

How to Cite:

Patra, I. (2021). Of surviving humans and apocalyptic machines: Studying the themes of human continuity and posthuman proliferation in the post-apocalyptic world building in Alastair Reynolds's inhibitor phase. *Linguistics and Culture Review*, 5(S3), 734-749. <https://doi.org/10.21744/lingcure.v5nS3.1645>

Of Surviving Humans and Apocalyptic Machines: Studying the Themes of Human Continuity and Posthuman Proliferation in the Post-Apocalyptic World Building in Alastair Reynolds's Inhibitor Phase

Indrajit Patra

An Independent Researcher and an Ex Research Scholar at NIT Durgapur, India

Abstract--The article aims to critically examine the roles of humanity and posthumanity in Alastair Reynolds's post-apocalyptic space opera *Inhibitor Phase* (2021). The study endeavours to show how in this post-apocalyptic and posthuman space opera, humanity emerges as the key player in determining the fate of the galaxy or even universe at large. In Reynolds's masterfully crafted post-apocalyptic universe, is it not pure technological advancement sans human concern but basic human bonding that appears to be the determining factor when it comes to saving the final remains of the human or posthuman civilizations from the clutches of the nightmarish machines. It is by reassembling and regrouping the fragmented and isolated communities of survivors that mankind seeks to defeat a virtually unconquerable foe. In the process, the article also strives to show how the novel expands and extends the very scope of humanity and its definition and how through a fusion of posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism the agency and animacy of non-human entities also get redefined and redistributed. For the purpose of a theoretically enriched textual analysis, the author has adopted some important theoretical viewpoints from such thinkers as Rosi Braidotti, Deleuze and Guattari, Jane Bennett, Karen Barad and Gordon Coonfield.

Keywords---critical posthumanism, hard science fiction, new materialism, post-anthropocentrism, post-apocalyptic, revelation space universe, sentient machines, space opera, speculative fiction.

Introduction

The present article wants to study Alastair Reynolds's novel *Inhibitor Phase* (2021) as a post-apocalyptic, space opera which is the fourth in the *Inhibitor Sequence* that comprises such novels as *Revelation Space*, *Redemption Ark*, and *Absolution Gap* while itself being a part of an even larger sequence which is *Revelation Space* (Merrie et al., 2018; Sy, 2021). So, in order to gain a proper understanding of the vastness of its scale and expansiveness of the scope and breadth of its action, we should learn certain crucial things about *The Revelation Space* novels. The *Revelation Space* series depicts a fictional future of mankind. The timeline of the various novels and short stories in the series spans from the year 2200 to around 40,000 AD. Most of the novels take place between the 25th and 28th centuries and involve the conflicts experienced by humankind, sometimes with alien species. The action in many of the novels unfolds around the planet *Yellowstone* which orbits the star *Epsilon Eridani* and which is home to thousands of wondrous space habitats. *Democratic Anarchy* is the name given to these habitats of the *Glitter Band*, in which each habitat governs itself and offers citizens the ability to vote through their neural implants. The story in *Revelation Space* (2000) revolves around the quest to discover what led to the extinction of the *Amarantin*, a pre-technological civilization that once inhabited the bleak world of *Resurgam*, orbiting *Delta Pavonis*. By the time, the main action begins, *Resurgam* transforms into a human colony disturbed by political upheaval. Then we see how *Dan Sylveste*, the son of one of *Resurgam*'s founders, is one the verge of making a crucial discovery regarding an alien artefact which is an *Amarantin* obelisk with engravings that hint at technologies this species should never have had. *Sylveste* is the son of the infamous leader of the *Eighty*, the unwitting victims of a failed immortality experiment (Chown, 2008; Weinberg, 2013). *Redemption Ark* (2002) is the sequel to *Revelation Space* and is the second instalment in Reynolds' *Inhibitor Sequence*. In this epic, hard science fiction novel we see the consequences when the human race accidentally triggers predatorial alien machines designed by the *Inhibitors* to detect intelligent life and destroy it. Various characters such as the conflicted military commander *Nevil Clavain* are seen to reappear in the *Inhibitor Phase*. There are *Lovecraftian* elements in the novel such as the *Captain Brannigan*/the *Conjoiner Ship* named '*Nostalgia for Infinity*', constantly growing external spikes and oozing dark fluids. Then, in *Absolution Gap* (2003), we see how humanity attempts to establish contact with some other civilizations who have been successful in evading the contact with the *wolves* (Dahlin, 2012; Filladsen & Jordenzen, 2020).

The *Revelation Space* novels are primarily concerned with dealing with the far future history of mankind and *Inhibitor Phase* too, being an addition to this series, is not an exception to it. Reynolds' latest novel portrays the struggles of humankind for survival in a vast and deep galactic conflict that eventually takes the readers out of the *Milky Way* altogether. This vast scope and breadth of action enables Reynolds to add several interesting and extremely innovative tropes such as influence of the deep past on the present and far-future unfolding of events, evolution of posthuman species in exotic settings among alien planets, vengeful post-sentient or non-sentient powers seeking to destroy any technologically advanced civilizations etc. to name a few. The main action of *Inhibitor Phase* centres round the adventures of the first-person narrator of the novel, *Miguel de*

