

In Search of the Self: Alienation and Anxiety in a Posthumanist world in Charles Burns' *Black Hole* and Jeff Lemiere's *Sweet Tooth*

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Abstract

We inhabit in the world of technology and everyday it is challenging the corpus of our ideas. Technology has infiltrated our lives to such deep extremes that it has become difficult for humans to assert a meaningful existence. We struggle to find ourselves dissected at such moments where there is a struggle between these alterations. The historian Yuval Noah Harari argues in his book *Homo Deus*, that there has emerged a possibility where this technological search will lead the vulnerable humans to a better world where they will be invincible like the gods. That will be the next step of our civilization. However literature has already foraged into this unthinkable. Posthumanism as a theory tries to seek a passage into this hitherto unknown world borrowing the wings of its imagination.

In this paper I want to talk about the concept of alienation and anxiety suffered by humans in such a futuristic world by locating my observations on two phenomenal graphic novels published in two different eras. The first one is titled *Black Hole* by Charles Burns published between 1995 and 2005 by Kitchen Sink Press and then by Fantagraphics. The second one is *Sweet Tooth* written by Jeff Lemiere published by DC Comics, Vertigo Imprint, between 2010-13. What binds these two novels is the sheer intensity of alienation faced by the characters in a posthumanist world. While Charles Burns depicts the transformations of teenagers in Seattle

area, after they have contracted a mysterious strange disease transmitted sexually that transformed their bodies and ultimately leading them to societal ostracism, Lemiere's *Sweet Tooth* is a search of the self in a post-apocalyptic world. Gus a 9year old boy with antlers is a new breed of human/animal hybrid that appeared after an apocalyptic pandemic of an unknown virus. Underlying these two novels is the crisis of the human. The paper will be an attempt to address the issues of identity, anxiety and alienation deeply embedded in these two novels which are set in a posthumanist, post-apocalyptic period. It will try to engage these issues that have become critical in the concept of understanding posthumanist literature in itself.

Keywords: Posthumanism; identity; alienation; anxiety; *Black Hole*, *Sweet Tooth*

Posthumanism or posthumanist literature has come up as a new idea in the corpus of hitherto existing literary theories. This fancy term has sought to interrogate the role of the human who is living in the age of digital media, technology and cyber culture. The very essence of this being's existence is enmeshed in data processes, in network sharing culture, in a rather de-humanized form now. If Renaissance had placed the human being as the centre of the world, where it was his interaction with the outside physical world, the natural world to be more specific, this current age of high speed data transfer, cybernetics has stoked the idea of an alternate reality. Our being includes all the other non-being that reshapes and moulds our existence. There exists beyond the corporeal, ontological liminality- a more firm man-machine linkage, trans-species bodies, organic-inorganic hybrids that have become a part of our cultural imagination. The modern day experimentation in cryogenics, stem-cell, gene therapy, gene alteration, cloning, artificial intelligence and further scientific researches have morphed the boundaries between man and machine. This has given birth to a new form of the human- one who is more of a hybrid, a cross between human and the technology, the birth of a new "organicism" (Nayar 12)

Critical posthumanism, as we shall come to call this philosophical and political theme in literature, popular culture and theory, is the radical decentring of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how

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the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines. (Nayar 11)

Therefore, posthumanism according to Nayar, as a new genre in literature can be marked in two ways. He goes on to map this new birth in two important frames- one as an ontological invention of the human linking- it's existence with machines, chemically altered bodies working in tandem with technologically altered bodies, forms, shapes or a new existence. On the other hand, it marks also the new conceptualisation of the human himself. Going beyond the traditional discourses of the human being who is imbricated in socio-political, cultural, economic and spatial relations of existence, this theory questions the human in the age of technological modification, hybridization and newer scientific processes. Thus posthumanism takes into account the interactions of the human with the technological, and looks at the human not as an exceptional creature. Rather it sees how technology and science have refashioned the idea of this human in our cultural imagination:

This means critical posthumanism does not see the human as the centre of all things: it sees the human as an instantiation of a network of connections, exchanges, linkages and crossings with all forms of life. (Nayar 14)

There is a constant attempt of science and technology to gain superiority over the natural world. Humanity at the dawn of twenty-first century is standing at the cusp of a new age, a new revolution where science is intervening in our everyday life and altering the everyday consciousness of being and living. Antibiotics, medicines and genome studies have led to identifying virus, bacteria, understanding their DNA and gathering knowledge about their growth. This marks the beginning of the transformation of mankind from Homo Sapiens to Homo Deus, a desire to surpass the humane and become one with the gods. According to the historian Yuval Noah Harari:

“ (this) upgrading of humans into gods may follow any of the paths: biological engineering, cyborg engineering and the engineering of non-organic beings.” (Harari 50)

Biological engineering starts with the alteration of the human DNA, intentionally rewriting the genetic code, rewiring the brain structure, altering the biochemical

balance, and even possibly growing new limbs as well, by artificial technology. Cyborg engineering on the other hand will go even a step further by-

...merging the organic body with non-organic devices such as bionic hands, artificial eyes or millions of nano-robots that will navigate our bloodstream, diagnose problems and repair damage. Such a cyborg could enjoy abilities far beyond those of any organic body. (Harari 52-53)

Often such kind of infusion of science and technology gives birth to the aberrant, the bizarre that challenges the very idea of the normal all together. This grotesque being, a hybrid, a product of the future is looked down upon as an outcaste, a pariah to the conventional. They become vilified, loathed creatures who sometimes seek a reprise of their situation by retaliating against others or become reticent beings, trying to find an answer to the riddle of their life and existence. It is here that the two above discussed comic book series fit in the frame. *Sweet Tooth* written by Jeff Lemire, published by DC Comics' Vertigo Imprint takes place in a mostly post-apocalyptic setting where some creatures have become human/animal hybrids. The issues ran from September 2009 to January 2013 with the story about a young boy named Gus with strange deer-like features. He is more of a hybrid child who is on a quest to know about his past. The land is ravaged by a strange plague and in the story we meet several other deformed, hybrid children. In *Black Hole*, written and illustrated by Charles Burns and published first by Kitchen Sink Press in 1995, then Fantagraphics, the story is about a strange disease that spreads among a group of teenagers causing grotesque mutations in their bodies. The collected form was released in 2005 by Pantheon Books. In both these two comic books, there is a gripping sense of alienation, anxiety, frustration and more specifically there exists a new understanding of the body politics. The concept of the hybrids- a figure who is half- human and half – animal or disease stricken bodies challenge our understanding of the human and push forward our imagination to the post-human. Both these two comics transports the readers to the future world, when the idea of civilisation will be challenged severely, when there will be a complete breakdown of law and order, where chaos will be rife and mankind as a species would have undergone a lot of changes physically. This apocalyptic vision binds these two comics together.

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The Body Politics: Deformity and Hybridism in *Sweet Tooth*



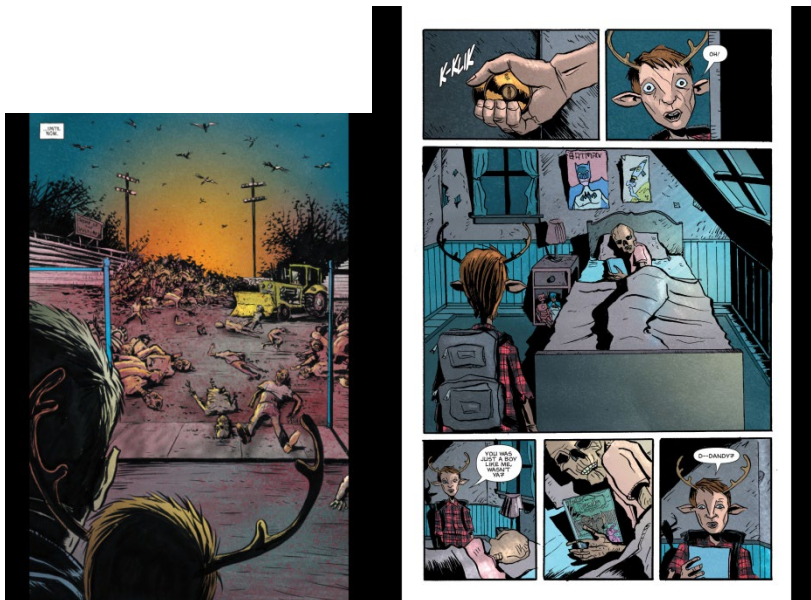
Fig. 1.1. Cover Page, Issue 1. *Sweet Tooth* by Jeff Lemire

