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Of Extreme Monsters and Extraordinary Mutations: A critical Appreciation of Neal Asher's Jack Four as a Masterly Work of Body Horror Bildungsroman

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Abstract--- The present article seeks to analyses Neal Asher's novel Jack Four (2021) to show how elements of posthuman monstrosity and extreme biological horror can combine to produce a unique kind of transgressive and transformative effect that radically alters the very definition of human and blurs the boundaries between human and non-human. As part of its theoretical framework, the article seeks to employ Braidotti's idea of 'epistemophilic', Braidotti's 'Zoe'-centred view of the posthuman dimension of post-anthropocentrism, and Betterton's (2006) idea of the boundary-problematizing potential of the monstrous 'Other' among many others. The article strives to show how Asher's portrayal of extreme forms of posthuman monsters not only harnesses the near-inexhaustible transgressive power of the essentially indefinable monstrous figure but also by combining with the gruesome portrayal of endless body horror, it seems to project the human body as a site of endless becoming, connectivities and proliferations.

Keywords---cyberpunk, extraterrestrial, hard science fiction, military science fiction, monsters, post-apocalyptic, posthuman, science fiction, space opera.

Introduction

Hayles remarks that science fictional narratives seem to provide the otherwise abstract philosophical theories and abstruse scientific and technological concepts a form of embodiment in the form of narrative and Asher's works are no exception. In Hayles' words: "the literary texts do more than explore the cultural implications of scientific theories and technological artifacts. Embedding ideas and artifacts in the situated specificities of narrative, the literary texts give these ideas and artifacts a local habitation and a name through discursive formulations

whose effects are specific to that textual body". Among the highly acclaimed and truly insightful critical works that endeavour to analyse the influence of posthumanism and recent advances in science and technology on science fiction, young adult fiction and literature in general, Victoria Flanagan's Technology and Identity in Young Adult Fiction: The Posthuman Subject, Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini's The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman, Anita Tarr and Donna R. White's Posthumanism in Young Adult Fiction , Jennifer Harrison's Posthumanist Readings in Dystopian Young Adult Fiction: Negotiating the Nature/Culture Divide, Justin Omar Johnston's Posthuman Capital and Biotechnology in Contemporary Novels and Nina Engelhardt, Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, and Essi Varis's Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture and Julia Hoydis's Representations of Science in Twenty-First-Century Fiction: Human and Temporal Connectivities etc. deserve special mention.

Neal Asher's novel Jack Four is the latest addition to the author's expansive and extensive Polity universe chronicles which can be read as a standalone work but is appreciated better when understood against the context of the massive backstory of the Polity universe supernarrative. Asher's Polity Universe novels and collection of novellas and short stories span three lines of storytelling, in which the first thread or trilogy portrays the survival story of the Earth Central Security Agent named Ian Cormac in the 2400s, the second series depicts the predatorial world of Spatterjay planets and its extremely violent seas during the 31st Century, while the final thread is concerned with the actions of the hyperaugmented and deranged machine intelligences and hive-minds seeking to either capture the alien Jian technology to become invulnerable or to correct their past mistakes in their peculiar ways which could extinguish the entire human civilization (Haraway, 2013; Grossberg, 1992).

The present study wants to focus particularly on the precarious condition that a human is most likely to suffer in the wake of such apocalyptic and overly monstrous posthuman transformations. Such transformations are important areas of study not just for their depiction of monstrosity and grotesquery, but also because they help us to appreciate the dissolution of boundaries between humans and non-humans and humans and monsters. For this purpose, the study attempts to view the elements of extreme monstrosity and associated body horror from the perspectives of Betterton's theory of the monstrous as capable of dismantling binary categories and Braidotti's idea of 'epistemophilic' in our analysis of Asher's meticulous descriptions of body horror. Bruce Clarke in his Posthuman Metamorphosis similarly argues how portrayal of various metamorphosis and transformations in science fiction narratives not only function as metaphors of human transformations but also attempt to "rewrite the boundaries between ourselves, animals, and machines" (Gane, 2006; Macmillan, 2009).

Asher's world-building seems to be centred round the portrayal of the eponymous protagonist's growth as a posthuman character and as such, the narrative can be treated as an exercise in an extreme posthuman bildungsroman. The main character is from the recent batch of human clones who suffers from heavy amnesia in the beginning, but after some time, he begins to learn about and

adapt to new things and challenges while himself still remaining totally oblivious of his own origin. When he wakes up from deep hibernation, Jack Four has no transhuman or posthuman appendages or augmentations, rather he is described as an un-modified human. His body is not a cyborgized body and has not been experimented with. Asher writes, "The body lacked all the bolt-on advantages of current humanity, such as nanosuites, boosting, cerebral augs, gridlinks or motorized paraphernalia. It was in fact one of a vanishingly small number of humans not to be a cyborg" (Asher, 2021). One of the most memorable passages of the novel is where it describes how Jack gradually gains self-awareness and becomes conscious of his existence as an embodied human being of flesh and blood (Asher, 2004; Asher, 2005).

