



A Posthuman View of *The Blazing World*

The Blazing World'e Posthümanist Bir Bakış

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Makale geliş tarihi / First received : 27.10.2022
Makale kabul tarihi / Accepted : 28.12.2022

569

Bilgilendirme / Acknowledgement:

- 1- Makalemizde etik kurulu izni ve/veya yasal/özel izin alınmasını gerektiren bir durum yoktur. Makale edebiyat alanında yazılmış bir araştırma makalesidir ve herhangi bir deneysel çalışma gerektirmemiştir.
- 2- Bu makalede araştırma ve yayın etiğine uyulmuştur.

This article was checked by *Turnitin*. Similarity Index 04%

Atıf bilgisi / Citation:

Metinoğlu, N. (2022). A posthuman view of *The Blazing World*. *IBAD Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, (13), 569-578.

ÖZ

Margaret Cavendish'in 1666'da yayınlanan, ütöpik bir dünyada, bilinmeyen bir zamanda geçen *The Blazing World* adlı düzyazı kurgusu, posthuman (insansonrası) bir ütöpik dünyayı gözler önüne serer. Cavendish anlatısında bilim ve teknolojiden dine ve insan haklarına kadar çeşitli konular üzerine felsefi anlamda düşünür. Metin, bilim kurgu romanlarının yanı sıra ütöpik ve distopik romanların öncüsü olarak kabul edilir. Roman yarı insan yarı hayvan sayısız canlıyla, bedensiz varlıklarla ve teknolojik üretimlerle doludur. Yazarın romandaki insan dışı yaratımları insana benzer niteliklere sahiptir ve bu da Aydınlanma'dan bu yana hâkim olan insanla ilgili temel varsayımlara meydan okur. İnsanın faillik, zekâ ve niyetlilik sahibi tek varlık olduğunu iddia eden bu varsayımları Cavendish'in romanında vücut bulan kurgusal yaratıklar çürütebilir. Ayrıca, bu varlıklar, barış ve uyum içinde yaşayan bir dünyayı şekillendirmek için failliklerini, zekalarını ve niyetlerini kullanırlar ve bu onları kitaptaki insanlardan daha üstün kılar. Bu makale, Aydınlanma'dan bu yana süregelen insanmerkezci tutumu sorgulamak için Margaret Cavendish'in bilimkurgu romanlarının atası sayılan metnini posthümanist bir bakış açısıyla analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler

Margaret Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, Aydınlanma, Hümanizm, Posthümanizm.

ABSTRACT

Set in an unknown time in a utopian world named *The Blazing World*, Margaret Cavendish's prose fiction published in 1666 introduces a posthuman utopian world. Cavendish philosophizes on a variety of subjects from science and technology to religion and human rights in her narrative. The text is considered the predecessor of science fiction novels as well as utopian and dystopian novels. It is packed with numerous beings that are half human and half animal as well as immaterial spirits and pieces of technology. The nonhuman creations of the writer in the novel have human-like attributes, which challenges the basic assumptions of human that have prevailed since the Enlightenment. These assumptions of human claiming that humans are the only beings with agency, intelligence, and intentionality may be repudiated by Cavendish's fictional creatures who have these features attributed to men. In addition, they use their agency, intelligence, and intentionality to shape a world that lives in peace and harmony, which makes them even more outstanding entities than humans in the book. This paper aims to analyze Margaret Cavendish's proto-science fiction text in the light of posthumanism with a post-anthropocentric view to question the ongoing anthropocentric attitude since the Enlightenment.

Keywords

Margaret Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, Enlightenment, Humanism, Posthumanism.

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Cavendish's fictional work is regarded as a proto-science fiction and a forerunner of utopian novels (Splender, 1986, p. 43). The novel could be regarded as being far ahead of the time it was written. One of the most striking aspects of the text is the characters it introduces. In the book, there is a utopian world which is inhabited by bear-men, fly-men, worm-men, fish-men, and ape-men who all have various professions, wisdom, and knowledge that prove them to be as intelligent and able as humans and peace prevails in this world: "as for guns, there was no use of them, because they had no other enemies but the winds" (p. 7).¹ Through her half-human, half-animal beings, "Margaret Cavendish challenged early modern epistemological frameworks, in particular, contemporary understandings of animals, plants, and matter, and the ascription of uncontested human superiority over all other living beings and the environment" (Suzuki, 2021, p. 183). Cavendish's imaginative creations, as in Donna Haraway's words, "transgressed" the "boundary between human and animal" by bringing two distinctive species together in one body and the "human animality" takes a corporeal form through Cavendish's half-human and half-animal species (Haraway, 2016, p. 10-11). In the posthuman sense, the novel presents beings that transgress boundaries and clear-cut distinctions.