In Lemire's comic book, the protagonist is a humanoid, half-human and half-deer with antlers. He is a young boy, named Gus, who lives in the 'woods' of Nebraska along with his ailing father. The land is ravaged by a devastating plague H5-G9 and almost all of mankind has been swept away by it. There are only a few humans left. In such an apocalyptic scenario the story begins. The boy is warned by his father, never to leave the woods for the dark, evil world lies outside the woods. Yet the boy is driven by a desire- the desire to know about his past and about the life outside. It is said that he is born 'a hybrid' after the great disease. The innocent boy believes that god has made him 'special' till he meets Jepperd, who promises him to take him to the 'reserve' where all the other 'hybrids' like him live. It is revealed that the plague had wreaked havoc among humans but the hybrids like Gus were safe and happened to remain immune from the deadly disease. Jepperd says that in the 'Preserve', the last few remaining humans are trying to find out the exact cause of this mystery.



Fig. 1.2. First Issue of *Sweet Tooth: Out of the Deep Woods*

The onslaught of plague had disfigured faces of people. Things have become barren. At first the government had imposed lockdown measures and quarantine to control the plague. Soon, the outbreak became massive and killed most of the living men and women. As Gus and Jepperd wanders towards the city, in their journey forward the reader witnesses the vast desolate landscape, dead bodies and bleakness loom large. Lemire brilliantly portrays this in the two following panels:



. From Left to Right: (i) The large heap of dead bodies strewn all across the road, (ii) Gus meets a boy whose face looks ghastly as a result of the plague.

Finally after reaching the 'preserve' Gus meets other hybrid kids like him. But to his shock, he discovers that it was a project by the army and the militia camp. There they

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torture, kill and dissect these hybrids as they believe that the hybrid children have brought the plague with their birth. The next panel will show this-



Fig. 1.5 and Fig 1.6- Gus befriends other hybrid children, kept in captivity, a hog faced boy named Bobby, a half-girl and half-pig Wendy along with other humanoid children. All of them have become disfigured after the plague.

Fig 1.6- Cover Page *Sweet Tooth*. Issue 5. Jeff Lemire

Michel Foucault in his seminal book, *Discipline and Punish* has talked about the regulation of bodies by the instruments of power. In the controlled societies that we live, biopower is the way in which states and institutions exercises their control over human bodies, manipulates and disciplines them, making them submissive to their authority. Lemire in his comic book, has shown how the bodies of these hybrid children are cut open, dissected to open up knowledge about them.

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Fig 1.8 and Fig 1.9- In the two panels, in the first one Dr Singh explains to the militia commander Abbot about his plans of examining the young boy to find a cure for the deadly plague. Second Panel- The rise of the ‘hybrid cultists’ .

In the bizarre world of *Sweet Tooth*, there exists another group of humanoids, who are known as hybrid cultists who are also half-human and half-beast in their appearance, also the aftereffect of the plague. The panel above shows the rise of the animal armies fighting a war against the militia. In a series of events, Gus will come to know that his place of birth is in Alaska and together with his friends he would be determined to know about the secret of his birth. Along with Jepperd, who would later on become his guardian and protector against Abbott, the villain and the evil one in the story, he would reach Alaska at the end of the comic series, only to find that he was a product of a strange experiment made by some scientists in the past. In the end there will be a battle between the militia and the hybrids where hybrids will come up as valiant. Framing the entire point of view of the comics in a critical posthuman paradigm, Lemiere makes Gus and other hybrids as the reincarnation of ancient gods of the Alaska region, whom the natives worshipped. When mankind tried to wage war upon nature, they became angry and cursed the world with the cruel plague that killed

thousands. However the hybrids were spared as they were a part of nature and were innocent beings.