Images rose in my mind of soldiers standing in a row, and marching. Associations blossomed through my consciousness, including positions in organizations and societies, the relative importance of individuals and the smell of something foul. This surge of connecting thoughts, along with the sudden change in perspective and pull of gravity, made me retch for a moment and I spat green bile. I felt my flesh sagging on my bones as I stood up. Self-awareness of my human body and its constituents came upon me then – bones and organs and muscles. A positioning instruction fell into my mind and I walked unsteadily to my assigned place amidst the rest. I had a number and it was four (Asher, 2021).

While moving out into the world outside the confines of his spaceship, Jack realizes that he is lagging so far behind other humans or transhumans of his time who have all incorporated extreme augmentations within themselves: "I probably didn't have the usual immunity-boosting nanosuite which humans had within their bodies, and my risk of genetic damage and cancers had now climbed through the roof". So, we may safely assume that transhumanism seems to be the norm in such an age where virtually every human being has incorporated multiple forms of implants and augmentations in themselves. This is the very essence of transhumanist notion of enhancement of the human that encompasses "radical extension of human health-span, eradication of disease, elimination of unnecessary suffering, and augmentation of human intellectual, physical, and emotional capacities" (Bostrom, 2005). From the very beginning, we see how Asher's world-building relies on what Braidotti dubs as the 'epistemophilic curiosity' where extreme attention to details about the origin and functioning of the uncanny and unnatural body continues to define the pattern of unfolding of the narrative. Then the action moves outward to encompass a larger and more gruesome moments of action which takes place largely on an ancient Space station in the forbidden zone called the Graveyard situated between Polity and the Prador empire. The novel details extremely vividly how his life is at constant risk from different monstrous factions (Asher, 2013; Asher, 2006).

The novel is concerned primarily with the action of augmented, ruthless mercenaries, their alien customers, highly mutated and near-indestructible alien warriors, their semi-human test subjects and troops, and gradually expands to include even extremely predatorial fauna and freshly resurrected biomechanical war machines all brought into being from the galactic deep past by soke unholy combination of Jain technology and Spatterjay virus. It is only when one gains some ideas about the efficacy and strength of these two things from reading some

of the preceding Polity novels, that the extent of posthuman horror with which Asher deals here, clearly dawns upon the audience. The protagonist starts his journey as one of the most vulnerable characters in the entire story, but later evolves to become one of the most formidable opponents in Asher's work. It is the relentless series of action and violence that defines the novels as peculiarly Asherian (Cavallaro, 2004; Kukka et al., 2014). Asher begins his work with a glossary of al the dangerous and hideous monsters who are parts of the novels before plunging into the main storytelling. There are the pradors, a group of xenophobic, intelligent and ruthless aliens who just cannot come to terms in their truce with humankind after a massive war with the human Polity in which the humankind with their AIs managed to defeat the prador empire. Pradors are a highly xenophobic race of giant crablike aliens ruled by a king and his family. "Hostility is implicit in their biology", Asher writes, and "upon encountering the Polity, they immediately attacked it". During the massive war with the humans, pradors did not use any wormholes or 'runcibles', as the control of which required Als and pradors were highly distrustful of machine intelligences. Later, even though they developed their own technologies and near-indestructible spaceships, the humans and AIs adapted, their war factories out-manufactured the prador and they began to win. The new king then usurped the old king and made an uneasy truce with the victorious humans (Jones & Lim, 2000; Bourke et al., 2010).

Portrayal of posthuman monstrosities

Asher is particularly adept in his portrayal of non-human or posthuman monsters and aliens, and this latest instalment in his already sprawling Polity novels bears testimony to his talent of portraying extreme science fictional monsters. Here, we come across the Atheter, who are a super-advanced space-faring race, but upon encountering the civilization-destroying Jain technology, they decided to commit a form of "racial suicide by sacrificing their civilization and intelligence" (Asher, 2021). Their animal descendants are known as the gabbleducks who roam freely on their planet Masada, and these gabble ducks are monstrous creatures that speak nonsense and whose behaviour is utterly and inexplicably strange. In novels after novels in Asher's Polity-verse, we come across such remarkable characters as Skellor, Orlandine, Thellant, the Makers, Erebus, the Atheter race, etc. to name a few, who have either directly or indirectly been influenced by or incorporated within themselves certain parts or features of the civilizationshattering Jain technology. The Polity AIs and their master treat Jain technology as a form of sterilizing death weapon for any sentient civilization. The novel describes this technology as a technology spanning all scientific disciplines, created by one of the dead races - the Jain. Its main purpose appears to spread through civilizations and annihilate them. A full appreciation of the powers and potential of Jain technology cannot be complete without looking at some episodes from Asher's works in Polity Series. In Asher's Agent Cormac Series comprising such books as Gridlinked, The Line of Polity, Brass Man, and Line War, we see how in the novel Brass Man, a broke humanoid or Golem named Mr Crane gets resurrected with the help of Jian technology and is consequently transformed into an indefatigable killing machine, while in Line War, a renegade hive-mind AI named Erebus is infected with the Jain technology and threatens to destroy the entire Polity with its lethal wormhole powered battleships. In Agent Cormac Series and Rise of the Jain trilogy, a Haiman or human-AI hybrid named Orlandine seems to be boosted beyond imagination with tamed Jain technology implants. Also, in Rise of the Jain trilogy, another rogue AI named Clade gets infected with Jain technology and wreaks havoc on the Polity (Cowburn, 1965; Barad, 2007).

