

## Critiquing Humanism: Introductory Conversations

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The word “humanism” is associated with the revival of classical antiquity in 13<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup>C Italy. “It involves,” as Nicholas Mann writes, “the rediscovery and study of ancient Greek and Roman texts, the restoration and interpretation of them and the assimilation of the ideas and values that they contain” (2). The assimilation was based on archaeological and philological attention to the details of all manner of written records - from inscriptions to epic poems – and pervaded all areas of post-medieval culture, including theology, philosophy, political thought, jurisprudence, medicine, mathematics, and the creative arts. Such a practice allowed humanist scholars to explore the meaning of local or foreign texts, use them for religious, socio-political or economic reasons, and form an international community of texts and discourses. Since the revival of classical learning was related with the popular rise of liberal education, especially literature, philosophy, and the arts, which had an important role in political propaganda, military discourse, and public morality, humanism also had a political role. But, the humanist political thinkers were not political in its ideological sense. As James Hankins tells us, the Italian humanists, because of the central role, the Church played in public and professional life, were seldom critical of establishment politics and spoke mainly about both the positive and negative sides in rhetorical manner, choosing to take the role of a pragmatist (Hankins 120). It was with the rise of Ottoman empire and fall and degradation of humanist learning that new humanist thinking came to take the central stage – mainly by Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas More with shifting ideals on virtue (which for Machiavelli stood for ability, power, and prowess) and a specific focus on justice, equality and democracy (for More).

What we notice here is that the term humanism shifts its meaning over time and appears more critical of establishment politics. But it is in the seventeenth and eighteenth century onwards in Germany that the term receives a different meaning, one that dominantly holds in academic talk even today. As Raymond Williams shows in his *Keywords*, with the rise of national consciousness in Germany and then in other European countries, humanism is linked with cultivation of European values and culture and a possibility of self-development and self-perfection (Williams 150). European nation, culture, civilization, and humanism are begun to be used interchangeably, and in the colonies these ideals are used for religious propaganda, colonial law, and imperialist profit. Partha Chatterjee and Stephen Morton, for instance, tell us of the heated debates in the British parliament over the different treatment of the word “human,” and the use of the state of emergency law for the question of appropriate mode of governance in the colonies in an age when the Europeans spoke of rational, universal human nature and human equality (Chatterjee 5; Morton 3). With the two European/World Wars, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and the rise of minority, gender, and ethnicity based movements, the European meaning and use of humanism have encountered severe criticism from

intellectuals, social scientists, and philosophers, resulting in the popularity of anti-humanist philosophy in the “West.” The rise of machines in contemporary everyday life, from computers, mobile phones, to surveillance cameras, the critical-ethical discussions on animal studies and the current debates on the Anthropocene and climate change have further pushed the notion of humanness away from the centre of discussion or centred the “human” and made “him” responsible for the destruction of nature and ecology. These developments in critical thinking are all very useful and have given us valuable discoveries and research directions; but, in our current posthumanist critical climate, it also becomes important to ask: are we, in the name of criticism, dethroning humanism from everyday life or a certain understanding of humanism connected with European culture, civilization, arrogance, imperialism, and war? As the world sees numerous popular resistance struggles and movements, from Bangladesh, India, Hong Kong, the Arab countries, to the US, Mexico, Brazil and Greece, as the gap between wealth and poverty reaches unprecedented dimensions, as the ecological questions and climate change continue to throw humans of poorer nations and nonhuman animals into a life of catastrophe, and as the world faces steep economic crisis, wide refugee crisis, rise of religious fundamentalism and fascist hyper-nationalism, is it useful to lose faith in humanity or ethically correct to stop helping the weak, the vulnerable, the helpless Other? Is it beneficial to attack humanism for the sake of attacking a civilizational notion?