Ruyter. The action starts when Ruyter embarks on a mission to destroy a spaceship that threatens to reveal the presence of Sun Hollow, an extrasolar sanctuary where a small group of humans are hiding from the “wolves” – also known as the Inhibitors, which are “remorseless cube-shaped replicating machines” (Reynolds, 2021), that are hellbent on wiping out technological civilizations wherever and whenever they arise. In the supernarrative of Revelation Space series, the Inhibitors have been described as originally non-sapient machinery, which later grow to become post-intelligent. Operating on the incomprehensible physics of ‘structured’ spacetime, they are capable of endless self-replication. Their technology allows them to manifest themselves as black cubes of pure force, and thus they remain immune to conventional human weaponry. The machinery could only be defeated by alien weapons supplied by the Hades Matrix or the Nestbuilders. So, in order to keep their colony hidden from the ken of the Inhibitor wolves, Miguel and his group have to destroy any other fugitive starships that might draw the attention of the wolves to the massively camouflaged Sun Hollow. Now, as the story unwinds, we find that the starship is just a distraction and its sole survivor named Glass has actually come looking for Miguel de Ruyter. When Miguel intercepts her ship and rescues her, others suspect her to be an Inhibitor-sent Trojan horse, “a wolf construct, a biological infiltration measure” (Reynolds, 2021). However, that fear is soon dispelled as we come to know of her true purpose and mission. Then the narrative proceeds to give us glimpses into Miguel’s conflict-ridden past through intermittent flashbacks and with it also explores a history of personal and political rivalries, civilizational warfare, tales of betrayals and much more. Not only Miguel continues to discover more about himself as the narrative advances, but the starship survivor, Glass, also turns out to be not just any ordinary woman, but a woman of extraordinary physical and mental traits. Glass is also in possession of some superior technologies that simply overwhelms any technology that Miguel and his crew could think of. Glass and her stealth starship Scythe take Miguel on a dangerous mission in search of a weapon named The Incantor that can delay the imminent attack from the wolves. During their journey to find the Incantor weapon hidden deep beneath the layers of the strange gas giant named Charybdis, we come across a number of exotic entities and artefacts among which a ruined and derelict zombie sentient starship/AI is there which has even named itself as John the Revelator; the ruins of the Glitter Band and Chasm City (which feature heavily in novels such as *The Prefect*, *Elysium Fire*, and *Chasm City*) and a nightmarish Swine House; an ocean world where strange alien Pattern Jugglers swim and which can make fantasies come true for anyone who swim with them; and the crushing depths of a gas-giant planet where the ultimate weapon lies hidden. Though *Chasm City* is a standalone work while the other two novels make *Prefect Dreyfus Emergencies Sequence*. *Chasm City* (2001) deals with the story of how the once utopian Chasm City, full of technological marvels, gradually succumbs to the vicious virus known as the Melding Plague. *The Prefect* (2007) largely narrates the investigation by one law enforcement officer named Tom Dreyfus into the deadly attack on one of the ten thousand space habitats orbiting the planet Yellowstone. In *Elysium Fire* (2018), Dreyfus investigates the cause of sudden death of many people as a result of some unprecedented malfunction of the neural implants that have become an indispensable part of their life. He must discover the cause before the near-perfect

democratic society suffers from an irredeemable collapse (Post, 2010; Gede Budasi & Wayan Suryasa, 2021).

Now, coming back to Inhibitor Phase, during their course of their journey, various other characters such as the posthuman Lady Arek, a hyperpig human named Pinky and a medic named Probably Rose join hands with Glass and Miguel. The narrative is fraught with flashbacks and backstories of memories, histories and complex and intricate relationships emerging out of those backstories all of which contribute to the mixing of personal present and deep past. The backdrop of the narrative is rich with direct and indirect depictions of and references to gigantic space battles, extreme struggles for survival, and characters persisting against all odds and daunting all extraordinary challenges that the bleak and monochromatic cosmos throws at them. The setting is haunted by the imageries of a great, technologically advanced city perched on a chasm being slowly consumed by the terrible Melding Plague while we also come to know about the people called Conjoiners with shared mental experience and collective memories, hybrid and modified human beings, a vast decaying spaceship, and elaborate descriptions of space exploration etc. to name a few (Ananthaswamy, 2014; Smith & Monforte, 2020).

The article will seek to focus on the stories of human continuity and survival amidst the wake of a galactic-scale threat which is hellbent on assimilating and destroying any technologically advanced civilization. Since most of the advanced civilizations of our and probably other galaxies have been already destroyed by these Inhibitors or 'wolves', the action can be said to be taking place against a cosmic, post-apocalyptic backdrop. The novel clearly states that "The wolves have taken apart civilizations before" . In such a scenario, we need to focus on the elements of post-apocalypticism and posthumanism to see how they fuse together to give rise to a space operatic saga of survival and extinction. We see how humanity's last remaining settlements are hiding out from the dangerous alien Inhibitors, swarming black cube robots bent solely on the annihilation of advanced technology among all species in the universe. The people of Sun Hollow, a community of a few thousand living underground on a desolate planet, detect an incoming spaceship that threatens to arouse the Inhibitors that are totally immune to the effects of all human or posthuman weapons. Miguel de Ruyter, Sun Hollow's leader must stop that starship from getting too close to their camouflaged settlement so that their group remains undetected by the Inhibitor wolves. Miguel says, "I set out from Sun Hollow to intercept a ship that was in danger of exposing our existence to the wolves. Even if that ship had never attempted any contact with our community, it was behaving in a way that caused us concern. It had to be destroyed, even though that meant the likely deaths of many innocent souls" (Reynolds, 2021). Miguel and his community have followed one simple rules of survival which is to remain undetected as long as possible to nay extra-terrestrial entities: "If we were going to survive, if we were going to stay hidden from the wolves, that entailed a simple, binding premise: no one could ever leave the system". Now, the main action and adventure begin when Miguel decides to go with Glass on a several years long mission to find the one weapon that could possibly destroy the Inhibitors.