Unlike humankind that is in conflict with their own species due to differences such as gender, nationality, religion and so forth is similarly in dispute with the nonhuman nature throughout history. As Francesca Ferrando, who has several works on posthumanism asserts,

The Seventies called for a revisitation of the notion of the human by acknowledging that, in the Western tradition, only a specific type of human had been recognized as such: he had to be male, white, Western, heterosexual, physically able, propertied and so on. Such a revisitation called for a recognition of all the «other» humans, who had been left out. (Ferrando, 2014, p. 169)

On the other hand, the nonhuman creatures live in peace with every other entity. There is no faction regarding the matters of religion or administration, which also proves that these half-human-half-animal creatures display the ability to live in complete harmony. Therefore, pondering on Cavendish's work from a posthuman point of view would be accurate. The peaceful demeanor, physical and mental superiority of Cavendish's fictional beings can be deemed as proof to the fact that these creatures that are human-animal hybrids are not, in fact, inferior to humans. Additionally, it demonstrates the fact that humans are not the only beings that have the capacity of reasoning and autonomy. In fact, Cavendish's creatures seem to predominate humans in terms of the faculties that were long thought to be the properties of the human realm.

Humans cannot be thought separate from the technological and the animal because they rely on them heavily. Furthermore, they are all in a never-ending relationship with each other. Therefore, it is harmful to have an anthropocentric worldview even for human species itself. Anthropocentric mindset pursues a hierarchy between humans and the nonhuman, and it offers a set of ideas that put humans in the center of all creation. It regards humans as the most important entities in the universe having the right to dominate all other beings, animate or

¹ The primary text will be referred only with page numbers.

inanimate. Posthumanist thinkers offer neologies that contribute further to the posthumanist conception that is put forward in line with the struggle to invalidate this anthropocentric approach. Paralleling this, Rosi Braidotti, a leading philosopher and a feminist theoretician, remarks:

'Life', far from being codified as the exclusive property or the unalienable right of one species, the human, over all others or of being sacralized as a pre-established given, is posited as process, interactive and open-ended. This vitalist approach to living matter displaces the boundary between the portion of life – both organic and discursive – that has traditionally been reserved for *anthropos*, that is to say bios, and the wider scope of animal and non-human life, also known as *zoe*. (2013, p. 60)

This is where New Materialisms, a theory that originated from the general posthuman thought and proposes that matter has an intrinsic value and agency, kicks in. It bestows the smallest part of any entity, animate or inanimate, agency and subjectivity, which means everything is ontologically equal: None precedes the other.

With the same perspective, posthumanism keeps away from being human-centered or anthropocentric: "a posthuman theory of subjectivity that does not rely on classical Humanism and carefully avoids anthropocentrism" (Braidotti, 2019, p. 56). Posthumanism is a theory that emerged around the 1990s and has its roots in the Macy conferences of cybernetics between 1946-1953 (Wolfe, 2010, p. xii) feminism² of the 1980s (Ferrando 2014, p. 169). Posthumanism refers to the set of ideas that comes after Enlightenment humanism and it is against the humanist philosophy that emerged during this era. Enlightenment humanism favored humans above all other beings. By putting humans in the center, it inferiorized the nonhuman which is a dangerous situation for both human and the nonhuman as there is an interdependence between the two. Inferiorization of one over the other is the reason that lies in the core of the current global security issues that humans and the nonhuman face altogether (Braidotti, 2015, p. 13). World Wars and all armed conflicts arising from traditional humanism strikingly represent the dangers of anthropocentrism (Baysal 2020, p. 212). According to Enlightenment humanism, humans are "autonomous agent[s]" with the ability of reasoning which makes them supreme and dignified (Bolter, 2016, p. 1). The fact that they can use scientific methods and have the capacity for compassion and mercy adds to their dignified status. Due to such factors, humanist thinkers grant them the right to dominate and manipulate the more-than-human worlds around them: however, posthumanism emerged as a counter-theory. From the start of its appearance in the theoretical realm, posthumanism offers a whole new insight about human's relationship with the things around them, which led to the questions of the place of humans presented by western tradition: "Posthumanism seeks to undermine the traditionally firm boundaries between the human, the animal, and the technological" (Bolter, 2016, p.1). Posthumanism opposes the idea of human as the supreme being who has the right to dominate the natural world, which proves harmful for their own species as much as other species. "The term 'posthumanism' is applied to a range of contemporary theoretical positions put forward by researchers in philosophy, science and technology studies, literary studies, critical theory, theoretical sociology, and communication studies. The term designates a new