These questions ask us to posit here what we mean by humanism. To go back to Nicholas Mann’s definition, humanism is a philological practice which, through a careful and sympathetic reading, gives meaning to texts that are international in nature and formative of societal and community values. It allows learning from foreign cultures, suggestions, instructions, and constructive criticisms for a betterment of national/regional/urban culture. As is already suggested, humanism in the use of Machiavelli and More had an anti-establishment critique embedded in it (though their ideas were vastly different from each other). Machiavelli and More criticized the existing order and built their ideas of humanism upon the necessities and imperatives of their ages and their political beliefs. Humanism today should begin with this critical spirit, of criticizing the establishment, the power structures that push a large section of humans under the yoke and continue to give the other tiny bit all the benefits and advantages of the consumerist capitalist world. It should begin from addressing this gap, the question of imperialism which is very much alive (as the situation in the Middle East confirms) and human struggle against and resistance to it, of how nonhuman animals and nature have been given particular meaning in the European Enlightenment humanist ecosystem and how the ideological and discursive dominance of the world by European thinking has rarely allowed space to recover them from subjection and exploitation. It should start from responding to how race, class, and gender have received categorical meaning and use in this plane of thought and been used methodically for the politics of human domination.

It is important then to criticize a certain European understanding of humanism that rose with industrial capitalism, civilizational thoughts, bourgeois modernity, nationalism, and imperialism. There has already been work on these questions in the disciplinary studies of poststructuralism, postcolonialism, feminist theory, and race studies, among others. But there is still a need to address the gap that these studies have promoted. Instead of *speaking* of humanism and its critical capacity in a world ravaged by different forms of crisis and struggles, these discourses have mostly perversely prioritized, for disciplinary politics and global marketization of university discourses, anti-humanist, anti-foundationalist lenses that regard real events as linguistic effects or discursive formations. We believe that a broader understanding of humanism, one that invites critique and inter-relational use, one that speaks of human struggles and emancipation, can be meaningfully developed by engaging with thoughts and texts by thinkers from different spaces – spaces that have experiences of subjugation, exploitations, and struggle. Thus, we place here critical thinking from geographies as vast and different as those of colonized, metropole, exile, emigrated, and war-torn territories to understand how humanism and an informed critique of this concept have long inspired philosophy of actually existing conditions and the socio-political imperative of human emancipation. This section engages with critical work by Rabindranath Tagore, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Edward Said, while the next one follows from Tagore's thoughts on a universal humankind in a post-secular age and the constitutive critique of this notion in the work of Judith Butler and Hamid Dabashi.

### **Rabindranath Tagore and the Critique of European Humanism**

Rabindranath Tagore delivered his last public speech, "The Crisis of Civilization" at Santiniketan in 1941. It was about his long admiration for and faith in the humanitarian acts and cultural wealth of the British people and his contrasting realizations during the final years of his life. 1941 was a time when the Second World War ravaged the world in the name of racial pride and economic profit. The War turned all the civilizational ideals that Europe had been preaching into a mockery in its aggressive fascist, racist and imperialist intentions. At this crucial juncture, Tagore attempts to understand what civilization is, what it means to Indians and how Britain has subjected a population through power, domination, and arrogance based on racial superiority. Civilization in India, he says, had a different meaning. It meant "Sadachar" (proper conduct), cultivated in a famous ancient land, Brahmavarta, and the generational use of the conducts which gradually turned into restrictive laws: "That is how a pharisaic formalism gradually got the upper hand of free thought and the ideal of 'proper conduct' which Manu found established in Brahmavarta steadily degenerated into socialized tyranny" (n. pag.). The Bengal Renaissance movement, which threw a severe challenge to that, was the intellectual atmosphere that Tagore grew up in – an atmosphere inspired by British analytical thinking and humanitarian deeds. But unlike other races and religions in India, the British never came to settle and mingle with races and foster peace and love for other humans. They drained the wealth of the nation, subjected the people to torture and mutual hatred, and preached their civilizational superiority. This

discourse of superiority, Tagore says in another noted essay, “Nationalism in India” (delivered as a lecture in the United States of America), is based on the notion of the evolution of Nation, the geographical harshness and dearth of resources in Europe for which every race had to fight hard, shaping from it, an aggressive culture. It is the same Europe that also gave analytical thinking and the practice of historical consciousness to the world. But the environment-determined aggression and pride in racial and knowledge based superiority made it blasé, blind and closed to welcoming other traditions, other cultures, and wisdom:

Europe has gradually grown hardened in her pride of all her outer and inner habits. She not only cannot forget that she is Western, but she takes every opportunity to hurl this fact against others to humiliate them. This is why she is growing incapable of imparting to the East what is best in herself, and of accepting in a right spirit the wisdom that the East has stored for centuries (n. pag.).