Surviving the wrath of the apocalyptic machines

From the very beginning, we find that any form of techno-signature is suspected to be more than capable enough of attracting the wrath of the wolves or Inhibitors. So, instead of relying on their technologies, the last surviving members of Miguel's group are forced to turn off all forms of technological advancements. When Glass' spaceship explodes, everyone is afraid that it will be radiating the exact kind of signal that could attract the attention of the ferocious wolves. Miguel also suspects that it could be distress signal too and in either case, he has to go and see for himself what this is all about: "Something that was now putting out exactly the kind of signature that Sun Hollow had spent thirty years doing its best not to broadcast: a clear, repeating and unambiguous indicator of functioning human technology. The wolves might or might not have been drawn to the explosion, but a systematic distress signal would be more than they could be ignore" (Reynolds, 2021). From the very beginning, we get the sense that the wolves are cube-shaped machines that are extremely deadly and immensely destructive and are quite indescribable in any picturesque way. We find how one character Victorine is staring and adding some details to the mural paintings of these monstrous machines. This seems to be an attempt to add concrete and pictorial details to the otherwise unnameable horrors that those machines wreak on civilizations. The novel describes the painting in this way: "Cubes swarmed in from space, each rendered in two efficient strokes of midnight blue and black. They stood out against the ruddier background of the dust disk, gathering into sinuous straggly formations, loops, and chains, before coagulating into larger and more ominous forms – dark, dense masses prickling with lightning like an armada of thunderheads" (Reynolds, 2021). However, Victorine adds some details to the wolves by showing them to be as possessing mad eyes, strained muscles, claws, fur and teeth – all of which in no way resemble the Inhibitor wolves of the novel. This seems to correspond to the oxymoronic nature of post-apocalyptic itself which cannot be described in any meaningful sense since apocalypse itself means an end and adding 'post' before that implies a new beginning. As DiTommaso (2014), puts it aptly, "strictly speaking, "postapocalyptic" is an oxymoron. In the biblical mode of the worldview, the end time is a literal event, not a literary setting". Stacy (2010), similarly observes that in a post-apocalyptic narrative, all hope for a grand narrative is lost: "post-apocalyptic culture is therefore one in which these orders, and the grand narratives attached to them, have been lost or have come to be questioned, and is also one in which referential connections of language have been lost". However, the saga that unfolds in Inhibitor Phase is more concerned with relating the struggle of survival and resistance rather than portraying a new beginning where humanity seeks to evade the attention of an alien machine intelligence and attempts to chalk out a plan to thwart the inevitable machinic onslaught from these voracious machines. Miguel and his peers have been always on the lookout for any possible signal of attack from these galactic predators and this stands in stark contrast to the complacent attitude of the humanity before the attack of the wolves took place. Most of the people were confident at that time that they could not be defeated by the attack from some machine wolves: "some revenant alien machines could never defeat the civilisation that had already survived the Melding Plague and numerous wars of its own" (Reynolds, 2021). Later, when the attack took place, many thought of regrouping and fighting back, but that plan was too abandoned out of sheer

hopelessness. Humanity witnessed how planet after planet, civilization after civilization collapsed at the relentless onslaught of these ravaging, marauding wolves. The wolves seemed to have come not from outside but from among the humanity and have been waiting all along amidst mankind for the right opportunity to get activated and then pounce on their prey. Their relentless attacks made any defence system look obsolete and weak and any plan ineffective: "The wolves were emerging everywhere we looked, around every settled star. In many cases it was perfectly clear that they had been with us all along, undetected, dormant, waiting for their moment of activation. All thoughts of a safe haven in the known systems were thrown out. We had to plot a new course to some world where humans had never trodden, and where the wolves would be least likely to look. There were many suggestions, but most of them were deemed unworkable for one reason or other". Now, when Glass arrives to meet Miguel, she tries to convince him of the weapon which could defeat these Inhibitor wolves. The wolves are bound to discover the few remaining human survivors in the Sun Hollow and would then wreak total havoc on their community and so, it is better to find a powerful weapon that can thwart their attack. Before embarking on their perilous journey to find that master weapon, Glass raises her own glass and encouraged Miguel to raise his and says: "A toast. But not to me, or even to us: it's far too soon for that. You despise me and I understand your feelings. But to your friends, and mine, and our mutual struggle against the wolves. The night is cold, the forest full of terrors, but there is a glimmer of light on the horizon" (Reynolds, 2021). For Glass, the weapon is the last hope they have in their resistance against the wolves. Miguel, however, is extremely sceptical of the existence of any such weapon which could make a significant impact in their battle against the wolves and states how he has carried with him such extreme weapons as Exordium devices, hypometric weapons, but none of them made a difference. As the story progresses, we come to know more about these Inhibitor machines or wolves as they are called, and when Miguel embarks on his deadly journey with Glass, he comes across the microscopic versions of the cosmic monstrosity that the wolf is. When they remain dispersed and microscopic, they pose no real harm, but when they conjoin together into sentient shapes, then they become a pure terror. Miguel understands that there is always a pattern to their attacks, and it is only after lying dormant for an unknown period of time, the wolfish cubes assemble and start assimilating all non-sentient matter with their ever-growing, ever-widening conglomeration (Larson, 2008; Jumanovich, 2021). Their spaceship begins to detect and neutralise wolf cubes every few minutes as they rain against the hull of their ship. Miguel knows that "These were either lone cells or micro-aggregations of less than a dozen, and in such small numbers were not a serious threat. In all cases the cubes were destroyed before they showed any tendency to begin the assimilation of local matter, confirming that they were in the same state of dormancy as the first. But the threat of the wolves lay in coordinated action, and it would only take one cube to wake up sufficiently to send an alert back to a larger concentration, in the ruins or nearby. This was not speculation: it was a pattern that had been documented time and again as the wolves picked our civilisation apart" (Reynolds, 2021). The functioning of the wolf cubes reminds us of the idea of the extreme "machinic assemblage" as posited by Gordon Coonefield. In his words, 'machinic assemblage' should be viewed "not [as] a thing, but as a process, an ongoing organizing of multiplicities, or relations between elements and forces, that produces affects". Kozel (2007), also argues

