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Critiquing Posthuman Landscapes in Lucy Prebble's

The Sugar Syndrome

Abstract

Lucy Prebble in *The Sugar Syndrome* (2003) explores posthuman themes, opens with the stage directions of cyberspace. The paper attempts to critique the play from posthumanistic perspectives wherein pertinent concern remains to look at the relationship between humans and technological devices. Current study offers critical analyses of posthuman characters and setting of the play. The descriptions of a teenager and her relationship with numerous other people are significant. Posthuman subjectivity in *The Sugar Syndrome* emerges from the virtual encounters, for example- the play has dialogues directly uttered by the computer, stage directions are occupied by electronic gadgets, screens, etc. Posthuman drama highlights the human situations surrounded by technological devices and cyber landscape.

Key Words: Posthuman Landscapes, Cyberspace, Posthuman Drama, Technology, Electronic Characters.

Posthuman discourse emphasises stretching the boundaries of human landscapes wherein the process began long back when people made efforts for survival. Humans' fantasy for better life contributes in shaping the nascent concept of posthuman landscapes. Internet usage becomes an essential aspect of transforming the lives of youths. Technology gives a progressive direction to human life whereas, the dangerous consequences are an unavoidable part of that. Surveillance potential of new media landscape progresses through virtualisation and further video surveillance becomes more powerful in deriving information about users. Networked information through smartphones, social networking sites create a virtual form of biopower in the age of new media world. The networked information benefits not only governments, police forces but also helps terrorists and criminals to achieve their targets. There are instances where one can find unexpected progressive and destructive consequences of electronic surveillance. Electronic surveillance reflects both situations of empowering people and pushing in the hands of authoritative people.

Catherine Hayles claims, "In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals" (Hayles 3). Hayles emphasises shifting of information from the body to other material objects. The posthuman subject is a combination of material entity and collection of dissimilar components as to how to undergo reconstruction.

Internet and digital space reshape landscapes in the world as well as in literature. As life gets transformed by the use of digital diegesis as to what reflects in literature. Dani spends her most of the time with computer and hates her parents. During her online chat, she connects with Lewis, a boy with whom she enters into a no-strings-attached sexual relationship. She also connects with a thirty-two-year-old paedophile Tim who thinks her as an eleven-year-old boy. Later on, she also indulges into physical relationship with Tim. Every

character is seen using the internet except Dani's mother Jan. Virtual landscape helps Lewis to connect with Dani and he falls in love with her. But she responds his love as a physical attraction only. Dani did not find any care from Lewis to become his mate forever.

Lucy Prebble introduces advanced technologies in the setting. Dani connects to the internet and the voice is heard loudly. In *The Sugar Syndrome*, human and non-human characters have a dialogue. As she writes:

INTERNET: Welcome to Chatarama, Dani2752. Please choose a chatroom. *(She clicks.)*Chatrooms by LOCATION. Enter postcode. *(Lewis in his bedroom. He sees Danienter the chatroom.)*

INTERNET: To ensure that this forum remains friendly and fun for everyone, please report any offensive communications to our Cyclops. (3)

The dialogues between human and non-human characters bring implications of posthuman drama. Posthuman drama provides space to electronic devices to represent the contemporary scenario. The playwright depicts excessive indulgence of youth with advanced technologies. Posthuman drama represents humans in technologically occupied situations. Lucy Prebble's stage directions clearly direct, "The set should remain spare and non-naturalistic throughout. The locations should be evoked by space, detail and lighting rather than replicated. Cyberspace, in particular, need not be naturalistically portrayed with screens and computers etc" (1). Lucy Prebbe's stage directions can be viewed as to how machines replace humans on the stage. The first act's nine scenes are partly online chat among the characters. The act starts with an online chat between Dani and Lewis and suddenly setting shifts to Lewis's bedroom wherein both end their meeting by having no-strings-attached sex. The first meeting of Dani and Tim build a posthuman paradigm where they come into interaction through social media. Suzan Lema Gencer and Mustafa Koc's *Internet Abuse*

among Teenagers and Its Relations to Internet Usage Patterns and Demographics clearly state;