Tagore grabs at the heart of the thing here. Pride and blindness and the colonial aggression and conquering of the world have made the European Enlightenment discourse of humanism the only available one for the world. He asserts that Europe as a being cannot forget that she is Western and humiliates the world by constantly referring to its accumulated (and narrow) cultural resources. For Tagore, it is only in India and America, who have long been welcoming different races, where a true universal humanity can be fostered. Tagore is not uncritical of America’s treatment of the Red Indians and the aboriginals, but thinks that a country must find its own form of critical thinking, history and education, and then impart knowledge to the other for a creative and spiritual unity.

To come back to the “Crisis” essay, England was such a land of creative and spiritual unity for Tagore for a long time—a glorious place for oppressed humanity, cultural thinking, and humanitarian deeds. But the British colonial rule in India has given him a different understanding—that humans are different and they should be treated differently, with law and order, with rules of torture and subjugation: “Such acts of heroism reminded me over again of the true English spirit to which in those early days I had given my full faith, and made me wonder how imperialist greed could bring about so ugly a transformation in the character of so great a race.” Britain has developed itself through its invention of various machinery but has kept her colonial dominions into perennial poverty, underdevelopment, deprivation, and torture:

In India the misfortune of being governed by a foreign race is daily brought home to us not only in the callous neglect of such minimum necessities of life as adequate provision for food, clothing, education and medical facilities for the people, but in an even unhappier form in the way people have divided themselves [...] If in its place they have established, with baton in hand, a reign of ‘law and order’, in other words a policeman’s rule, such mockery of civilization can claim no respect from us (n. pag.).

In this line of thinking, he seems to not only “demystify” the imperialist dimension of colonial rule but also hint at the idea of different treatment of humans by the Europeans who had preached universal and legal equality of man in the metropolises (prognosticating Chatterjee’s and Morton’s work). From this extremely disillusioning realization of civilization, which he considered Europe’s innate wealth for India, and which he now disdainfully terms “the crumbling ruins of a proud civilization strewn like a vast heap of futility,” Tagore, the eternal believer in the good of man, speaks of the coming of a universal, unvanquished Man from the East (almost like Walter Benjamin’s visions of the messiah) who “will retrace his path of conquest, despite all barriers, to win back his lost human heritage,” teach the world of tolerance and love for the other, rescue us from the pursuit of self-interest and aggression that Europe has condemned us with, and sing the songs of human emancipation.

### **Jean-Paul Sartre, Humanism, and Responsibility**

If this is not exactly what Jean-Paul Sartre said, these lines from his lecture on “Existentialism is a Humanism” about universal human condition are not very different either:

Furthermore, although it is impossible to find in every man a universal essence that could be said to comprise human nature, there is nonetheless a universal human *condition*. [...] By “condition” they refer, more or less clearly, to all limitations that *a priori* define man’s fundamental situation in the universe [...] as diverse as man’s projects may be, at least none of them seems wholly foreign to me since each presents itself as an attempt to surpass such limitations. Every project however individual has a universal value. Every project - even one belonging to a Chinese, an Indian, or an African – can be understood by a European. To say it can be understood means that the European of 1945, though his situation is different, must deal with his own limitations in the same way, and so can reinvent within himself the project undertaken by the Chinese, Indian or black African. (42)

Given in 1945, when France was suffering from Nazi tyranny and choked by press censorship, and Sartre’s fiction and philosophy promoting existentialism was faced with virulent criticism from the Christian and Communist sections, this lecture was a response that existentialism as a philosophy is essentially humanist. Sartre elucidates that in existentialist philosophy, which takes from Descartes, Kierkegaard and Heidegger, existence precedes essence: “man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterwards defines himself” (22). Stripped of spiritual and divine protection, man in the modern world is controlled by his will and his action. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is “to make every man conscious of what he is, and to make him solely responsible for his own existence” (23). Responsibility for one’s existence and actions and the will to commitment are indispensable to existentialism. He then goes on to show how features such as “anguish,” “abandonment,” and “despair,” which have been taken out of context and used to describe the nature