In fact, in Asher's Polity-verse novels, the Polity itself is the only remaining civilization that still has not devolved into total chaos and lawlessness while most others have either degraded to become playground for mindless, devolved monstrosities or have been largely abandoned. The worlds of Polity are all full of a variety of posthuman factions among which the sentient AIs, wardrones, Golems and Haimen cyborgs play most prominent roles in the series. Asher's Jack Four has an inexhaustible and diverse menagerie of strange, mutated and bioaugmented monsters and alien creatures, and our protagonist Jack Four exemplifies the power of human stamina, determination, physical and mental fortitude, which make one capable of facing any challenge and overcoming any obstacles. Now, coming back to the description of the evolved or devolved monstrosities in which this work abounds, we see Hooders, which are devolved descendants of Atheter biomechanical war machines. They look like giant centipedes but retain some of the features from their war machine past in that they are rugged, tough, vicious and very difficult to kill with conventional weapons. Now, Hoopers are the humans from the oceanic world of Spatterjay who has been infected with the Spatterjay virus (Betterton, 2006; Braidotti, 2013). In Asher's Rise of the Jain Trilogy novels, we find how two mutated hoopers named Cog and Trike gradually become indestructible after several decades of suffering and Trike even gets infected with the formidable Jain technology to grow even more powerful and monstrous so that it manages to thwart the attempts of the evil hive-mind machine intelligence named Erebus which has been trying to lay waste to the entire human race. The Spatterjay infection is passed on through a leech bite and the virus makes its host inhumanly strong, dangerous and longlived. Now, throughout the novel, the most formidable and indestructible character seems to be none other than the Prador King who himself has been mutated by the Spatterjay virus. Asher states how "The new king, and his family, have been highly mutated by this, resulting in extreme body changes and increased intelligence". In the present novel under consideration, we see how Jack Four, the fourth of the twenty human clones who have all been sold to the prador empire to be experimented upon somehow escapes the spaceship to enter a planet which has been a dumping ground of various mutated monstrosities from across the galaxy. Asher writes: "Creatures from many other worlds had been dumped here from Stratogaster's Zoo. Hooders, and Suzeal had mentioned mud snakes, as well as a siluroyne. These were all vicious dangerous predators from the world of Masada, but other nasty things came from there too and it seemed one of them might be trailing us" (Asher, 2021). Even ordinary and not-too-monstrous creatures that roam around in the planet Masada seem to be ridiculously difficult to be defined in plain terms. Jack sees "a birdlike creature with a long neck terminating in a spike of a beak but no visible head", which somehow resembles another fictional, avian monstrosity known as the Masadan heroyn in Asher's polity novels. Here, we may cite Halberstam and Livingston's words who opine that posthuman monster is "is not monstrous simply by virtue of its status as a non-species: posthuman monstrosity and its bodily forms are recognizable because they occupy the overlap between the now and the then, the here and the

always". Braidotti too feels that the posthuman subject and the monster have uncanny similarities since they both are boundary figures and as such are capable of embodying elements of contradictory discursive practices and also "potentially contradictory meanings". Haraway in her "The Promise of Monsters" also endeavours to explore the affiliations between non-human and technological in the portrayal of monsters from technoscientific worlds (Clark, 2004; Clarke, 2008). The characters who first seem to treat the monster as the terrible 'Other' later seem to incorporate the same traits from fighting those same creatures and this is best exemplified by none other than Jack Four himself. The more Jack Four succeeds in overcoming his initial fear of the monsters, the more monstrous a figure he seems become. So, as the novel progresses, we find that despite starting out as a pure human being, neither Jack remains truly human as he continues in his monster-killing ordeals, nor do the pradors remain true pradors as a result of their heavy infection and extreme mutations. The immanent transgressive potential of these monstrous reincarnations and extreme modifications of humans, non-humans and grotesque animals alike in the novel should be acknowledged and appreciated from Betterton's point-of-view. According to Betterton, the "challenge that the hybrid, the anomalous, the monstrous others throw in our direction is nothing less than a disassociation from [the Victorian sensibility] which patholologized and criminalized difference". Matthew Calarco too seems to follow Giorgio Agamben's line of thinking and proposes for a 'jamming' of the anthropological machine Calarco (2008), and fervently criticizes "the human-animal distinction that serves as the foundation for Western political and metaphysical thought" (Clarke & Rossini, 2017; Connor, 2003).