that machinic assemblage should be viewed as a phenomenon and phenomenon is an extremely ambiguous idea which encompasses “the human and the nonhuman, animal and machine, microscopic and macroscopic”. Initially, while seeing a cube-shaped black dot, it appears to be perfectly innocuous, but while inspecting closely, one could find the real nature of these tiny, black dots: “a piece of wolf, or in some sense a wolf entire. Magnified, I would have seen a cube of perfect blackness. More accurately: I would have seen either a square or a hexagon, depending on the viewing angle, since the three-dimensional nature of Inhibitor cubes was impossible to perceive. Those surfaces and edges were as slippery to light as an event horizon”. When Miguel and Glass in their spaceship continues to advance closer to their destined planet, they begin to feel that the wolves have picked up their signal and are now assembling at an additional level of readiness: “The wolves have been roused to an additional readiness level: cubes are warming up, beginning to aggregate. Some organised movement, precursor flows. Left to itself, and with no other provocation, it will likely die down. That’s what always happens” (Reynolds, 2021). The wolves can easily be classified as autopoietic machines which are capable of self-sustaining, self-replicating and functioning as an organized and highly unified entity. Maturana & Varela (1981).

in their book “Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living” (1980), defines these autopoietic machines thus: “A machine organized (defined as a unity) as a network of processes of production, transformation and destruction of components which: (i) through their interactions and transformations continuously regenerate and realize the network of processes (relations) that produced them; and (ii) constitute it (the machine) as a concrete unity in space in which they (the components) exist by specifying the topological domain of its realization as such a network”. The most defining feature of the wolves has been their ability to think and plan on long timescales that span some millions of years and to them, the humans are but puny creatures who only manage to think in terms of few years and decades. The novel describes the nature of thinking and operating of the wolves thus: “The wolves’ greatest strength was their patience, their willingness to sit out an enemy for millions of years. If we put up a sufficiently messy, obstinate struggle, they might move us into a holding category, a problem to be deferred for a galactic rotation or two. To the wolves, that would not count as defeat in any sense: merely a drawing of breath. But we were warm, fleet creatures who operated on timescales utterly beneath their comprehension. A mayfly would regard an extra hour as a welcome stay of execution” (Reynolds, 2021). The coordinated way of their attacks and flowing movement speaks of some underlying central intelligence that drives and guides their action but no one knows what it is or how to describe it. The wolves appear to play the role of the Lovecraftian ‘Other’ or the cosmic terror that remains beyond categorization, description or labelling: “The wolf flows were dark arteries, curling and spiralling through these broken pieces, throbbing out of the largest remnants, where the machines had gorged and multiplied and waited until their time of release and quickening. Where the Rust Belt lay against a background of space, on either side of the planet, it should have been as invisible as it had been before, its presence betrayed only by the stars it occluded. But now flecks of gold and red burned like lanterns on a slow-flowing river. These were the last human fires, the last gasps of life and oxygen, as tiny warm pockets were at last evacuated to space”.

The action of the wolves reminds us of vitalist view of matter from new materialist perspective, where they are posited as possessing an inner spirit, agency of vitality of their own. They remain distributed in their existence and yet can perform co-ordinated action due to their complex entanglement and intricate pattern of interaction and connectivity. Through his expansive posthuman world-building, Reynolds shows how lives and matter can be seen as being imbricated in complex and cosmic systems whose scales easily outstrip unaided, normal human perception. For the appreciation of the full potential of this distributed agency and animacy of all these exotic inhuman and posthuman entities, a harmonious fusion between critical posthumanism and new materialism is required. In fact, there are more than one instance where we see that the agency and animacy is portrayed as being distributed beyond the human subject and thus the centrality of the category of the human is challenged. Various new materialist ontologies have critiqued the anthropocentric paradigm which directly or indirectly reinforces the idea of human supremacy and exceptionalism in some way. [Whatmore \(2002\)](#); [Law \(2004\)](#); [Thrift \(2008\)](#); [Frost \(2011\)](#); and [Connolly \(2013\)](#), are among such theoreticians whose work have critiqued the anthropocentric discursive turn in contemporary philosophy and research. [Law \(2004\)](#), argues for giving importance to fluidity, elusiveness, or multiplicity of things instead of remaining fixated on our search for absolute clarity and precision. [Thrift \(2008\)](#), in his Non-Representational Theory advocates for adopting an experimental approach towards uncovering the nature of the things that exist on the margins of the known. [Frost \(2011\)](#), in her “The Implications of the New Materialisms” argues against the linear models of causation and instead urges us to adopt new models which can acknowledge and address the complex interactions among various social, biological and physical phenomena. Now, this does not mean that the idea of humanity itself is destroyed, but in some strange ways, even amidst posthuman or post-biological entities, we find the flame of humanity still burning. Among such examples of exotic, post-biological intelligences which seem to possess intelligence and sentience in a purely extra-human way, the Pattern Jugglers deserve special mention. They are found swimming in the ocean of one planet Ararat and possess knowledge of all kinds of races that have ever swum in its waters ranging from the very ancient times to present. The novel describes them thus:

“There was still no definite opinion on the matter of whether the Pattern Juggler nodes were themselves conscious. But the nodes were certainly rich in biological methods of information storage, manipulation and dissemination. The Jugglers stored many different informational forms, from nuggets of pure, discorporeal knowledge to species-specific templates for particular modes of cognition. A person could swim in the Juggler waters and have the node’s micro-organisms rebuild their mind to permit the acquisition of some new gift, such as heightened mathematical insight or the grasping of some long-dead alien language. Such Juggler-derived talents tended to be temporary, though: after an interval – sometimes only a matter of hours – the imprinted structures would wither away. Very rarely, the change was enduring enough for the swimmer to accomplish some one-off challenge. Repeat visits to the Jugglers were uncommon, and rarely successful. It was also said that in the rare instances where the changes were permanent, there was wisdom in being careful what you wished for” ([Reynolds, 2021](#)). The entire posthuman landscape ranging from the extreme Inhibitor

machines to exotic non-human lifeforms all seem to operate on the principles of assemblage, and assemblages are dynamic, impermanent wholes comprising both corporeal and incorporeal bodies and components. In this regard, one may cite the theories of interiority and exteriority propounded by the likes of [DeLanda \(2019\)](#), and [Deleuze et al. \(1977\)](#). Various contemporary theoreticians like Bruno Latour, Timothy Morton and Jan Bennett are attempting to posit the power and potency of nonhuman entities and phenomena in their ground-breaking scholastic works. In contemporary fiction, we see a number of instances where nonhuman forces or entities are seen to be assuming threatening proportions. In Ben Lerner's *10:04*, the novel begins and ends with descriptions of potentially catastrophic storms sweeping through New York as the narrator ruminates on a future ice age and the possibility of a city submerged under rising seawaters, while in [Cole's \(2012\)](#), *Open City*, the young psychiatrist Julius observes and examines the effects of catastrophic climate change in a number of phenomena such as in an unnaturally warm November weather in New York, and in Jonathan Lethem's *Chronic City* (2009), we see a mysterious, gigantic tiger rampaging and destroying buildings and underground stations in the New York City. All these are different way in which contemporary novelists are seen attempting to portray the effect of the nonhuman 'actants' on our human lives. Bennett has defined Latour's idea of the 'actant' as "a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman". Bennett also calls for a need to acknowledge the "fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within our human bodies". In *Inhibitor Phase*, Reynolds extrapolates it to a far-future scenario where mankind has already fallen and we are on a voyage for discovering an antidote to another impending apocalypse. The memory of the Jugglers is largely holographic and distributed across multiple embedded encoding structures. These Jugglers are adept in disassembling and reassembling minds at a holographic level. Their activities of erasing and reconstructing memories leave no fuzzy traces. Borrowing [Bennet's \(2016, 2010\)](#), and Braidotti's vitalist perspective, we may state that Reynolds here seems to describe the essential ontological account of continual 'becomings' of vital matter. A proper appreciation of Reynolds' endlessly proliferating canvas of posthuman species and societies can be done by adopting William Connolly's notion of 'a world of becoming' in which he speaks of "a world of becoming in which multiple force fields set on different tiers of chronotime periodically collide or coalesce to foment a new danger, risk, or possibility". The derelict spaceship which calls itself John the Revelator is another such extreme example of posthuman intelligence. The sentient spaceship had its own intelligence which got weirder when a human's sentience was fused with it. When Miguel inquires Glass of John the Revelator's 'state of mind', Glass's words give us crucial insights into the largely inexplicable nature of semi-human intelligence. Glass speaks of "a barely human consciousness haunting the bowels of a plague-ravaged wreck from another century" and also how the ship's consciousness has been mixed with that of "a man whose life consists solely of grand crimes and tiny inadequate twitches of reflex atonement". In this regard, one may cite Barad's words where she says that "matter and meaning are mutually articulated... Neither has privileged status in determining the other". Barad's vision of the non-unitary existence and assemblages of non-human and super-human actors is purely posthumanist. While readying their weapon for a final assault, Glass also realizes, "The wolves have identified it as a source of organised human activity, and now they're massing". No matter how powerful the weapons of the humans

are, the wolves will always find some ways to develop resistance against its influence and devise new countermeasures (Buchma-Bernatska et al., 2021; Sy, 2020).

Reynold's exotic world-building manifest in this novel and other works in his Revelation Space series is replete with references of extreme proliferations, unregulated and unfettered growth of some "self-replicating biological or cybernetic process" beyond the whims of its creators and plague-like events wreaking havoc on unsuspecting civilizations etc. to name a few. In this regard, we may consult the works of Mitchell & Waldby (2006), and Thacker (2006), who have focused on the self-replicating and self-sustaining capacities of a number of biological processes. The entire functionality and mode of operation of these fiercely predatory Inhibitor machines should be understood in the light of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'ecosystem' which is traversed by a 'machinic phylum'. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari comment how the machinic phylum should be seen as a technological lineage. So, the evolution of the wolves from their non-sapient condition to post-sentient state should be seen as an post-singular illustration of machinic phylum and technological lineage. Among the posthuman or even post-biological and post-sentient civilizations, the symbiont race of the Nestbuilders are most important since it is they who have the access to the supremely powerful Incantor weapon, but they will use it against the wolves only as an absolute last resort option. The Nestbuilders are described as "the only species within this sector of the galaxy to have attained any sort of technological parity with the Inhibitors", and they have managed to avert their extinction by adopting a number of subtle strategies among which one is their self-restraint in using the weapon against the wolves: "they have a stick that can poke the wolves, but if they use it too many times the wolves will evolve a countermeasure (Barad, 2003; Coonfield, 2006). So for the Nestbuilders the best approach is to survive by stealth and only use their weaponry as a last resort, even if that means accepting the occasional defeat. Think of the weapon as a supremely powerful antibiotic, to be used only in direst need, lest the bacteria develop resistance". Commenting on the evolution of the Nestbuilders as a supremely powerful, technologically advanced civilization to a migratory, spacefaring civilization, Lady Arek remarks: "They are a long-lived galactic species; one of the very few that has managed to avoid total extinction. They are organic, rather than machine. Their native form is analogous to a terrestrial arthropod: a sort of large, intelligent crab or lobster. The name derives from the vast, free-floating space structures known to have been made by their kind – enormous nest-like agglomerations of conch-like elements, hundreds and thousands of times larger than this ship. But since the Inhibitor purge, the Nestbuilders have largely abandoned these objects and become migratory" (Reynolds, 2021).