of the world and the cowardly response of an isolated individual who does not know how to take part in community or collective action, are useful responses for collective action. For Sartre, a world divided and tattered by human greed, arrogance, and the will to dominate, is bound to develop anguish in mankind, but that does not mean “quietism” or “inaction.” On the other hand, anguish gives birth to take responsibility for one’s actions because it is a world where man is abandoned from God. This abandonment means there is no one to blame or take care of in danger. Every human should help the other, commit himself or herself to remain close and take care of the community. Existentialism, he asserts, is a philosophy of action, of realizing human will and consciousness and acting upon them based on collective responsibility and need. Despair teaches that one should limit oneself according to need and individual capacity. All these features essentially inspire humanity to act upon circumstances, make collective action happen, limit ambitions, and take responsibility for one’s actions. Through such collective action, responsibility and commitment to one and the other, humans can realize the project of humanism and a European can surpass his or her limitations and understand the other, help out and reinvent the project. Existentialist Humanism, according to Sartre, is this need for man to understand that “there is no legislator other than himself and that he must, in his abandoned state, make his own choices, and also because we show that it is not by turning inward, but by constantly seeking a goal outside of himself in the form of liberation, or of some special achievement, that man will realize himself as truly human” (53). Though Sartre did not agree with many of these ideas later, the notion that man realizes humanity by acting outside himself in the form of liberation never deserted him. Like in the quote above, Sartre continued to engage with political questions in the French-occupied colonies in Africa, write “introductions” and “forewords” to books by Franz Fanon, Leopold Senghor, and other prominent Francophone African intellectuals and support the Algerian anti-colonial struggles. Sartre’s humanism was not the humanism that Europe taught him about national and individual self-development, but one of opening up, surpassing limitation, beyond and outside oneself, embracing the other and building an atmosphere of political hope and collective will.

### **Edward Said and the Restoration of Humanist Critique**

Edward Said’s intellectual development took place in the atmosphere of postwar student agitations in France and in the US, the war in Vietnam, and the climate of radical anti-humanist philosophy espoused by Foucault and others. *Orientalism* (1978), however, situated a paradox in Saidian thinking, one of humanist philosophy and anti-humanist method and scholarship. Pondering on this paradox and speaking on his life-long faith in struggle-based agitations and the Palestinian human rights movement, Said asserts in his final book, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004),

On the contrary, as a fair degree of my own political and social activism has assured me, people all over the world can be and are moved by the ideals of justice and equality – the South African victory in the liberation struggle is a perfect case in point – and the affiliated

notion that the humanistic ideals of liberty and learning still supply most disadvantaged people with the energy to resist unjust war and military occupation, for example, and to try to overrun despotism and tyranny, both strike me as ideas that are alive and well. And despite the (in my opinion) shallow but influential ideas of a certain facile type of radical antifoundationalism, with its insistence that real events are at most linguistic effects, and its close relative, the end-of-history thesis, these are so contradicted by the historical impact of human agency and labour as to make a detailed refutation of them here unnecessary. (10)

Said places faith in the concept of humanism. But what is humanism here? For Said, the European Enlightenment discourse of humanism in liberal education has taken the old use of criticism away from humanism and made it into a rule-bound philosophy of canons and appreciation of great literature. This humanism has also given birth to professionalism and specialization, refusing gradually to credit humanist study with the understanding of human values, energy, and freedom. Said wants to bring back the old use of humanism. He provides a working definition here: “Humanism is the achievement of form by human will and agency; it is neither system nor impersonal force like the market or the unconscious, however much one may believe in the workings of both” (15). It is not a philosophy only, it is a practice that warrants undivided attention to critical scrutiny and the space for the other, the inter-relational that has long built and defined the historical, economic and cultural relations in the ancient times. This rather Vichian philological understanding of humanism has been missing from the field. Said shows that, instead, another practice has been methodically developed: of the building of canons, hierarchy, and institutional prestige which is unfailingly Western/European and hardly allows any opening or criticism from outside. Through a liberalist reading of Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*, where anarchy is understood as or linked with the barbaric/colonized/other, and through schools such as “Practical Criticism” and “New Criticism,” humanism has been removed from the sphere of human agency and labour and thrown into the world of scholasticism that studies literary-cultural activities as a formal, linguistic, and mechanical affair. It is this notion of humanism, according to Said, that anti-humanism in the radical political times of the seventies was challenging. But in order to uproot this humanist practice, anti-humanism has obscured human agency and labour further, putting the struggles of disadvantaged humans and their ideals of liberty and learning into jeopardy, and stripping them of a revolutionary and democratic vocabulary. In order to restore a humanist practice, Said informs, not only does our method of learning need rescuing from anti-foundationalist obscurities but it also requires a constant challenge and alertness to Eurocentrism that has seriously damaged old intercultural humanism. Said, for this restoration, uses a concept of worldliness, “by which I mean at a more precise cultural level that all texts and all representations were in the world and subject to its numerous heterogeneous realities – assured contamination and involvement, since in all cases the history and presence of various other groups and individuals made it impossible for anyone to be free of the conditions of material existence” (49). Worldliness assures