Fig 1.10- Revelation at the end when Gus learns about his creation in a laboratory

Sweet Tooth the comics can also be read from an eco-critical approach, about the reprise of nature over mankind. Even in the final issue of the book, when Gus and his friends have become old and have families, they are busy fighting humans off their world. The humans have become intruders in their natural world, robbing it's peace and serenity. But in the end, they accept the hybrids as equals. This is a story when mankind accepts the hybrids as cohabitants in the same planet. The story is about compassion, about love and bonding. It started off as a quest for the self, the search for truth and culminates as a story of friendship, love and camaraderie. The world is a place for all the living beings battling against the alienation and anxiety- it's a search for that 'smooth space' of living where a new definition of normative will reign, a combination of hybrid and the human.

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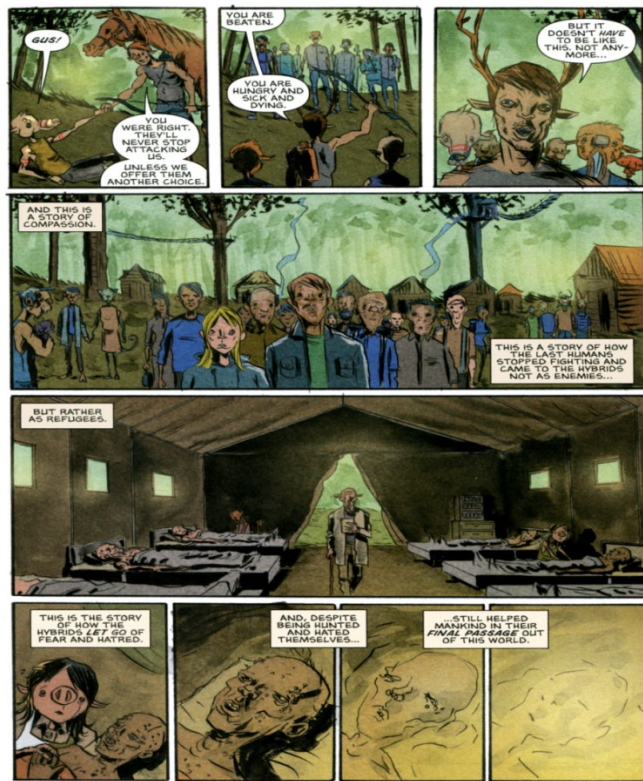


Fig. 1.11- *Sweet Tooth* Issue 40- When humans learnt to live with the hybrids under the same sky

The Abhorred Body- Alienation, Angst and Anxiety in *Black Hole*



Fig 1.12- *Black Hole*: Issue 1 by Charles Burns

Like Lemire, Burns experiments with the same idea of deformity in his cult comics book, *Black Hole*, albeit in a different manner. In this comic, a strange plague had descended upon suburban Seattle area. The teenagers are the worst affected who develop this strange disease called 'the bug', usually as an after-effect of a sexual act. The disease can be metaphorically connected to other venereal diseases such as AIDS, Syphilis or gonorrhoea. Once contracted, it leaves a permanent mark on the body, making it filthy and loathsome. The disease is manifested in any number of ways- from the hideously grotesque to the subtle (and concealable), but once it grips a body there is no turning back. The panel below shows Burns' depiction of the 'bug' in the teenagers.



Fig 1.13- The deformed body parts of some of the characters- marks on the foot, backside and private parts of the body

This bizarre disease has gripped a widespread number of high school teenagers, who are busy wiling away their time in alcohol, drugs and sexual exploits. But unlike *Sweet Tooth*, in this graphic novel, the young adults revel in their abnormal appearance and celebrate it as a sort of mark of adulthood. The panel below shows the discussion about Chris, a central character of the story who is referred to as someone who has got 'the bug'.