The persistence and continuity of humanity

In the very preface to the novel, Reynolds writes of the essentially post-apocalyptic backdrop of the novel where we see how the entire galaxy has undergone a civilizational collapse and humanity is reduced to a handful of dispersed communities of tenacious survivors. Reynold writes: "By the late years of the twenty-eighth century all that's left of humanity is a few isolated pockets of

survivors, hunkering down with ever more limited resources, and still no real idea how to fight back against the wolves. This is where Inhibitor Phase begins". One of the most important aspects of Reynolds's Inhibitor Phase is its portrayal of the tenacity and continuity of humanity amidst various forms of posthuman proliferations and extreme challenges. Reynolds's latest work is remarkable for expanding the very definition and scope that the category of the human through the application of discursive abstraction and capacious reimagination. Reynolds's work seems to both critique the centrality of the human in the unwinding of events on a cosmic scale, as well affirming the vitality of a newfound humanity which is expansive, inventive and appreciative of the agency and animacy of everything around itself. The bonds among the members of the crew seem to be tested in the most extreme ways imaginable, and yet these bonds endure these challenges. Humanity asserts itself in the face of most daunting challenges and its presence can be felt in the unlikeliest of places. It is not just Miguel's own self-discovery which infuses the novel with a uniquely human charm of its own, but also in the description of several others posthuman entities, we see the essence of humanity manifesting itself in its original form. The chimeric character named Pinky who is actually a 'hyperpig', thinks himself to be as much a human as any other character he comes across and takes pride in asserting his own humanity in contrast to the inhuman nature of these Inhibitor wolves or many other advanced cyborgs. Pinky's words bring out the essential post-anthropocentric aura of the novel: "we're not a bunch of identical black cubes with only one idea in the universe. We're messy and broken and we make stupid mistakes but we aren't stupid, mindless machines that are too dumb to realise their programming no longer makes any sense. We're people. Fish people, pig people, people-people, creepy-zombie-spider-people" (Reynolds, 2021). Braidotti (2013), strongly advocates in her works the need of 'defamiliarisation' of our perspective where we will shift our frame of reference from an anthropocentric one to a vitalist one (pp. 5, 35, 49, 164-8, 193). Grusin (2015), makes this observation that post-anthropocentric theories are "all engaged in decentering the human in favor of a turn toward and concern for the nonhuman, understood variously in terms of animals, affectivity, bodies, organic and geophysical systems, materiality, or technologies" (vii). In this way, the bonding between human and non-human actors, and even machinic or planetary agents will be affirmed and appreciated. In this way, the idea of the 'human' itself will not be negated or eliminated but instead be reformulated in terms of its being in the world. Braidotti also speaks of her idea of the 'zoe' or the force that guides all nonhuman lifeforms, and Reynolds' posthuman world-building seems to be a perfect illustration of this 'zoe'-centric world of excessive richness and unending vitality. Braidotti describes her philosophy of zoe thus: "zoe, or the generative force of nonhuman life-rules through a trans-species and transgenic, interconnection, or rather a chain of connections which can best be described as an ecological philosophy of non-unitary, embodied subjects and of multiple belonging". What Braidotti dubs as the 'zoe', various preeminent new materialist thinkers like to view it as a transformational material force. Deleuze & Guattari (1994); Deleuze (1997); Braidotti (2006); Massumi (2002, 2011). Bennett (2010); Iovino (2012); and Iovino & Oppermann (2012), are such thinkers and philosophers who posit a new materialist and vitalist view of the world. In "Material Ecocriticism", Iovino and Oppermann have called for a renewed attention on the 'bodily' practices and experiences where the 'body' refers "not only to the human body but to the

concrete entanglements of plural ‘natures’, in both human and more-than-human realms”. Wolfe also maintains that it is by acknowledging the entangled nature of humans with other non-human forces and agents in the world that we may hope to redefine humanity constructively. She stresses the need of acknowledging that the human being is a “fundamentally prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technology and materiality, forms that are radically ‘not-human’ and yet nevertheless have made the human what it is” (Wolfe, 2009). We may also recall Hayles (2000), posthuman reimagination of the body “as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born”. Lady Arek, probably the most posthuman of all human characters featured in the novel, herself asserts her human nature and origin even though she possesses godlike stamina, endurance and strength. Despite all her outward appearance of a goddess of war, she possesses a brightly burning core of effulgent humanity in simmering her heart. She introduces herself thus: “I am Lady Arek. You may call me that. I have had other names, some longer, some shorter, but this one satisfies me for now. My mother was a soldier, my father a revolutionary. I was conceived within the influence of the Hades matrix and carried to term in the artificial womb of a half-sane Conjoiner whose name means “damage” in a tongue now long forgotten. I carry within me traces of all my antecedents, including those who passed forever into the Hades matrix. I am therefore both a scientist and a scholar. I have lived a hundred human lives and felt the death agonies of a thousand civilisations lost to the Inhibitors. I have seen worlds burn and suns shrivel. I have walked on bones and breathed the dust of the dead. I have wept. Some think me insane, others that I might be a goddess. I am neither of those things, but I am most certainly not to be underestimated” (Reynolds, 2021). Miguel himself admits that Lady Arek is indeed a commanding figure yet fully human and despite her extreme augmentations she still remains human in a recognizable way: “I saw a human woman, with nothing about her to suggest any obvious genetic or prosthetic augmentation. Yet authority blasted off her like a cold, shrieking wind, finding every loose chink in my soul. I had never been in the presence of another person with such a commanding will” (150). Another character who is mentioned in the novel is Nevil Clavain, the brother of Miguel, who chose to remain human by rejecting to be incorporated and assimilated within the hive-mind existence of the Conjoiners. Miguel takes pride in his brother because he chose to cling onto his humanity by rejecting the offer of virtual immortality: “He had not been converted; not had their machines pumped into his skull, eroding his humanity and turning him into another unit in their massively distributed, conscienceless hive-mind”. Miguel even sees and appreciates how human Glass really is despite all her outward toughness and ruggedness. Miguel remarks: “A nearly invulnerable shell wrapped around something that’s still a lot warmer and more human than she’s ready to admit – a human core that still makes mistakes and still cares”. The intrinsic humanity of the highly posthuman Lady Arek too is described in a similar fashion: “Somewhere beneath that scary born-in-a-neutron-star space-goddess exterior there is actually a beating human heart”. Humanity is almost invariably described as fragile when compared to the extremely advanced machines or the cold and cruel cosmic challenges that they have to put up with (Forlano, 2017; Lloro-Bidart, 2018). When he first rescues Glass, Miguel describes her as “human being, fragile and easily broken, just like the rest of us”. In fact, the very name of