the travelling nature of texts, movements, and alongside it the movement and agency of humans to find out, learn from foreign cultures, and struggle for emancipation through knowledge, method, and action. This mobile, fluid nature of texts and studies cannot be taken away from humanist practice. It is the role of intellectuals to remind us of this mobile and political nature of humanism in everyday life, of never to obey uncritically to the canonical, rigid, and establishment-oriented strictures and structures of Eurocentric Enlightenment humanism, and teach us over time the songs of human agency, will, and collective action.

Throughout his life, Said campaigned for Palestinian human rights, Sartre promoted anti-colonial, anti-Eurocentric humanism, and Tagore sang of humanity, love, and peace. All of them were critical of a particular Eurocentric humanism that brought with it national interest, cultural dominance, imperialism, and subjugation of humanity. All of them, from their critical moments of national and global crisis, from the Second World War to the current permanent state of war, have mobilized critique of establishment politics and spoken of the significant role of a philosopher, intellectual, or great man who will arrive and through his or her life examples help us commit to humanity, teach us how to be responsible to each other and live with the nonhumans in a world without values of self-possession and interest. As the contemporary world is torn apart by religious fundamentalism, fascist nationalism, neoliberal economic subjugation, and the wide difference between wealthy and poor nations, these ideas from very different geographical and historical contexts appear timely and useful. Let us end this section with a quote by Said on the role of intellectual in contemporary times who Said thinks is a custodian of humanist thought:

The intellectual's role is dialectically, oppositionally [...] to challenge and defeat both an imposed silence and the normalized quiet of unseen power wherever and whenever possible. For there is a social and intellectual equivalence between the mass of overbearing collective interests and the discourse used to justify, disguise, or mystify its workings while also preventing objection or challenges to it. (135)

### **What is the Human Universal? : Sartre**

Attempting to conceptualize the human universal from the discussion we have had so far in this introductory dialogue, it is a question whether we can think "universal man" as Tagore would say, by *generalizing* the particular in an *inductive* framework or whether we must derive the universal as a *deduction* from the particular. How do we think through the status of the human universal in this globalized era of late-capitalism? In today's culturalist universe of discourses, we cannot have a universal conception of the human that disregards particular differences of class, caste, race and nationality and the crucial differentiations with the non-human as well as the inanimate, not to mention the earth in its planetary nuances. As Sartre says in the passage quoted above, the universal man can *transcend* the limits of the particular only by acknowledging, among myriad cultural



differences, the similar way, a Chinese, an Indian and an African understands the *individual limitation* of his or her own situation. In other words, it is only by being an individual that we can deduce ourselves as being part of some human universal: “Thus the man who discovers himself directly in the *cogito* also discovers all the others, and discovers them as the condition of his own existence.” (n. pag.) For Sartre, the human universal is not *founded* on the particular subject but on the contrary it is universal man who *founds* the individual. If the universal man establishes the individual, this schema of the universal foregrounds various cultural, ethnic, psychic and sexual differences that constitute the particular. Though this is not a deduction of the universal man from the individual, it is nevertheless a universality that is acutely sensitive to particular differences.

### **Tagore’s Universal Man: Redefining Religion**

Rabindranath Tagore’s “universal man” is markedly different from Sartre’s godless and *immanent* human universal. Tinged with a meditative spirituality, characteristic of his Upanishadic worldview, Tagore’s messianic man is a realization of the universal human spirit that transcends narrow self-interests of the individual and elevates itself to the celebrated status of the spiritual universal:

It is said in a verse of the Upanishad that this world which is all movement is pervaded by one supreme unity, and therefore true enjoyment can never be had through the satisfaction of greed, but only through the surrender of our individual self to the Universal Self. (*The Religion of Man* 20-21)