> the level of Internet abuse was the highest among those students who used the Internet mostly at home. This is an expected finding and consistent with prior research (Johansson & Gotestam, 2004) because home access provides anytime and unlimited access. However, this finding may raise the question of whether parental control at home is limited and effective. Not surprisingly, the level of Internet abuse was the least among the students who used the Internet mostly at school. (34)

It clearly reflects the lack of supervision of parents over children whereas students in educational institutions get controlled access. Dani is free to use limitless internet and whatever comes into her mind. She is free to do anything. Authorities in educational institutions hold control on the Wi-Fi users and restrict websites such as porn and limited access to social networking sites (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter etc.). Dani logged in the chat room as Danny Boy and connects with Tim. He believes that she is an eleven-year-old boy. They start talking on the basis of information available on the screen. Tim finds social media, useful tool to connect with teenagers as to how he shows expert skills to attract:

> (Dani *and* Tim *in a chatroom)*
>
> TIM: Do you like football? Who are your favourite players?
>
> DANI: I don't like football. I'm always in goal.
>
> TIM: Has your dad taken you to any big matches?
>
> DANI: He's not around much.
>
> TIM: That's a shame. Does that make you sad?
>
> DANI: (slightly amused) Not really, no.
>
> TIM: Can you see the moon?
>
> DANI: Now?

TIM: Yes.

DANI: (leans back to look out of her window) Yes.

TIM: What shape is it?

DANI: Half.

TIM: It's nice that we're looking at the moon together.

DANI: (laughs at this, but is a little touched) Weirdo. (Prebble 9)

While talking to the girl through in chat the identity remains masked. Here in the play, Tim thinks that Dani boy is an eleven-year-old boy. New media landscape blurrs boundaries between animate and inanimate characters. It introduced many platforms to interact with people globally wherein they can keep their identities masked. Hence, the man does not identify the original communicator. Paedophile Tim gets wider accessibility to gain his sexual interests. Therefore, he is actually taking her as a boy. Hayles states in her book *How We Became Posthuman*:

> The crucial move of distinguishing between the enacted body, present in the flesh on one side of the computer screen, and the represented body, produced through verbal and semiotic markers in an electronic environment. This construction necessarily makes the subject into a cyborg, for the enacted and represented bodies are brought into conjunction through the technology that connects them. (xiii)

Dani represents herself as an electronic or virtual character in cyberspace. The first face to face meeting of Tim and Dani can be seen as a disjunctive conversation as he feels deceived and failed to differentiate during the online chat. He was talking to an eleven-year boy, his enthusiastic questions about the liking of football and looking at the moon, brought amused reactions when Dani meets him in person. The person with whom Tim associated himself revealed to be an animate body only. Their interaction remains virtual because Danny boy does not exist. Richard Jordan asserts in his *Posthuman Drama: Identity and the*

Machine in Twenty-First-Century Playwriting, "Their enacted bodies performing their represented ones before us" (52). Identity can be kept masked on social media as anybody make as many numbers of fake accounts of Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp etc. Dani creates a fake account to have a different kind of chat experience. Soon she starts getting messages from paedophile Tim. Her enacted body and Tim can be viewed as their fantasy for a virtual body. She substitutes his attraction with fatherly love. and masked Dani substituted his fantasy of eleven-year-old boy which remained in a virtual landscape only. After some days, when the identity of Danny boy as girl and Tim as a paedophile is unmasked, brings the horrible end of their relationship.

