsiders. Thus, the human characteristic to deem themselves as normal and everyone else as the deviation is found in posthumans too, if we consider the people of the Blacklands are termed the Other over here. Bigotry, hypocrisy and and ignorance are the prevailing characteristics of Waknuk and the story exhibits these attributes being shown by both humans and posthumans.

"The Midwich Cuckoos" also gives space to posthumanism including aspects like telepathic abilities and process of reproduction through xenogenesis. The conflict between the humans and

the 'posthumans' comes into the picture as the text unfolds. The novel's narrator, Rihard Grayford and his wife, Janet, live a placid life in Midwich. Their life is, in fact, so quiet that Grayford tells the reader he would not be surprised if there "had […] been posts at the entrances to the village bearing a red triangle and a notice below: MIDWICH DO NOT DISTURB"(MC 11). Representing the prototypical utopian island, Midwich is a microcosm of its own, sealed off the rest of the world, as the heading of the chapter frames the novel: "*No Entry to Midwich"*(MC 9). From the beginning , the village is introduced as a peaceful, quiet place with little contact to an unknown, mostly irrelevant, outside. The relevance and the symbolic meaning of its spatial structure becomes even more evident when the village's topography is introduced:

> "At the heart of Midwich is a triangular Green ornamented by five elms and a white-railed pond. The war memorial stands in the churchward corner of the Green, and spaced out round the sides are the church itself, the vicarage, the inn, the smithy, the post office. Mrs Welt's shop, and a number of cottages. Altogether, the village comprises some sixty cottages and small houses, a village hall, Kyle Manor, and The Grange." (11)

While most of these buildings can be expected in a village or small town, three of them stand out. The green triangle can be read as a reference to female reproductivity, representing the colour of fertility. The reference of the war memorial indicates that the story unfolds in a period after World War II. The function of The Grange (originally a regular farm) is most unexpected since "the Ministry took it over for Research"(12). Since the Grange's interior is inaccessible to all non-scientists, sucxh as the narrator, we never gain insight into the laboratories or experiments. This depiction underscores Wyndham's strategy of representing science and technology as the backdrop for the plot but not as its central theme: The Grange is introduced parenthetically although, from a certain point of view, it is highly involved in the events.

Though Midwich's spatial order becomes evident very early in the novel, it becomes even more relevant after what is called the 'Dayout'(61). When Richard and Janet return from a journey, they find the village inaccessible, resting under an invisible cupola with a radius of two miles. Everyone in the zone is unconscious. Midwich is then considered an "affected area"(37) although no one knows why or by whom it has been affected. The carefully uttered comment, "There's the Grange,"(38) by an unknown protagonist, neither provokes any reaction nor provides an explanation.

The novel features a fantasy element here when the "prosaic English village" (175) finds itself in a strange situation reminiscent of the sleeping phase the Grimm Brothers'*Sleeping Beauty*. The results are more drastic, however, because several weeks later, "inexplicable pregnancies"(61) occur in the village. They affect all women of childbearing age independent of sexual intercourse. The children are born with supernatural abilities, such as the power to determine the inhabitants' actions to share knowledge telepathically, thereby also forming a collective identity (122)'.

Although the concept of gestational surrogacy was possible only in the mid 1980s, decades after *The Midwich Cuckoos* was published (Patel et al. 2018), Wyndham's scenario can be considered a form of traditional surrogacy. However, the 'father(s)'of the Midwich's cuckoos remain undetected until the story's end. After all, these surrogate mothers were impregnated unwillingly in what amounts to a type of rape (Ketterer 2011), since their bodies have become "victims of an imposition" (MC 106). The children are described as 'cuckoos' which is an allegory for a species bringing another 'strange' species to life. Thus, the procedure of conceiving and the offspring produced differ from the normal hence rendering into the posthuman theme. Unlike surrogate mothers, however, the Midwich women are required to keep their babies constituting another imposition. Interestingly enough, abortion is not n option for the women, perhaps the result of it being both a taboo and a criminal act during the time the novel was published.