For Tagore, the human universal does not condition or produce the particular but the individual human being is *superseded* in the universal being of man. As Tagore would reflect on, in *The Religion of Man* (1930), “this is why there is such a thing as progress in our civilization; for progress means that there is an ideal perfection which the individual seeks to reach by extending his limits in knowledge, power, love, enjoyment, thus approaching the universal.” (21) In these Hibbert lectures delivered in 1930, what he develops is not an institutional idea of religion but humanitarianism as a religion in itself. Today the saturated function of the nation-state all over the world is in the process of undoing the separation of religion from politics that had been the defining feature of political modernity. While the so-called “post-secular” age acknowledges the intermeshing of the religious and the secular, instead of seeing them as watertight categories, the global rise of right-wing religious fascism and terrorist fundamentalism has unsettled our everyday reality as well as the way we seem to think about institutional religion. In this context, Tagore’s conception of “religion” as a contemplative spiritual practice of the individual that can realize the potential human universal that rests within him, acquires a critical value precisely because of its transcendental humanism:

Our religions present for us the dreams of the ideal unity which is man himself as he manifests the infinite. We suffer from the sense of sin, which is the sense of discord,

when any disruptive passion tears gaps in our vision of the One in man, creating isolation in our self from the universal humanity. (120)

For Tagore, the universal man is anything but a negation of the individual. Following the Upanishad once again, he talks about a harmonious relationship between man as individual and man as infinite (180). As he qualifies in the final stages of this lecture, religion is not understood as an absolute but only as a “means to a further end” and this end is “the perfect liberation of the individual in the universal spirit across the furthest limits of humanity itself.” (189) Even though Tagore’s humanism is anthropocentric in the classical sense, it has historically assumed a contemporary note of critique in relation to a fundamentalist notion of religion, which has gathered global momentum in permeating the vicious circle of terrorism and counter-terrorism.

### **Grievability as the Universal of Lives: Butler**

After Sartre’s universal man who *produces* the individual and Tagore’s human universal as a way of *overcoming* the individual in a spiritual exultation, let us probe a little further into this questioning of the status of the human from more contemporary vantage points. In November 2015, following terror attacks in Lebanon, Iraq and France, the social media and the entire virtual space was astir with the issue of discrimination when it came to grieving the loss of lives in different countries. It was alleged from various quarters that white European lives were deemed more valuable than their non-European counterparts. According to this accusatory line of thinking, the middle-eastern countries where such attacks had long become a matter of everyday reality, saw very little virtual grieving and the frequency of the attacks was used as a way of neutralizing their impact. Social media platforms like Facebook came up with generic profile-picture filters to express grief for Paris killings whereas deaths in Lebanon or Iraq remained unsung. The public forums thus became engaged in discussing the received inequality of human lives along the lines of racial and national identity. To return to our question about the human universal in this context is to ask whether all lives are equally “grievable.” If the answer is negative, it subverts the possibility of a universal human discourse of emancipation. Judith Butler’s 2009 book *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* which came out in a newly revised edition earlier this year, takes up this question of “grievability” from the position of the human.

Following up on *Precarious Life* (2004), Butler here defines the human by combining the existentialist conception of *precariousness* (as we have seen above with Sartre’s notion of the abandoned man, condemned to his own freedom) with the political notion of *precarity* to account for the contemporary crisis of refugees and migrants, caught up in a no-man’s land and left to die in the middle of the tempestuous sea (3). She presents a “bodily ontology” where a body is defined by its vulnerability to social and political forces that both make and unmake it. Butler considers the Hegelian structure of *recognizability* as the condition of what is defined as life but she also reflects

that there is a *politically produced normativity*, which determines this benchmark of recognition. I would argue that Butler politically mobilizes a notion of the human universal from the affective point of grieving and “grievability” to counter the discrimination in grieving for lost lives, some of which are inevitably attributed more value than others. As she argues, precariousness is endemic to the universal human condition and it is this universality of precariousness that can open up an egalitarian definition of grievability as the fundamental situation of all lives, both human and non-human:

Precisely because a living being may die, it is necessary to care for that being so that it may live. Only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of the life appear. Thus, grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters. (14)