The Spatterjay leeches infect and instil the virus which then toughens humans and aliens alike by transforming them into voracious survival machines. As Jack himself realises later in the novel, that the virus "with its eclectic collection of genomes from many creatures" could mutate its host "to optimize its survival" (Asher, 2021). Now, pradors then enact their operation called 'coring and thralling' through which they turn the virus-infected humans into mindless slaves: "These clones too, when ready, would be cored and thralled, becoming simply organic extensions of the controlling prador's mind" (Asher, 2021). One mutated prador named Vrasan similarly observes that the 'cored' and 'thralled' clones can be thought of as "merely human shells - no more sentient than a mudfish with some extra programming laid down in its brain" (Asher, 2021). Pradors are hell-bent in building an army of mutated, battle-hardened hybrids whom they could command in another war against the humans in foreseeable future. From the very beginning, we begin to see that the Spatterjay infection not merely paves the way for Asher to display his gift of portraying instances of unrelentingly grotesque body-horrors, but also serves as the catalyst for dissolution of all boundaries between living and non-living, man and monster and man and machines. The mutations wrought by the virus transforms human beings into mindless creatures whom then pradors seek to augment biomechanically to further transform them into cyborg soldiers. In fact, Jack comes to know how it was some pirate-like humans in the past who decided to apply follow this 'coring' technique in the past which the pradors then adopted (Cruz, 2012; Engelhardt & Hoydis, 2019).

The virus infected humans and made them unreasonably tough and rugged. In the past, during the war long ago, some piratical humans had 'cored' these infected humans, removing the brain and spinal cord from each and replacing them with a thrall - a device on which my slave unit was based. The thrall effectively turned them into humanoid robots. Those villains had then sold this product on to the prador (Asher, 2021). The virus effectively turns humans into mindless survival machines but when it is incorporated into the prador biology, it produces entirely different effects. Jack is aware of the fact "that humans who were mutated by the virus to this extent lost their minds, diminishing into no more than a beast" Asher (2021), but pradors are of an entirely different biology from humans and their mutation has an entirely different origin and effect on their bodies. The Spatterjay virus acts as an agent of subversion and dissolution of binaries as it is seen more than capable enough in turning humans into animals and animals into grotesque monsters. Hoydis and Engelhardt in their work Representations of Science in Twenty-First-Century Fiction (2019) attempt to show how texts engage with science and technology to explore relations between bodies and minds, how such connectivities shape conceptions and narrations of the human, and how the speculative view of science fiction can exist alongside realist engagements with the Victorian period and modernism. Through extensive employment of such viral forms of hyper-transgressive transformations, Asher seems to engage in a world-building where monstrous attains the position of the central signifier (Flanagan, 2014; Haraway, 2016). However, he portrays the monstrous as being utterly indefinable and forever exceeds any attempt at a binarist categorization. Betterton rightly opines that the very attempt of defining monstrous only further reinforces "a same/other binary between what is scared and mutant. Normal and abnormal, whether it be sexual, racial, or human/nonhuman categories". So, Asher seems to be portraying his monsters as exemplifying the excess in all its macabre and gory details. Now, when it comes to analysing the body horror in which the novel abounds, we should recall Braidotti's phrase 'epistemophilic curiosity' which denotes a curiosity about origins and causes, and this form of curiosity is motivated by an intense thirst for learning and for discovery and reorganization of some form of extreme knowledge. Pradors possess an extreme curiosity of the effects of the virus on human biology and so they keep on experimenting on human captives (Harrison, 2019; Hayles, 2000; Herbrechter, 2013; Johnston, 2019).

In fact, a group of humans seems to have betrayed the rest and now serve as procurers and traders of human test subjects for the prador king. Suzeal, Brack and Frey are the names of such traders who trade humans to pradors for a hight price and Jack Four himself, along with his clone compatriots, was sold by Suzeal to the pradors. Jack Four later realizes that it was Suzeal who first used the DNA of a Polity agent whose name was Jack and then copied the sample to produce other clones but used the original one to make Jack Four. The entire novel is full of descriptions of terrible ordeals than Jack must undergo in his battle against these minsters on the cursed planet and also gruesome and vicious experiments on human test subjects and the monstrosity becomes more conspicuous since all of it is narrated from the first-person point-of-view of the human protagonist of the novel, Jack Four. Jack continues to be transformed not only physically but also mentally as is apparent when he describes the horrific ways in which the test subjects are "thralled and cored" by the prador scientists. The grotesque elements

make their presence felt to us in the descriptions of the various hybrid monsters and grotesque creatures and the chief among them is definitely the prador King. Jack Four recognizes the prador king and describes him thus: "I recognized the king of the prador at once. His body was scattered with scars and technological additions (Karkulehto et al., 2020; Smith & Rossit, 2018; Tarr & White, 2018; Vint, 2007).