² In this regard, feminist writers and theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Judith Butler "displace man from his central position in the definition of the human" (Bolter, 2016, p. 4).

way of understanding the human subject and its relationship to the natural world. Posthumanist theory claims to offer a new epistemology not centered in Cartesian dualism.

According to posthumanist thinkers such as feminist theorist Donna Haraway, there is kinship instead of humanmade hierarchy. Owing to posthumanism, this hierarchy socially constructed ontological hierarchy is torn down: "Posthumanism deconstructs any ontological hierarchy; a multidimensional network depicts more closely what is at stake, even if there is no representational autonomy" (Ferrando, 2014, p. 170). Therefore, it calls for a redefinition of human status in the non-human environment. Cavendish's narrative provides the perfect medium to underscore the fact that human may not be the supreme being with agency and the capability of reasoning. Therefore, it helps to deconstruct the anthropocentric hierarchy in that although the protagonist of the text is a human, the human species is not put in the center as there are many other species exhibiting characteristics that have long been thought to belong solely to humans. These beings are living proofs that there is no self and other binary as agency is an attribute shared by them and humans, bringing humans closer to all other beings. The creatures mentioned in Cavendish's narrative prove that the nonhuman can wield their agency for the good, which can be considered as proof that the nonhuman tower over humans in opposition to the concept of human that was created during the Enlightenment. This fact provides the perfect medium for a posthuman reading of *The Blazing World*, which has otherwise been studied from other perspectives. The posthuman analysis of the novel has a great potential to contribute to the field.

CAVENDISH'S *THE BLAZING WORLD* AS A POST-ANTHROPOCENTRIC TEXT

Cavendish's narrative is an example of utopian fiction that is written and published in the seventeenth century. However, her text is not the only fictional work that tackles utopian or dystopian worlds. For instance, Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) proposes a supposedly utopian society whose administration is based on reason and there is no private property, class distinction, poverty, or crime. Francis Bacon who is regarded as the initiator of the idea that supports the anthropocentric view, "human power and dominion over nature" (Merchant, 2008, p. 734) published *The New Atlantis* in 1627. His work is another utopian fiction that portrays a utopian world where science is highly revered. Henry Neville's *The Isle of Pines* (1668) is a text in an epistolary form that presents a utopian atmosphere in which a man, along with four women, is shipwrecked on an island. The peaceful atmosphere of the island is disturbed as the humans on it who multiply and are divided into tribes. The main difference between Cavendish's work and these examples derives from the fact that it introduces a utopian world that is in peace with nature and matter. This world that shares its poles with the known world is inhabited by half-human-half-animal beings is always in peace while the other one, populated and governed by humans, is always in strife.

This fictional world is called "blazing" because of the blazing stars seen in its sky. The half-human and half-animal inhabitants of the world that has one religion, one sovereign, one law, and one language, live in peace and harmony in their world, while the world in which humans live is scourged with war. Humans cannot bear their own species let alone a being of another kind. They have the technology; however, they use it against their own kind to assert power over each other. In Cavendish's text, the "physical excellence" of the inhabitants of the *Blazing World* matches their moral way of life (Blaim, 2018, p. 20). In line with the information above,

the two worlds that contrast each other in Cavendish's narrative decenter the human as the supreme being.

Cavendish's narrative is told from the third-person perspective. This unnamed narrator describes the life and adventures of an unnamed woman with whom a merchant beneath the girl's social status and wealth falls in love. This merchant cannot bear his love towards her and steals her away from her native country in a vessel that is blown away by a storm towards the coldest areas of the earth, to the North Pole. The man who kidnaps her and a few men on the boat freeze to death because of the cold weather. The only survivor on the boat is "this virtuous lady:"

But alas! Those few men which were in it, not knowing whither they went, nor what was to be done in so strange an adventure, and not being provided for so cold a voyage, were all frozen to death; the young lady onely, by the light of her beauty, the heat of her youth, and protection of the gods, remaining alive: Neither was it a wonder that the men did freeze to death; for they were not onely driven to the very end or point of the pole of that world, but even to another pole of another world, which joined close to it; so that the cold having a double strength at the conjunction of those two poles, was insupportable. (Cavendish, 2019, p. 3)³