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Fig 1.14. Issue 3. Who's Chris. *Black Hole* by Charles Burns

Burns looks at a different way in which the characters look at their 'stigma', moving away from societal ostracism. The four major characters develop weird body parts after catching hold of this disease. Rob grows a mouth- complete with teeth on his throat; it speaks while he is sleeping. His beloved Chris develops an artificial skin which she sheds like a reptile, Keith an admirer of Chris develops tadpole shaped burns on his torso and Eliza develops a tail like a lizard. Apparently this story is about deformity, malformation in the human body but deep down it becomes a criticism of the technocracy and the culture of hedonism that surrounds these teenagers. Burns has sketched the panels all throughout in black and white in wood-cut style giving it a different visual appeal.



Fig 1.15- The hideous transformation that the disease made in the characters

Vastly dystopic in nature, this story probes into the adolescent psyche, their non-conformist attitude with society, government, state and the search for the elusive freedom from the normative order. It is as if an act of transgression that these teens are performing by breaking the rules of the society and the family, refusing to remain as docile bodies and immersing themselves in cultures of consumption. Almost all of the characters in this story are teenagers. This malady is a symbolic representation of their repressed desires. Steeped in hedonism these teenagers, search for an escape route- either by going to the woods, finding a recluse therein and splurging in addictive substances, or in sexual orgies with one another. It is a portrayal of high school alienation- the savagery, the cruelty, the relentless anxiety and ennui. Finally it is about the longing for escape. Chris and Rob love one another and desert their family to find a resting place in the woods. But their happy world turns topsy-turvy one day when Rob goes missing. A devastated Chris gets to know the truth about his murder in the end by another boy of her class- Dave. It is revealed that Dave liked Chris and orchestrated the murder of Rob out of jealousy. The other two important characters Keith and Eliza also go through their own anxieties and frustrations in their elusive search for happiness.

Throughout the text, the readers witness love, betrayal, anxiety and dilemma about self-hood. This comic series encapsulates perfectly the tensions experienced by teenagers in adolescence when they become conscious about their sexuality and their body. More specifically, Burns uses the trope of body horror in his depiction of the diseased bodies of these teens. The grotesque bodies evoke eroticism and become the centre of desire. In the panel below, Chris is shown particularly fond of the deformity caused in Rob by the 'bug'-

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Fig 1.16- Chris is fascinated by Rob's mouth which is visible on his throat

Burns experiments with the idea of adolescent sexual awareness in his comics which is extremely rich in images replete with body horror, the transformation and transmutations in the body replicating that of adolescent hormonal changes. To the readers it might evoke a feeling of disgust, fear, revulsion or boredom. However it is the feeling of angst that becomes dominant in the narrative. Though Burns talks about the onset of plague he does not show an end to the epidemic. Rather the story ends with Chris, one of the main characters in this comic book, searching for the answers to life, digging deep into knowing herself.



Fig 1.17- The final two panels of the comics *Black Hole*

In *Black Hole*, the anxiety is internal and intensely psychological. Burns uses a stark, chiaroscuro art style, to talk about a growing fear among the teenagers, about sexually transmitted disease. But the trope of illness is a macrocosm of their failure to build relationships, reflecting their existence in a world dominated by alienation and anxiety.

Conclusion

Primarily both these two texts are symbiotically connected with one another- in the characters' quest for selfhood. Critical posthumanist theories give us the tool to investigate into the oncoming of a futuristic society. Posthumanist theories essentially create a chance, a scope for the readers to imagine that sort of a future which might come tomorrow or even after a century. With the rise of the anthropocene and the destruction of the natural world, the question of a sustainable world is jeopardized severely. Posthumanism raises the vital concern about the challenges of living in that future society. What will that future world be like and most importantly what will be

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the position of mankind in there? The two texts discussed above, Lemire's *Sweet Tooth* and Burns' *Black Hole* opens up a window of imagination in that future.

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