His foreclaws were long, like a langoustine's, and oddly he possessed none of the weapons prador usually sported" (Asher, 2021). The King is described as possessing a "nightmare head" and an "array of glaring red eyes" (Asher, 2021). The we see how the king of the prador faces a mutated, near-immortal human being and in a blink of an eye, turns him into "a great chunk of fibrous flesh hanging from his hip, black ribs exposed and a length of blue intestine trailing" (Asher, 2021). Then we see how the vicious king mauls and mutilates the hapless man with absolutely no mercy before finally turning him "into a disjointed mess, still connected and moving weakly". The Spatterjay-virus-mutated-man could just not die, and his remains will again be collected and placed in the lab to be combined into a whole human form like he was before his dismemberment, and following his re-embodiment, would again be subjected to extreme forms of dismemberment, mutilation and violent experiments. In the present work, the Spatterjay virus seems to be superseding its previous capabilities too and Jack seems to be amazed when he recalls the stories he has heard about the nearindestructible hooders and compares their sturdiness and ruggedness with present 'man-things' who are being dismembered, vivisected, and mutilated only to be reassembled again into proper human shapes all thanks to the power of Spatterjay virus. Jack stares in amazement at the reassembled man whom the prador King had just mutilated and dismembered beyond any hope of repair. Still, the man is now seen standing and various staples mark the portions where the body pieces have been joined together again, while massive clamps are holding in place his arms, legs and torso (Collie, 2011; Chown, 2008).

Jack feels, "The legendary hooper humans were famed for their ruggedness because they could survive the most appalling injuries, but this seemed beyond ridiculous" (Asher, 2021). Jack also recalls the stories about Spatterjay's Old Captains, who were residents of the world and hoopers, with legendary strength and durability. It took centuries of being infected with the virus to make them the way they were. Again, to appreciate the references to his previous works, we may need to cite the example of his Spatterjay Trilogy novels comprising such novels as The Skinner, The Voyage of the Sable Keech and Orbus. Spatterjay's Old Captain is none other than Captain Orbus with whose remembrances of terrifying transformation under the influence of the virus the pages of the novel Orbus are filled, where he is seen describing the lengths he was driven to in order to survive and the horrible lifestyle that followed. The three main characters featured in the novel are the mythical, nightmarish prador monster named Golgoloth, the mutating prador Vrell and the terrific Prador King himself who (or his heavily mutated avatar) features prominently in Jack Four. They all meet in the Graveyard, a border realm of wreckage from interplanetary war between Polity and Prador. In The Voyage of the Sable Keech, we again encounter various biotechnologically modified pirates, undead Old Captains and multi-limbed monsters. Now, the Spatterjay virus seems to be assuming a more sinister dimension in Jack Four, and this is what Jack suspects that the virus that the pradors at present are employing on their test subjects is most probably a more mutated version of the original strain (Miles, 1993; Merrie et al., 2018).

From the information I had, I knew that the prador had cored and thralled virusinfected humans throughout the war with the Polity, so the technique had been long established. But this procedure being conducted here, in a laboratory, had to be something new. The virus had established quickly in the clones, so I suspected a much faster-growing, mutated form of it (Asher, 2021). As the story progresses, we see how monsters continue to become even more monstrous while the grotesque creatures continue to assume even more grotesque proportions. In the early parts of his encounters with the monsters, we see Jack trembling from fear of these monstrous entities and has no idea how to survive their attacks: "I halted, no idea how I could survive the hooder, let alone this monster" (Asher, 2021). However, as the story advances, we see that it is Jack who grows to become a daunting, vengeful predator who could strike terror into the hearts of these monsters. Asher's description of the monsters follows the trajectory of everincreasing grotesquery and relentless manifestation of monstrosity where either previous monsters are replaced by even larger or more violent monsters or original monsters later evolve to become more monstrous and grotesque than before. When Jack faces a 'droon', it appears like a horseshoe crab, with added tentacles and two vertical rows of glinting red eye which then transforms into an even monstrous form where we see "mouths opening in every ridge of its head, which stretched and extended higher and higher". A hooder has been commanding it to fight Jack but Jack manages to kill it successfully. This is the first significant fatality by our hero Jack Four in the novel. In fact, in that planet anything and everything that encounters the strange Spatterjay virus runs the risk into becoming irredeemably monstrous. The virus blurs the already weakened line between humanity and animality and also animality and monstrosity (Alberch, 1989; Forlano, 2017).