This other world is the Blazing World whose inhabitants are "strange creatures" that walk "upright as men" (p. 4). They are the amalgamation of human and animal. Their bodies are corporeality in which "nature and culture" are literally and figuratively "intrinsically entangled" and they make the readers realize "that the human is not one but many" (Ferrando, 2014, p. 169). The lady's first encounter with the natives of the land is a positive experience as the first thing they do is to take her out of the boat treating her gently. They sink the boat together with the dead men inside it, which is a sign of intelligence indicating that they are aware of the fact that the dead bodies must be buried or removed somehow. In the beginning, the lady is afraid of the creatures because, obviously, they are a strange sight to her as they are half-human-half-animal creatures from an unknown land. There are no creatures like them in the world where she comes from. The creatures can speak, which is another sign of intelligence showing that they have a language of their own. They did not show any sign of enmity and "were they so far from exercising any cruelty upon her, that rather they shewed her all civility and kindness imaginable," so, as time passes, she gets used to and even loves them. The narrator presents a picture of the natives of the Blazing World. There are "men like Foxes, onely walking in an upright shape, who received their neighbours the bear-men with great civility and courtship," who are resolved to take the lady to lands where their emperor lives and give her to the emperor as a present (p. 14). There are also Bear-men, some Worm-men, some Fish- or Mear-men, otherwise called Syrens; some Bird-men, some Fly-men, some Ant-men, some Geese-men, some Spider-men, some Lice-men, some Fox-men, some Ape-men, some Jack daw-men, some Magpie-men, some Parrot-men, some Satyrs, some Gyants, "as well as men with green complexion" "and many more," that are chosen to be not named by the narrator for brevity's sake (pp. 10-11). Cavendish's fictional alien beings are the "progenitor[s] of the posthuman" with "a hybrid—a human-alien construct" (Nanda, 2010, p. 115). They are the reminders of xenotransplantation which, again, deconstruct the alleged human-nonhuman

hierarchy. They render the notion of different species problematic and urge for the redefinition of it: “Advances in genetics and techniques of genetic manipulation seem to provide tangible evidence of the porous quality of barriers between species and thereby complicate the notion of species altogether” (Bolter, 2016, 3). These creatures are intelligent beings who have their own language, customs, religion, law, and form of government, which may help refute the “androcentric, exclusionary, hierarchical, and Eurocentric” Enlightenment idea that regards man as the measure and “measurer of all things” (Braidotti, 2015, p. 677):

Each followed such a profession as was most proper for the nature of their Species, which the Empress encouraged them in, especially those that had applied themselves to the study of several Arts and Sciences; for they were as ingenious and witty in the invention of profitable and useful Arts, as we are in our world, nay, more; and to that end she erected Schools, and founded several Societies. The Bear-men were to be her Experimental Philosophers, the Bird-men her Astronomers, the Fly- Worm- and Fish-men her Natural Philosophers, the Ape-men her Chymists, the Satyrs her Galenick Physicians, the Fox-men her Politicians, the Spider- and Lice-men her Mathematicians, the Jackdaw- Magpie- and Parrot-men her Orators and Logicians, the Gyants her Architects. (p. 11)

According to the excerpt taken from the text, the Cavendish’s creatures, just like humans, can study arts and sciences. They build schools and found societies. They can become philosophers, astronomers, chemists, doctors, politicians, mathematicians, orators, logicians, and architects. Until recently, it was commonly accepted that humans are the only beings with the ability of tool making which was one of the signs of being human. However, with the help of scientific studies and technology, it has been proven otherwise. This fact, again, raised the question of human exceptionalism. Such capabilities shared both by humans and the nonhuman brought the human species closer to the latter. Thus, the long-accepted boundary between them has been blurred: “Biology and evolutionary theory over the past two centuries have simultaneously produced modern organisms as objects of knowledge and reduced the line between humans and animals to a faint trace re-etched in ideological struggle or professional disputes between life and social science” (Haraway, 2016, p. 10). This situation requires a rethinking and redefinition of the place of human in the universe. Cavendish’s creatures lead one to question. These creatures imagined by Cavendish enable the understanding of the posthuman condition in which humans live. Their bodies as human and animal hybrids which have posthuman agencies reminding of the present conditions of humans who live in a world that is governed by technology. Humans are considered cyborgs by critics such as Donna Haraway who claims that their lives are imbued with pieces of technology. As for the human-animal hybrids in the book, “Haraway’s cyborg is not merely transhuman, but posthuman, as a rejection and a reconfiguration of the values of the traditional humanist subject” (Bolter, 2016, p. 1). Humans’ posthuman condition is not a recent phenomenon. They have always been cyborgs living in a posthuman condition since their discovery and the control of fire and their wielding of fire to their own will:

...it is fire that allowed *Homo erectus* to sleep safely at night on the ground; it is fire that cooked the food that nourished and developed our outrageous brains; and it is fire that made us human. In our intertwined ontologies we collapse materiality and metaphor: we are fiery, and fires die. We can understand these fusions and

confusions when we see the bricks of Babel remain as relics of the architecture of a common language; when we see glass mediate impossible truths of immanent matter; and when we grant pyrophiliacs feel the objecthood and artistry of being made by fire. We can realize it: we are pyromena – we are fire’s doing. (Harris, 2012, pp. 47-48)

The fact that humans are cyborgs since the discovery of fire requires the deconstruction of culturally constructed binaries such as self-other, culture-nature, human-animal, machine-life, agency-structure, and their derivations while repositioning the human among the nonhuman in the universe. According to the theorists of posthumanism, humans must be decentered “in relation to either evolutionary, ecological, or technological coordinates” (Wolfe, 2010, p. xvi) in order for them to survive in a world that is already posthuman. The destruction of the hierarchical binaries and the repositioning of humans among the nonhuman and the technological will be in their favor because their anthropocentric hubris is the cause of their present misfortune that manifests itself as global warming, drought, famine, and pandemic. The theory strives for drawing attention to the interaction (or intra-action in Karen Barad’s words (2007, p. x) among the human, the non-human, and the machine as well as their mutual influence, and thus, it explains that human activities must be regulated in accordance.

This study explains the post-anthropocentric features of Cavendish’s novel. However, the novel is packed with anthropocentric elements, as well. The utopian world described in the novel is governed by a monarch, the emperor. The ruling system itself denotes an anthropocentric one. The ruler is a human, and the right rule passes to another human. As the story proceeds, the emperor of the Blazing-World falls in love with the lady and gets married to her. Upon their marriage, he grants her the right to govern the whole empire. The realm where she becomes a queen has a mild climate and the soil is rich and fruitful. Every structure in the imperial city called Paradise is made of gold and numerous precious stones such as diamonds, pearls, rubies, and carbuncle. It can be gathered from the above information that building structures by using such precious stones is a sign of moral perfection as it proves that the inhabitants of the kingdom, who are described as virtuous creatures by the narrator, do not attempt to steal them. On the other hand, humans living in their own world come together to usurp the throne of their sovereign. Humans, as beings who are deemed superior to the nonhuman because they are regarded as creatures that “possessed free will and the ability to use their reasoning power to bring about a humane world” (Scimecca, 2007, p. 16) use their technology to kill each other. They seek to dominate each other as much as they seek to dominate the nonhuman. This situation calls the concept of humans as dignified sovereign beings and human exceptionalism into question because while half-human and half-animal beings, who are supposed to be wild and violent, live in peace and harmony, they attack their own species. Furthermore, the intelligence and peace-loving demeanor of the inhabitants of the Blazing-World “call into question the distinctiveness of “human” aptitude and agency” (Sanchez, 2015, p. 22). The Enlightenment idea of human, which has been encouraging human dominion over the nonhuman world that has been causing the extinction of countless of animal species, deforestation, and climate change, brings forth the destruction of their own species.

CONCLUSION

Cavendish's work as an early modern utopian science fiction is an exemplary work in terms of raising questions about the status of humans among the nonhuman and her "monist and vitalist theories shaped debates on the proper relationship between human and nonhuman life" (Swarbick and Raber, 2020, p. 313). Although posthumanism did not exist during the early modern period when Cavendish's narrative was written, it is possible to read her work through the lens of posthumanism. One can gather from her work that human as a sovereign being with the right of manipulating the natural environment to their own benefit needs to be decentered and a flat ontology among all beings must be sought. In this respect, Cavendish's *The Blazing World* is a work beyond the age it was written and rich in elements that can be studied from a myriad of views among which is a contemporary one, posthumanism, which presents the previously uncovered aspects of this early modern work to the contemporary readers.

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