For Butler, “precariousness” and “precarity” are intersecting concepts. Precariousness ensures that lives “can be expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed.” On the other hand, “precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death.” (25) If the first belongs to *universal life* (the human universal in this case is not reduced to the human in the strict sense but incorporative of the non-human animals as well) in an existential way, the latter is a politically induced condition of *particular lives*. Butler’s argument of the vulnerable body shows a compatibility with Sartre’s thinking when she evokes the relational ethical matrix as a way of establishing the individual: ‘Am I even thinkable without that world of others? In effect, could it be that through the process of assuming responsibility the “I” shows itself to be, at least partially, a “we”?’ (35) At this point, we are back to the human universal as a way of *producing* the individual. But as she rightly points out, we mourn for lives known to us and remain cold to other losses at a remote distance, as we ask ourselves: Am I responsible for all lives? Butler observes that if this “responsibility” has to assume a universal character, it must pass through “critical reflection on those exclusionary norms by which fields of recognizability are constituted, fields that are implicitly invoked when, by a cultural reflex, we mourn for some lives but respond with coldness to the loss of others.” (36)

In Butler’s argument it is war that divides lives into those, which are grievable and those, which are not. This binary reduction of all lives is in itself a *normative frame* that emerges from the discourse of war:

Lives are divided into those representing certain kinds of states and those representing threats to state-centered liberal democracy, so that war can then be righteously waged on behalf of some lives, while the destruction of other lives can be righteously defended. (53)

We can derive from the logic of her argument that in order to overcome this dichotomous thinking, we must foreground our precariousness and *force* precarity with it:

The reason I am not free to destroy another—and indeed, why nations are not finally free to destroy one another—is not only because it will lead to further destructive consequences. That is doubtless true. But what may be finally more true is that the subject that I am is bound to the subject I am not, that we each have the power to destroy and to be destroyed, and that we are bound to one another in this power and this precariousness. In this sense, we are all precarious lives. (43)

As Butler clarifies, the schismatic categorization of lives into grievable and ungrivable ones, seeks to undermine the reality of our relationality. It hushes up the possibility of “any recognition that the generalized condition of precariousness implies, socially and politically, a generalized condition of interdependency.” (54) This mutually implicated relational matrix offers a dialectical way out from the dichotomization of lives:

The very fact of being bound up with others establishes the possibility of being subjugated and exploited—though in no way does it determine what political form that will take. But it also establishes the possibility of being relieved of suffering, of knowing justice and even love. (61)

It follows from Butler’s argument that the status of the human universal, redefined from the generalized precariousness of all lives, is an important way of thinking when it comes to resisting the bio-politically induced division of lives into the necessity and the needlessness of mourning. As opposed to this discriminatory dividedness, the human universal in this case becomes an affective tool of critique through precariousness.

### **From Butler to Dabashi: The Post-human Body**

Butler’s political ontology of the body speaks to Hamid Dabashi’s figuration of the post-human body of the suicide-bomber in *Corpus Anarchicum* (2012). What is interesting for our examination of the human universal is Dabashi’s point about a “corpus universalis” which goes beyond the xenophobic and Islamophobic designation of the “corpus particularis.” Dabashi writes:

Because of the incessant demonization of *the Palestinian, the Arab, and the Muslim* in the aftermath of 9/11, it is critically important to see the *corpus particularis* of the Palestinian suicidal bomber as the normative template of a *corpus universalis* that is far more global in its diagnosis of what has happened to the *posthuman body*. (18-19)

Or again:

The globalized body no longer has a territorial or cultural limit to its contestations. What

has happened to the Palestinian, the Arab, and the Muslim body, as *corpus particularis*, is integral to the predicament of the *posthuman body*, as *corpus universalis* at large. Severing the reading of that *particular* from the fate of this *universal* is the most pernicious legacy of Orientalism. (200)

As we can see, there is a crucial conception of the post-human body as a *universal* in Dabashi's argument here. It protects the discourse from criminalizing in a prejudiced way, the *particular cultural bodies*, in acts of terrorism. For Dabashi, it is important to cross over from this particular body to a corporeal universal and acknowledge the status of the post-human body as a waste:

The configuration of the *posthuman body* is coterminous with a universal denial of death, a fear of mortality put at the service of the mad logic of capital, the body made disposable, dispensable, and expendable, like any old Chevy with untenable retail value, unworthy of the valuable time of a used car salesman. (209)

With Dabashi's universal notion of an expendable (post-)human body, we return to Butler's *exposed* and *vulnerable* political ontology of the body and as we have seen, they both mobilize the human universal, albeit in different ways, to critique trans-valuation of lives and resist cultural clichés that generate phobia of a particular religious difference. The human universal in these discursive structures becomes a function of critique.