Jack describes, "The virus infected just about all humans resident on Spatterjay, but not only humans. Imported animals – livestock and pets – also became infected. Surely the same rule would apply here. The virus made humans and animals tough, rugged, practically immortal and, if not held in check, it could also turn all of them into monsters" (211-12). Asher enjoys describing the effects of unleashing such catalysts of radical and transgressive transformation in his novels. The virus can cause such changes which are largely dependent upon the nature of the one who is being transformed and the prador king observes that: "It has come to my attention that the mutation the Spatterjay virus causes is highly influenced by the nature and mind of the one who's infected. In some cases the mutation can cause extreme changes and ultimately produce a very dangerous creature" (Asher, 2021). In this regard, one may recall Vint's ideas about the sense of the interior and subjectivity of the body and mind: "subjectivity is as much material as it is abstract, about the body as well as about the mind, and subjectivity is shaped by cultural forces that produce the sense of an interior".

Also, the novel points out how in a posthuman culture, any form of life can be seen as mere bundled collection of data which should be preserved, instantiated and distributed across a wide range of medium or substrate. The prador king

remarks, "DNA itself can be a good storage medium for data besides that used to grow your body, but I suspect otherwise. The Polity AIs have been experimenting with distributed quantum crystal memplant" (Asher, 2021). So, in their quest of attaining an upper hand in their impending war against the Polity-based humans, pradors seem to be experimenting with a range of posthuman technologies. As Herbrechter opines, "technologization is changing our species". Richard Dawkins defines DNA as a "machine for making life," while Pepperell claims "there is no distinction between the mechanical and the organic when it comes to considering DNA". Andy Clark feels that humans have always been "natural born cyborgs," or "human-technology symbionts". According to Clark, "the cyborg is a potent cultural icon of the late twentieth century. It conjures images of human-machine hybrids and the physical merging of flesh and electronic circuitry. My goal is to hijack that image and to reshape it, revealing it as a disguised vision of (oddly) our own biological nature". Haraway claims that "The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment". Similarly, Pepperell believes that "organic machines would blur the distinction between organic and mechanical". In Asher's Jack Four, both humans and nonhumans undergo radical alterations as a result of virus-induced mutations. A heavily virus-mutated prador like Vrasan observes that "Humans have a curious attachment and attitude to their flesh despite being quite capable of leaving it" (Asher, 2021). Asher takes the posthumanism view of life to its very extreme and as such, is not content with merely presenting a picture of a hyper-humanist picture of positive augmentations and modifications. Ranisch & Sorgner (2014), view such posthumanism as a radical departure or break from the hyper-humanist version of transhumanism. Borrowing Badmington's words, we may state that in the extreme posthumanism that Asher portrays in his works, "the certainties of humanism fade and bodies, minds, desires, limits, knowledge, and being itself reimagined in ways for which traditional anthropocentrism cannot possibly account". Lestel (2015), too similarly argues that humanity should not be seen as an autonomous, extraterritorial and purely individualistic entity capable of existing independently from the entanglements with other nonhuman or inhuman species and organism. Lestel instead comments that "The human exists as such through a life shared with other living beings (Rinartha et al., 2018; Vressick-Chilborn & Rachman, 2020).

The posthumanist currents, contemporary or older, say nothing else, after all. The future of man is a machine. If man is useless, he can at least serve to eliminate himself". Jack Four, the protagonist in Asher's novel, seems to qualify as such a pure posthuman hero whose transformation from a human to a battle-hardened posthuman creature forms the subject matter of the present novel under consideration. Steven Connor writes in his foreword to a book entitled Becoming Human: "The nature of human beings, it is often said, is not to be but to subsist in a state of becoming, by which is meant coming about, coming-to-be, being in transit, being on the way to what one will have been". He further states that "to become human is always to become more, or less, than human" (2003, xi) and this appears to be quite applicable to the eponymous protagonist of Jack Four. Jack Four's transformation seems to embody what Maryanne Wolf terms as the "potential loss of our essential human qualities" and enhancement of posthuman qualities (Wolf, 2019). Herbrechter also prophesizes the emergence of the 'robo

sapiens', which would surely make the homo sapiens seem obsolete before it (Xiu & Xeauyin, 2018; Titko et al., 2021).

The myriad of lifeforms that the novel describes, contain various forms of monstrosities and grotesquely transformed hybrids which are not only limited to land-based organism, but also aquatic, crustacean, centipede, amphibian etc. to name a few. On one occasion, we come across the grotesque and yet exotic description of a giant octopus-like mutated creature rising out of the water: Throwing a wave ahead, it surged out of the water, revealing its heavy mutations. Diseased pink and black in coloration, it seemed fleshy and resembled a giant octopus rather than a creature with a carapace. Even its claws didn't look as if they could shear anything, being more like the claw flesh of a cooked crab extracted from its shell. But it rose up on the edge of the pool and cooked crab extracted from its shell (Asher, 2021).