the female protagonist suggests something truly fragile which needs to be protected and preserved carefully. Miguel too appears to be inhumanly tough in his handling of the challenges during his years-long voyage across different planets and star systems, but his humanity too has been affirmed and reaffirmed in the novel time and again. Miguel pines for his home, his family and friends when he is forced to undertake the dangerous voyage with Glass to find the Incantor. Miguel describes his situation in the following way: “I had been ripped from my home, torn from the two people I most loved in the universe. I had been severed from the community I had helped build; the five thousand faces that might be all that was left of humanity. In place of family life and the consoling obligations of work and duty – the almost comforting grind of daily worries and pressures – I had been granted the company of a ghoulish-faced psychological tormentress and a dark, dangerous ship I neither understood nor trusted”. When Miguel continues in his journey of discovery of the weapon, he also undergoes a painful and parallel journey of self-realization which appears to be equally daunting. Up until his epiphanic moment of self-discovery, Miguel has viewed the universe to be not cruel or difficult; but just massively, magnificently indifferent. However, following his true self-realization, instead of being haunted by the cold and callous indifference of the cosmos, he becomes painfully aware of his own place in the grand unfolding of events where every life is significant and meaningful in its own way: “It was the last tangible thread connecting me to the life I had lived when I considered myself a better man, when I had known the love and security of family, the bonds of a small but decent community to which I had given my last strong years. Lives had touched this life. Good lives and good people, a web of love and friendship, gratitude and trust, service and dignity, responsibility and humility. I saw it, shimmering out from the catafalque. Endless quivering strands of silver light, linking Miguel de Ruyter to the rest of his tribe, and via finer extensions of that same silver web, the rest of humanity. No life was worthless, not even a life built on lies. He had made something that was better than the materials given him” (Reynolds, 2021). Glass too undergoes a similar kind of gruelling process of self-discovery and self-realization where her humanity itself is put to test: “There had been grief, sadness, anger, despair, hope, sorrow, disillusionment. And again hope, again despair, a dozen times over, grinding away at her human core as if she were some foreign thing that the universe very much wished to annihilate. But she had endured” (Reynolds, 2021). In the end, we may state that Reynolds celebrates the resilience and continuity of the human condition against the backdrop of continually unfurling events of titanic proportions and cosmic significance (Reynolds, 2014; Reynolds, 2009).

Conclusion

The article endeavoured to analyse Alastair Reynolds’s *Inhibitor Phase* (2021) as a posthuman and post-apocalyptic space opera which celebrates the victory of humanity in the face of a series of extreme challenges. It not only portrays the various ways in which humanity manages to survive the onslaught of a predatorial, galaxy-wrecking power of unimaginable fury, but also portrays how it succeeds in keeping the bonds between its members intact by successfully averting many of the threats. The article also looks at various ways in which Reynolds creates an essentially posthuman and post-anthropocentric universe where the category of the human is not only challenged and contorted but the

agency and animacy of inhuman or nonhuman entities also get asserted. Humanity, in the end emerges in a reformed, chastised and expanded form where the human subject is no longer central but is instead now entangled with various other forms of lives and matters. The author attempted to show how Reynolds's work is successful in employing the best of posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism for building the most expansive and exotic kind of fictional universe where the final remains of humanity remains significant despite suffering damage and destruction on an unprecedented scale from an unconquerable foe.