New media landscape adversely affects youths by making them internet addicts. Technologically occupied characters constitute posthuman subjectivity in the play. Dani is an independent user of the internet in her family. Jan (Dani's mother) thinks that she studies in her room but Dani is always seen busy in online chat. She is irregular to her classes and goes to meet strangers. It reflects Dani's search for love and care in virtual landscape which she could not get from her parents. Her parents are about to get divorced. Dani's father does not come to meet them. Jan does not pay serious attention to her daughter. Dani does whatever she likes. She spends her most of the time using internet.

New media landscape adversely affects youths by making them internet addicts. Every academic discipline is digitalised so that students can have wider accessibility for their studies. They use desktop, laptop, smartphone, etc. Though in the field of academics, digital technologies brought a revolutionary change but technology has brought many negative changes in the lives of youths. Accessive use of gadgets also becomes a cause of alienation. People become present for virtually present and absent for physically present. Similarly, Dani says in an online conversation with Tim, "I hate my mother when I should feel sorry for her. I hate her and I don't know why" (Prebble 34). She lives with her mother in the house but has a hateful feeling. She has become habitual of interacting with people in virtual landscape only.

Whenever Jan enters into Dani's room, she "drops down the window of chatroom" (30). She flirts with Lewis, fights with her mother and tries to seek emotional support from Tim. By the end of the first act, the relationship between mother-daughter becomes more distanced.

Dani uses abusive words before her mother. The way she responds clearly reflects that her language is not acceptable to Jan. During her online chat and face to face conversation, she moves on to sexual discussions. Dani uses the internet since her move into teenage. Her rude behaviour and excessive coupling with technology created a gap between them. The playwright presents Dani, as an individual who spends her most of time using the internet to entertain herself. For Jan, she is suffering from eating disorders, no-strings-attached sexual relationship with Lewis, and Danny boy for Tim.

What makes Dani transforms her as a cyborg? The Internet provides access to porn at an early age, and it occupies her mind as a result of that she gets addicted to it. Thus, it brings drastically harmful results at an early stage. As she asserts that how her first experience of watching porn terrified her, "I couldn't get the picture out of my head of him, this big, cross man, going at it over these silly photos. I remember thinking how pretty the women were, that didn't bother me at all. But I couldn't sleep" (51). She admits that her mind is occupied with images and the beauty of the women. The act of watching porn makes her aphrodisiac. She is not happy with her own look and thinks of herself as a fat girl.

Both Tim and Lewis take her identity other than what she is in real life. She feels attached to Tim. Lewis comes to her house, speaks about the criminal nature of Tim before her mother. The absence of Dani's parental love serves as a reason for the connection between Dani and Tim, who is double her age. She again stays throughout the night with Tim in his apartment where she is seen using his laptop. On the other side, Lewis sends messages but she does not reply to him. The aphrodisiac effects of watching nudity lead Dani to connect with Lewis at a very early age. But she faces a lack of care and love. Her

realisation of Lewis's amatory exploits leads an end of their no strings attached relationship. The dialogue cited below contains voice message of Lewis that can be viewed as an instance of posthuman drama:

>*(Lewis is on his computer. He is writing an email)*
>
>INTERNET: To Dani2752@ demon.co.uk
>
>LEWIS: Dani. I rang you again and no answer. I get the feeling you're actively not ringing me now. What if you're dead? How would I ever find out? No one would think to call me. I'd just sit here forever looking at this screen. You don't even have to call, you could just email me to tell me why you're not calling. At least then I'd know.
>
>INTERNET: Save as draft. (45)

The play delineates electronic devices as characters wherein they utter dialogues. The theatrical performance of the play requires big screens in the theatre as to where the text is visible with pre-recorded over voice to make audible for the spectators. The directions which computer shows in the form of text all that carries pre-recorded sound. The presence of new media and digital technologies in the theatres brings implications of posthuman drama. The presence of electronic devices as characters in *The Sugar Syndrome* shifts traditional theatre into a posthuman theatre. Lucy Prebble's stage directions are overcrowded with the machines and screens on the stage. Posthuman drama represents not only humans but also the technologically occupied situations in which they live.