The monsters in Asher's work come in all shapes and sizes. As Russell Letson, in his review of the novel remarks, "the new Polity novel, Jack Four, is all monsters, all the time" (Russell Letson Reviews). Certain monsters appear and impress us as being more monstrous than others because they seem to embody multiple traits from various other exotic creatures. We come across the description of such a hybrid monster that is a cross between two or more exotic creatures such as siluroyne or trigon and Asher seems to be more than eager in delving deep into the detailed description of it: The thing had vertebrae that were solid lumps of its version of bone, green and whorled like old wood. Their solidity told me no spinal cord had run through it. Its ribs were of a double diagonal arrangement, like a trellis, and what looked like organic rivets had held them together. The skull, mostly jaws and teeth, had sockets for six eyes - two large ones at the centre and smaller ones either side. Its claws looked as if they could slice through metal. (Asher, 2021). Sometimes, the creatures are bio-mechanically augmented and seem to be organism and machine conjoined together in monstrous harmony. Certain unmutated prador guards are examples of such bio-mechanical monstrosities. Asher describes one such creature thus: "Missiles sat on the creature's back and it had a Gatling cannon attached on the underside of a claw. The tip of one jaw on its other claw hinged down to expose a shiny throat. It could see inside, and now it had readied its other weapon too" (Asher, 2021).

Portrayal of extreme body horror

Almost all the works in Asher's Polity Series can be said to incorporate elements from extreme body horror and post-cyberpunk elements and this novel is no exception. This work is primarily defined by its gruesome and graphic description of scenes of body horror and physical violence. Cruz emphasizes the body (or biological) horror's unique power of dismantling the organic and hierarchical arrangement of forms when he says that body horror "relished the destruction of the organic form to the point of unnatural evolutionary significance". The elements of body horror coupled with grotesque monstrosity provide the novels with the perfect setting for exploring the transgressive potential of monstrosity. Braidotti (2019); Cohen (1996); Shildrick (1999), also point towards the power of the monster in dismantling the hierarchical binary dualisms. In Asher's works, the Spatterjay virus and the Jain technology signal a dissolution of distinctions

between animal and human, organism and machine. The combined effects of Spatterjay infection and Jain technology seem to entangle the human agency itself in webs of inter/intra-action of myriad kinds and as such they appear to be infinitely malleable, dynamic and reconfigurable. Donna Haraway's article "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin" attempts to explore such various webs of assemblages, entanglements and interaction of biotic and abiotic forces with the historically situated agency of mankind. Karen Barad's "Posthumanist Performativity" also attempts to advance her ideas of 'iterative intra-activity' and agential realism as defining factors the shape human agency through "enactment of iterative changes" across various macroscopic and microscopic levels of matter. The Spatterjay virus plays a particularly significant role here since it mutates the subjects into invincible and apparently immortal beings who can be mauled, mutilated, dismembered and destroyed at will and yet will not be dead. The first of such elaborate depictions of body horror portrayed in all its mind-numbing details can be seen in the action of the prador king when it dismembers a virus-mutated human being (Nuryani et al., 2018; Arief et al., 2021).

The novel describes the one-sided mauling of the man by the prador king thus: The man-thing surged towards him and leapt, but the king moved horribly fast, snatching him from the air with one claw and slamming him to the floor. There was a whine of overloaded shearfields, followed by a crack. The man rolled clear of a claw which had been broken open, a great chunk of fibrous flesh hanging from his hip, black ribs exposed and a length of blue intestine trailing. The other claw struck him in the chest, sending him arcing across the chamber, with the king surging after him. As the man-thing rose yet again, the king grabbed him up in his mandibles and shook him like a dog killing a rabbit before crunching him down onto the floor. He stamped heavily on the man's back and ripped up one arm, nearly detaching it, but it clung on with a strew of fibres. He then stabbed down with the undamaged claw and closed it round his saurian neck just below the head. Again I heard the whine of shearfields struggling to cut through. The head mostly came away but still remained attached by fibres. And the man kept fighting, even as the king bowed down with his mandibles and tore at him (Asher, 2021).