References

- Ananthaswamy, A. (2014). Sentient machines are mathematically impossible. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0262-4079\(14\)60943-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0262-4079(14)60943-X)
- Barad, K. (2003). Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society*, 28(3), 801-831.
- Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant Matter*. Duke University Press.
- Bennett, J. (2016). *The enchantment of modern life*. Princeton University Press.
- Braidotti, R. (2006). Posthuman, all too human: Towards a new process ontology. *Theory, culture & society*, 23(7-8), 197-208.
- Braidotti, R. (2013). Posthuman humanities. *European Educational Research Journal*, 12(1), 1-19.
- Braidotti, R. (2013). *Metamorphoses: Towards a materialist theory of becoming*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Buchma-Bernatska, O., Chystiakova, N., Bazylchuk, L., Putiatytska, O., & Kopytsia, M. (2021). Features of development of the violin art in the modern theatre. *Linguistics and Culture Review*, 5(S4), 371-384. <https://doi.org/10.21744/lingcure.v5nS4.1584>
- Chown, M. (2008). Is science fiction dying?. *New Scientist*, 200(2682), 46-49. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0262-4079\(08\)62895-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0262-4079(08)62895-X)
- Cole, T. (2012). *Open city: A novel*. Random House Incorporated.
- Connolly, W. E. (2013). *The fragility of things*. Duke University Press.
- Coonfield, G. (2006). Thinking machinically, or, the techno-aesthetic of Jackie Chan: Toward a Deleuze-Guattarian media studies. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 23(4), 285-301.
- Dahlin, B. (2012). Our posthuman futures and education: Homo Zappiens, Cyborgs, and the New Adam. *Futures*, 44(1), 55-63. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2011.08.007>
- DeLanda, M. (2019). *A new philosophy of society: Assemblage theory and social complexity*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Deleuze, G. (1997). Bartleby; or, the Formula. *Essays critical and clinical*, 86.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1994). *What is philosophy?*. Columbia University Press.
- Deleuze, G., Guattari, F., & Plateaus, A. T. (1977). *Capitalism and schizophrenia* (Vol. 1). Viking Press.
- DiTommaso, L. (2014). Apocalypticism and Popular Culture. In *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*.
- Filladsen, J., & Jordanzen, P. (2020). Translation based on cultural aspect: a study regarding how translating text different traditional in two

- countries. *Applied Translation*, 14(1), 16–22. Retrieved from <https://appliedtranslation.nyc/index.php/journal/article/view/1064>
- Forlano, L. (2017). Posthumanism and design. *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation*, 3(1), 16–29. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2017.08.001>
- Frost, S. (2011). The implications of the new materialisms for feminist epistemology. In *Feminist epistemology and philosophy of science* (pp. 69–83). Springer, Dordrecht.
- Gede Budasi, I. & Wayan Suryasa, I. (2021). The cultural view of North Bali community towards Ngidih marriage reflected from its lexicons. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(3), 1484–1497
- Grusin, R. (Ed.). (2015). *The nonhuman turn*. U of Minnesota Press.
- Hayles, N. K. (2000). How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics.
- Iovino, S. (2012). Ecocriticas: Literatura y medio ambiente. Edited by CarmenFlys Junquera, José Manuel Marrero Henríquez, and JuliaBarella Vigal. Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2010. 422 pp. Paper \$36.00.
- Iovino, S., & Oppermann, S. (2012). Material ecocriticism: Materiality, agency, and models of narrativity. *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment*, 3(1).
- Iovino, S., & Oppermann, S. (2012). Theorizing material ecocriticism: A diptych. *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 19(3), 448–475.
- Jumanovich, A. T. (2021). Creation of the image of ibn sina in the east and its peculiarities. *Linguistics and Culture Review*, 5(S3), 104–110. <https://doi.org/10.21744/lingcure.v5nS3.1397>
- Kozel, S. (2007). *Closer: performance, technologies, phenomenology*. mit Press.
- Larson, J. (2008). Limited imagination: Depictions of computers in science fiction film. *Futures*, 40(3), 293–299. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2007.08.015>
- Law, J. (2004). *After method: Mess in social science research*. Routledge.
- Lloro-Bidart, T. (2018). Cultivating affects: A feminist posthumanist analysis of invertebrate and human performativity in an urban community garden. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 27, 23–30. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2018.02.006>
- Massumi, B. (2002). *Parables for the Virtual*. Duke University Press.
- Massumi, B. (2011). *Semblance and event: Activist philosophy and the occurrent arts*. MIT press.
- Maturana, H. R., & Varela, F. (1981). Autopoiesis. *Autopoiesis: A theory of living organization*, 21–35.
- Merrie, A., Keys, P., Metian, M., & Österblom, H. (2018). Radical ocean futures-scenario development using science fiction prototyping. *Futures*, 95, 22–32. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2017.09.005>
- Mitchell, R., & Waldby, C. (2006). *Tissue economies*. Duke University Press.
- Post, S. G. (2010). Humanism, posthumanism, and compassionate love. *Technology in Society*, 32(1), 35–39. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2009.12.007>
- Reynolds, A. (2009). *Absolution gap*. Hachette UK.
- Reynolds, A. (2009). *Redemption ark*. Hachette UK.
- Reynolds, A. (2009). *Revelation space*. Orion.
- Reynolds, A. (2014). *Chasm City: Roman* (Vol. 4). Heyne Verlag.

- Reynolds, A. (2021). *Inhibitor Phase*. Kindle Edition, Gollancz.
- Smith, B., & Monforte, J. (2020). Stories, new materialism and pluralism: Understanding, practising and pushing the boundaries of narrative analysis. *Methods in Psychology*, 2, 100016. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.metip.2020.100016>
- Stacy, I. (2010). Post-Apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism and the Twentieth-Century Novel.
- Sy, O. (2020). When ralph ellison unmutes the silences of history in invisible man. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Culture*, 6(2), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.21744/ijllc.v6n2.851>
- Sy, O. (2021). Toni Morrison's transgressive literary preaching and folk songs as postmemory. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Culture*, 7(4), 241-254. <https://doi.org/10.21744/ijllc.v7n4.1720>
- Thacker, E. (2006). *The global genome: Biotechnology, politics, and culture*. MIT press.
- Thrift, N. (2008). *Non-representational theory: Space, politics, affect*. Routledge.
- Weinberg, D. (2013). Post-humanism, addiction and the loss of self-control: Reflections on the missing core in addiction science. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 24(3), 173-181. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2013.01.009>
- Whatmore, S. (2002). *Hybrid geographies: Natures cultures spaces*. Sage.
- Wolfe, C. (2009). What is posthumanism?(pp. xiÀxxxiv).