### **Responsibility, Responsiveness and Action in Passivity**

In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953), when Vladimir says, "Was I sleeping, while the others suffered?" (84), his question is replete with the predicament of War. While they show an adamant passivity in their condition of waiting, when Lucky and Pozzo have their fall in the second act, they do respond to the cries for help, "addressed" "to all mankind." As Vladimir reasons, though the cries are addressed to all mankind, "at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not." (74) What springs the passive couple into action is this acknowledgment of representing, in the unique *individuality* of the human self, an *appeal* towards the human universal which in this case is *produced* both as a *responsibility* and a *responsiveness* towards the Other with whom it considers itself knotted. Looking at the state of the world today, is it not time for us to ask the same question and be both responsible and responsive for an answer that defines an ethic of action amid all passivity? Perhaps it is time to critique certain conceptions of humanism and yet use it against itself in its alternative avatars as a multi-dimensional machinery of critique.

The essays in this collection attempt critique from different perspectives and focussed areas. Pablo Lazo's article 'Latin American Literature and Criticism of Universal Humanism: The Case of Cortázar's "House Taken Over",' translated from Spanish by Fernando Villalovs Mariscal, offers a

reading of Julio Cortázar's short story by placing it into its contemporary socio-political context of 1940's Peronist Argentina. Through the historical context of the property rights debate, the piece reads into Cortázar's famously opaque narrative, a Derridean allegory of hospitality. By opening up to Derrida's dissection of the spectral alterity of the invisible global capital, the article indicates how global capitalism operates by way of "spectralizing" the human. Sagnika Chanda's "The Posthuman Child as a Genderless Ideal" contributes to a further widening of the posthumanist discussion in this issue by raising the question of gender in relation to the figure of the child in children's literature. Her reading of the *Artemis Fowl* series complicates the romantic figuration of the child as genderless by using it anew within the framework of post-humanism. Chanda addresses the role of technology in rendering the child's gendered body more opaque than ever as she installs the post-human child as an emancipatory site, resisting normativity of gendering. Highlighting tropes like corporeal transformation and counter-gendering, the essay destabilizes gender hegemonies to give a feminist direction to the critique of humanism.

Saptarshi Roy in "Robunism: Introspecting the Conjunction of Human and Humane Mechanics" tackles the question of humanism from the important contemporary context of global migration and connects it to technology in a post-humanist framework. After philosophically tracing the human as just another striation in the globalized technological machine in the first part, the article changes gears in the second part as it adopts a more informative, if not ethnographic approach. Here it navigates through the public discourse on managing the migrant by way of a technology, which also attempts to incorporate them into the "West." The article opens up the man-machine interface, which must be taken on board in any discussion or critique of the human in today's day and age. James Martell in "Becoming Béla Tarr's Bêtes, or How to Stop Being Afraid of Ceasing to Be a Human Being" approaches the human through a complex of time, space, animal and its affective constellation of slowness. In this multi-layered discussion of Béla Tarr's cinema, which responds to László Krasznahorkai's meandering syntax in its intense arrestedness, Martell argues against the contemporary fascination with speed, equated with smartness and mobilizes the non-reflexivity of stupidity, mutating into the reflexivity of madness to reopen a space for thinking. His rich and dense endnotes ask the reader to pause and go slow. In this performative resistance to the rapid pretence of understanding lies a horizon of the human, redefined through stupidity at the affective cusp of slowness that can turn time into space.

Mauro Scalercio's piece, "The Italian Job: Giambatista Vico at the Origin of Edward Said's Humanism" talks about the influence of Vico's thoughts and theoretical directions in Said's idea of humanism. Scalercio does a close textual study and rigorous analysis of Said's broad corpus in order to show how Said has variously taken from Nietzsche, Foucault and others and carefully dissociated

from them and the poststructuralist-postmodernist derivations. Said, Mauro shows, uses the term in its ontological and epistemological capacity to question and open human agency to possibilities, for which his debt to Vico's philological and scientific thoughts on the human remains seminal. The joint essay by Anindya Purakayastha and Saptarni Pandit, "Animal-humanities and the Eco-sophical Parergon: *Homo Reflectus* in Species History," attempts a posthumanist deconstruction of anthropocentrism in critical theory and in the disciplinary dispensation of humanities and social sciences. Using a number of sources and ideas from continental philosophy, especially the notion of "auto-reject," the authors call for a new materialist eco-sophical study that can decentre the human-oriented thinking in everyday life and in academia and help place the questions of environment and the animal in meaningful ways.

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