This is the first of a series of extreme illustrations of absolutely gruesome body horror. Asher takes recourse to three main ways of describing body horror in Jack Four – the first is when Asher describes the cruelty of the pradors towards Spatterjay-infected humans, the second is when he tries to describe the surgery procedures being performed on the test subjects and in the third type, when Jack comes face to face with vicious monsters. In the second instance of portrayal of surgical body horrors, we see how a prador researcher goes on to split open a Spatterjay-reinforced female captive's arms and legs down to the bone, while also ripping open her torso from neck to groin. She should have been pouring with blood but only clear fluids leaks out as she writhed, exposing fibrous growths with a bluish tint within. The Spatterjay virus has been growing there and it seems to be growing at an incredible pace. Even while the prador surgeon remains busy in cutting her open, the wounds are seen healing up and closing fast. Then we see a Polity pedestal-mounted autosurgeon robot comes to perform vicious surgeries on the human subject and then there is only "the buzz of a saw,

and the whickering of chain-glass scalpels" (Asher, 2021). When the bot moves way, Jack sees how the autosurgeon has taken off the back of her skull, opened her neck vertebrae, and extracted the contents. The surgeon then deposits her brain, along with a tail of spinal cord on a plate. Jack feels, "There lay She was now as good as dead" (Asher, 2021). However, the Spatterjay-mediated-mutation would not let her stay dead. Then the surgeon proceeds to insert a mechanical spinal cord-like instrument into her skull cavity and that thing has "silvery spider legs surrounded a squat cylinder from which also extended its own segmented tail". The subject is also a human clone named Jill and this is how the pradors perform their 'thralling and coring' operations thereby turning human beings into servile humanoids.

The novel describes, "This woman's skull no longer contained a human mind. I had just seen someone cored and thralled and turned into a human blank" (Asher, 2021). In the third form of depiction of body horror, we see how Jack kills and dismembers terrible monsters and Asher captures all its finer details with impeccable precision and twisted artistry. Jack is terrified at the sturdiness and durability of the monsters that seems to be stay alive no matter how hard he tries killing it: I had chopped it into pieces yet still it seemed to be alive. I remembered then the man-thing the king had torn apart and how that humanoid was now perfectly intact again. He'd been reassembled straight afterwards, however, while this mutated prador remained in pieces. Could it recover from such appalling injuries? I looked down at one disconnected leg from which a fibrous tendril oozed slowly across the floor towards the main body, and knew that it could (Asher, 2021).

Besides the horrid descriptions of pradors viscously killing Jack Four over and over again, we also see an instance where Jack is being operated upon and the description smacks of pre and unrelenting body horror. As the novel advances, it becomes clear that Jack Four cannot die and so pradors also try to use him as a test subject. In the episode where we see surgery is being performed on Jack, Jack never loses his consciousness and thus is able to describe in vivid details all the steps in all its gory and meticulous details. He describes how hooks come in and pull back the skin and muscle over his intestines and heavier arms with spatulas on the ends sank into his chest, as the scalpel goes through the cartilage. The spatulas then pull open his chest and enables Jack to gaze at his own insides: "I could see my heart pumping, blood flowing in the veins, my intestines shifting like great worms" (Asher, 2021). The surgeon admits that he aims to systematically disassemble Jacks' body while maintaining its function.

Then we come across even gorier details of the surgery or vivisection all narrated through the perspective of the test subject himself who is none other than the protagonist himself: More cutting ensued. Cage hands lifted out my intestines, severed behind the anus and still attached higher up, and deposited them in a big dish. Other things began to go, tubed and wired as they went. My breathing abruptly stopped and then my heart, but I felt no discomfort from this beyond a mental one – the blood droning in my skull was propelled by some other pump. The docs took out my heart and lungs along with other paraphernalia and inserted them into a tank of fluid. My liver into another. The machines then scattered my stomach and other organs in various containers, all artificially

attached by tubes and wires, small pumps intervening. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my heart start beating again and my lungs breathing, the trachea hissing above the fluid they sat in and looking like a leech mouth (Asher, 2021).

So, the description of such methodical disassembling of the human body being performed with such sophistication further adds to the monstrous world-building of the novel. In fact, through extensive and highly elaborate descriptions of organ implants, disassembling and reassembling of the material body and fusion of it with other forms of life, machinic entities and hybrid mutants only makes us aware of Braidotti's notion of "Zoe-centred" posthuman and post-anthropocentric worldview. In her words: The posthuman dimension of post-anthropocentrism deconstructs species supremacy, but it also inflicts a blow to any lingering notion of human nature, anthropos and bios, as categorically distinct from the life of animals and non-humans, or zoe. What comes to the fore instead is a natureculture continuum in the very embodied structure of the extended self. Zoe as the dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself stands for generative vitality. It is the transversal force that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories and domains. Zoe-centred egalitarianism is, for me, the core of the postanthropocentric turn: it is a materialist, secular, grounded and unsentimental response to the opportunistic trans-species commodification of Life that is the logic of advanced capitalism. Karkulehto et al., in their work Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture, have attempted to investigate the role played by actual and fictional nonhumans in contemporary culture, where defining nonhumanity in a positive light would help us in defining humanity itself as a reconfigured entity.

Conclusion

The article endeavoured to undertake a close reading of Neal Asher's latest Polity Series novel Jack Four, to analyse the combined effects of the highly transgressive and transformative potential of grotesque monsters and exceedingly violent body transformations both of which seem to radically alter the very definition of humanity and dismantle all binary differences between human and non-human.

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