Dani drinks wine with Tim overnight, they dance and kiss one another. She talks about her abnormality of feeling hungry all the times. Lucy Prebble portrays the behaviour and abnormalities in a girl who grew up in a condition surrounded by a computer, internet, other technological devices and deprived of parental love and care. Dani is seen surrounded by computers and screens throughout the play. Her interaction with people in virtual space brought horrendous impacts in her behaviour. Tim and Dani become intimate friends. She

frequently goes to meet him and interact more openly with him. They drink wine together and Tim shows his interest in her and thinks of getting married to her. As Tim says:

> Tim: Someday, Dani, I'm going to take you to the best restaurant in town and we'll eat ourselves silly. I'll propose and we'll argue about what to call our kids. I'll want to give them stupid names from literature and I'll go out in the middle of the night to get you gherkins and ice cream when you're pregnant and all stuff like that.
>
> Dani: And when people ask us how we met, we'll just give each other a knowing look. (54)

They met through social media and spend time together under the same roof. Tim shows a note of his interest to married to her. In the 21stcentury, social media plays an essential role in connecting people globally. No doubt, social media can be viewed as an agent that helps people to find their partner whereas trap of falling into the hands of exploiters can not be ignored. It is a popular side of social media which helps people in keeping connected. Lewis found Dani's house by tracing details from her social media details. "Dani: *(to Lewis)*How did you find my house? Lewis: The lions outside. They've got football scarves…Dani: Christ, worlds colliding. Fuck, Lewis! Have you been around town looking for stone lions? You mental" (58). The conversation makes it clear that social media help him to find her house. Although she is not willing to see him yet he finds her home and keeps troubling. Lewis found the location of Dani's house on the basis of given pictures and some other details. Dani is seen busy using a computer throughout the play. As the stage directions indicate "she has been holding the laptop all this time" (60). In *The Sugar Syndrome*, Dani is seen accessing internet all the time. As, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek stated, "we live in a society with coffee without caffeine, with chocolate without sugar and with virtuality as reality without reality" (Krueger 77). Žižek clearly reflects in his statement the reality shifts with virtuality. People have become more engaged with the virtual

world and remain busy with electronic devices. The family relationships are becoming more distanced and alienated. People are becoming techno-aliens among friends and family. The playwright portrays Dani a posthuman teenager who spends her most of the time on internet, gradually, the relationship between mother-daughter becomes distanced. The identity reflected on social media is entirely different than the real one.

> DANI: Let's be honest, you met me to have sex and that's wonderful, that's simple, that's clean, I liked that. I wanted to help you. Just like with Tim. He needs fixing. You needed a shag, Lewis, let's be honest, that's what you were after.
>
> LEWIS: That's bollocks. I never used you.
>
> Dani: I never felt used. Just useful.
>
> LEWIS: What are you, the littlest fucking hobo of the Internet? (Prebble 68)

Dani being the central character of the play remains unattached to everyone who live around her. She thinks that she is useful for others by offering them her body. She grew up in the condition where she guided herself through internet. Lewis reacts by calling her a girl who is homeless and tries to search for somebody to live with for some time. But she tries to find somebody who really can understand her, help her to overcome eating disorders, and depression. Dani clearly says that she never got anyone who could become her mate. In the last scene of the play, she says to Lewis, "You're one of those many male lions, Lewis, who'll be on the edge of the pride forever, looking in, never getting to mate, and getting angrier and angrier" (69). Dani's answer to Lewis reflects her anger for his patriarchal mindset who took her as a sex object. Once, Lewis forces her to have sex whereas she does not want. This dialogue reflects her realisation that Lewis is chasing her only for his physical needs. Her statement reflects her anger for those who never cared for her emotions and treated her as a sex object. Dani represents a character who spends her most of time in seeking love and care from virtual relationships over social media. And she tries to find a

mate but comes across two different people who talk about sex most of the times. Lucy Prebble portrayed a character, who transformed herself into an individual cyborg, developed virtual connections with people and encounter with the real world that terrified her. Dani opens Tim's laptop and accesses an icon which carries cry of a young boy who is sexually abused by Tim. And his identity becomes terribly clear whose actions are not under control.