The pregnancies become a serious posthuman theme. Later in the plot, despite keeping

the pregnancies hidden from the outside, the villagers themselves begin to accept the unmarried pregnant women. Thus, there is a simultaneous existence and acceptance of the posthuman by the human. However, as a form of taking care of these women, keeping the press at bay is most important for Midwich, in order to decrease anxiety and keep the secret of the village. Consequently the mothers must remain discreet about their situation: "you must all know how the cheap papers seize upon anything to do with birth, particularly anything unusual. They make a peepshow of it, as if the people concerned were freaks in a fairground. The parents' lives, their homes, their children, are no longer their own" (71). Thus, this special form of reproduction has to be kept secret: [W]e must, every one of us, resolve not to mention, or even hint outside the village, at the present state of affairs' (72). This special situation, as unexpected as it is, creates a space of social affiliation and acceptance that is separated from all surrounding communities: "It means that a newspaper is unlikely to get anything to go on unless it is directly informed by someone inside the village"(82). Everybody beyond Midwich's borders who might receive information about the pregnancies is considered a threat to the community.

Being part of the village as well as an unaffected witness of the Dayout, Richard observes Midwich and reports all remarkable events to the local military. Bernard Wescott, the army personnel who mediates between the military and the village, asks Richard to observe the village because of his insider position: "I want a regular report on Midwich's state of health, mind, and morale so that I can keep a fatherly eye on it. […] I want it so that I can act for Midwich's benefit, should it be necessary (51). The human perspective is given the utmost importance though posthuman beings are also accorded space. Richard narrates from a perspective marked by a relatively high degree of distance to the events, which is a rare effect given that it is told in the autodiegetic mode (i.e. the first-person perspective). This narrative distance has the interesting effect of a quasi-personification of the village itself – Midwich almost becomes an individual character with emotions and a health status as represented by Richard. Through his monitoring, the village seems to be a self-sufficient subject with the 'Children' as its posthuman entity. Thus, there is an assemblage and assimilation of both the human and posthuman beings in Midwich.

Broadly speaking, the topic of otherness can be scrutinised from two perspectives, which are relevant for the interpretation of *The Midwich Cuckoos*. The first notion of otherness is a psychoanalytic one, interpreting "strangers, gods and monsters […] as tokens of fracture within the human psche"(Kearney 2003, 4). As Kearney notes, such literary figures of the other "speak to us how we are split between conscious and unconscious, familiar and unfamiliar"(4). Following a psychoanalytical interpretation of the novel, Bruhm argues that these "children are not 'children'but the representation of the primary narcissistic fantasy of Children"(2016,170). They remind us of the pleasure of raising expectations towards the other (and children in particular) and transferring expectations and desire towards them without recognising their own identity.

The second notion of otherness is posthuman, which aligns with postcolonial studies. Most critical posthuman thinkers argue that "[t]he existence of others is crucial in defining what is 'normal'and in locating one's own place in the world"(Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2007, 154). Here, 'Other'can refer to the "colonised others who are marginalised by imperial discourse, identified by their difference from the centre and, perhaps crucially, become the focus of anticipated mastery by the imperial 'ego'"(155). Similarly, 'Other' can refer to who are marginalised by human discourse, identified by their difference posthuman characteristics.

For both notions of otherness, the category of space is relevant. It allows one to discern one's identity as separate from one's own (Pinsky 2003). Thus, space prerequisites responsibility for the other (Monero Marquez 1987). In the posthuman tradition, aligning itself with postcolonial studies, the positioning of a person or group as 'central'and 'marginal'prerequisites the political and discursive exclusion:

> "To successfully position a character as the Other demands the prior binary construct of centre and periphery, as discussion of the Other is impossible without a primary definition of the self, which, in turn, rests upon where we see ourselves located. If we inhabit the centre of our existence (our world, life, knowledge), then the Other, who cannot inhabit the same place, becomes marginalised by definition: they cannot be us. They are different and apart from us. They are outside." (Kerslake 2010, 9)

Representing, narrating and negotiating both understandings of otherness is the genuine merit of particularly British and Canadian science fiction(Roberts2006, 17; Seed 2011, 27), which transforms the concrete moral, political and human issues of time and place into an abstract 'other'. Within this process of transformation, spatial demarcations – like the topography in Midwich – represent obviously constructed differences.

The children's otherness is even marked textually: 'the Children (now beginning to acquire an implied capital C, to distinguish them from other children') (MC 103). This textual marker very much resembles the standpoint in posthuman theory aligning with the postcolonial theme where the pronounced 'Other'(with a capital 'O') refers to politically and socially unaccepted, marginalised, or excluded posthuman figure in order to "connote an abstract and generalised but more symbolic representation of human "others".

In the novel, the children's striking feature is their "abstract foreignness", not calling to mind any particular race or region"(MC 148). By expressing their strangeness as "abstract"and "untraceable", Wyndham narrates otherness in posthuman form imbibing the psychoanalytic aspect. The women's incubation by a foreign species touches upon the ground-breaking features of otherness. The children become an 'other'(subject) through birth; and the peculiar conditions of pregnancy , birth and infancy, which shape the villagers' attitudes, resulting in a status of the Other , which is significantly different from the normal inhabitants.

The children's maturity process is characterised by a collective experience of their Otherness as it is constructed by the Midwichers. They encounter a social non-acceptance by being called "intruders"(106), "invaders"(188) and even "monsters"(167). This "abstract foreignness"(148) hinges on the realm of posthumanism. After the children's birth, the negotiation of Otherness continues when they perform telepathy and make people do things they otherwise would not do. For example, all children who were born outside Midwich are brought to the place even if their mothers do not want to move. Even though the village mistrusts the children, it comes to accept their existence in the end reinstating the simultaneous existence of the human and the posthuman. Although they finally decide to give birth to the children, doubts remain as to whether their decision is a right one as it is commented by Gordon Zellaby -, the village's novelist and the most educated inhabitant: "How is one to know with – strangers? (167).

The ambivalence prevails when the children are later offered to live at The Grange as "a group of their own kind"(132). Since their perspective is never a part of Richard's narrative the reader remains clueless with regard to the concrete events in The Grange. Richard only imparts that at the Grange, Zellaby educates the Children. The Children's collective position at this special place turns out to be their fate in the end when Midwich decides to burn down the Grange. By using their telepathic abilities and ordering Midwich's inhabitants to attack one another, the Children rescue themselves. Moreover, they isolate the community from the outside and stop all residents from leaving the village. This phenomenon of brood parasite has occurred in four other parts of the world, including an Inuit settlement in the Canadian Arctic, a small township in Australia's Northern Territory, a Mongolian village, and the town of Gihinsk in eastern Russia, northeast of Okhotsk. This exhibits a tendency to keep the posthuman at bay. The Inuit killed the newborn Children, sensing they were not their own, and the Mongolians killed the Children and their mothers. The Australian babies had all died within a few weeks, implying that

something may have gone wrong with the xenogenesis process. The Russian town was recently "accidentally" destroyed by the Soviet government, using an "atomic cannon"from a range of 50-60 miles. This portrays the evident latent and manifest tussle between humans and posthumans and the ultimate intent to do away with the posthumans. Likewise, the characters show attitudinal ambivalence towards the Children alternating between curiosity and suspicion or even fear while the reader is uncertain as to the reasons behind these events as Richard offers no explanation. Nevertheless, the vagueness of their actions is maintained since the children prevent neither the police from "coming inside" nor the ambulance from bringing the injured to hospitals, i.e. "the outside"(173). So, despite their peculiarities, the Children or the posthumans share some sort of moral compass or intuition with the humans.

The events in Midwich also attract the military, as the Intelligence Major assumes that the place is attacked by the opponent of its time, i.e. "Ivans"(38), or an alien force bringing the posthuman angle into picture. Accordingly, in contrast to the press and some villagers, the military is not interested in the Grange but rather focused on "a large dent in the ground which certainly looked as if something massive had rested there for a while"(47). Although it is not spelled out within the novel, this incident hints at the landing of a U.F.O. citing extraterrestrial posthuman beings. Along with the village's doctor, Zellaby tries to find a rational explanation for the pregnancies different from the U.F.O hypothesis. The characters refer to those reproductive medical procedures like parthenogenesis and artificial insemination which differ from the normal procedure of reproduction but have been gradually accepted and utilised by humans, whichever is possible.

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