> *There is the sound of the computer letting her in.* Dani *if touched and delighted. She clicks on icons on the computer, revealing images which we cannot see. She clicks a couple more times to reveal different images. She is shocked but entranced. An audio file is opened. The sound of a young boy, eight or nine, screaming in terror and begging through tears for it to stop. It is chillingly real.* (70)

He developed skills to attract young children and stored their screaming on a laptop. His desire to store the screaming voice of the young children evokes hate in Dani's heart. Tim's desire for children and screaming porn content can be viewed as his obsession for sex with minors. It horrifies and she slams to the lid of the laptop which can be viewed as her disillusionment in real and virtual landscapes. Throughout *The Sugar Syndrome*, Dani and Jan remain in conflict and she accuses her mother of causing an eating disorder. Tim's sexual disorder of his interest in minor caused her more depression. Symbolically, she never met the person whom she talked during her online chat remains in virtual landscape only. The online Tim is entirely different than the real one and his variegated identity helps to reconcile with Dani. She associated virtual Tim's image with her father. But his collection of screaming clips of young boys opened to understand his dual personality. It is undeniable when Dani discovers about paedophile nature of Tim from his laptop as to how oppressor is caught by the oppressed. By the end of the play, Dani enables herself to find a distinction between the virtual and real landscape.

Never allowing it to get out of hand, she puts the book on the keyboard of the laptop and pours the squash from Lewis' glass all over the book and computer. She then tightly closes the lid and puts it to one side. She turns and waits for her mother who she can very vaguely hear returning. 'You're a good girl, aren't you? Where have you been? Mummy's been worried, who's a naughty pusscat?'(Prebble 75)

The ending description of the play reflects Dani's anger for her posthuman relationship with gadgets and people in the new media landscape. She keeps a book over the keyboard of the computer can be viewed as to how accessive indulgence with technological devices can lead one into alienation and depression. It also indicates that she comes back to her studies. Lucy Prebble's portrayal confronts the reader with existing reality of a society where teenagers fall into trap of amatory exploiters through social media. The character of Tim represents a demon paedophile in the society who sexually exploits minors as well as girls and makes video clips for blackmailing. The play ends with slight hope where Dani finds love and happiness in the lap of her mother. Her disapproval of laptop and internet symbolically means excessive indulgence with virtual landscape is dangerous and real happiness can be driven from the people who live around. Richard Jordan states in his *Posthuman Drama: Identity and Machine in Twenty-First Century Playwriting*, about the characters of the play *The Sugar Syndrome* they "may be read as posthuman subjects-cyborgic combinations of digital code with unwanted desires of the flesh" (56). *The sugar Syndrome* highlights virtual landscape versus real-life landscape. Advanced technologies provide wider scope of communication across the world whereas also contributes to emotional gulf among family members. An alienated person can be defined as "one who has been estranged from… his society and the culture it carries" (Clark 849). So one's estrangement with family and society leads into the condition of alienation. It helps to access the worldwide knowledge but teenagers rarely escaped from accessing pornographic material

and addiction to social media. The play highlights the dark side of excessive usage of technology among the people. The play re-frames the perceptions of the readers that technology has turned humans into cyborgs. Teenagers like Dani become victim of parental alienation syndrome. The carelessness of parents and their mutual relation affect the life of their children. The impending divorce of Dani's parents also detaches the attention towards her. The unlimited access to internet and lack of supervision can lead teenagers victimisation of alienation and amatory exploits. The records of screaming videos in Tim's laptop suggest that he exploited many children. The play provides an eye-opening dark social reality of sexual exploitation of children where the assistance of social media is essential.

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