

Posthuman Echoes in Cultural Memory: Dialogues with Indian and Japanese Mythologies

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Abstract: Posthumanism as a philosophical concept is frequently situated within the contemporary discourse of technology and artificial intelligence. However, this paper argues that the posthuman condition — characterized by hybridity, transformation, and human-nonhuman interconnectedness — is not an emergent modern phenomenon but a primordial pattern embedded in ancient cultural mythologies. Drawing on parallel mythological traditions from India and Japan, this study undertakes a comparative analysis of selected narratives from the Dashavatara, the mythological figures of Hanuman and Ganesha, Shinto cosmology, and supernatural entities such as kami and yokai. Through the theoretical framework of posthumanism, the paper demonstrates that ancient cultures celebrated rather than problematized the dissolution of boundaries between the human and nonhuman. The study argues that integrating these mythological frameworks into contemporary posthumanist discourse offers a richer, culturally plural understanding of posthuman subjectivity — one rooted not in technological anxiety but in deep-seated cultural memory.

Keywords: posthumanism, mythology, hybridity, transformation, Dashavatara, Hanuman, Ganesha, Shinto, kami, yokai, Indian mythology, Japanese mythology, cultural memory, nonhuman

Introduction

The discourse of posthumanism has, in recent decades, emerged as one of the most compelling and contested areas in contemporary philosophy, literary theory, and cultural studies. Scholars such as N. Katherine Hayles (1999), Rosi Braidotti (2013), and Cary Wolfe (2010) have largely situated posthumanism within a technological and bioscientific context, wherein the boundaries between the human organism and its technological extensions dissolve, giving rise to new configurations of subjectivity. While this framing is intellectually productive, it risks provincializing posthumanism as a uniquely Western, post-Enlightenment phenomenon — an oversight with significant epistemological consequences.

This paper undertakes a corrective intervention by demonstrating that the conceptual architecture of posthumanism — including hybridity, transformation, the permeability of the human-nonhuman boundary, and the coexistence of diverse ontological categories — has deep roots in the mythological traditions of both India and Japan. Far from being a modern philosophical novelty, posthuman imaginaries can be traced back to ancient narratives that celebrated, rather than problematized, the crossing of ontological thresholds.

The study is organized around two parallel mythological traditions. The first is Hindu mythology, particularly the Dashavatara (the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu), the figure of Hanuman,

and the composite deity Ganesha. The second is Shinto mythology from Japan, with particular focus on the concept of kami, and the category of supernatural entities known as yokai. By reading

these traditions through the lens of posthumanist theory, the paper argues that what contemporary discourse frames as a rupture with humanism was, in ancient cultures, a normative imaginative reality.

The broader significance of this inquiry lies in its implications for postcolonial and decolonial posthumanism. By recovering non-Western mythological traditions as sites of posthuman thought, the study contributes to the growing scholarly effort to pluralize and decolonize posthumanist theory (Nayar, 2014; Chen, 2012).

Review of Literature

2.1 Posthumanism: Theoretical Frameworks

Posthumanism, in its most influential formulations, challenges the Cartesian subject — the bounded, rational, autonomous human individual that has served as the foundation of Western modernity. N. Katherine Hayles, in her landmark study *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), traces the emergence of the posthuman through the history of cybernetics and information science, arguing that information has come to be privileged over materiality in constituting subjectivity. For Hayles, the posthuman marks a moment in which the boundaries between the human body and its technological prosthetics become increasingly unstable.

Rosi Braidotti (2013) offers a more affirmative and politically engaged account of the posthuman in *The Posthuman*, situating it within a neo-materialist and feminist framework. For Braidotti, the posthuman is not a cause for anxiety but an opportunity to rethink human subjectivity as inherently relational, dynamic, and nonhierarchical. Her concept of 'zoe' — a generative, nonhuman life force — resonates strongly with the vital energies that animate mythological figures such as *kami* and avatars.

Cary Wolfe (2010) in *What Is Posthumanism?* emphasizes the need to move beyond anthropocentrism by engaging with animal studies, systems theory, and disability studies. His approach underscores the ethical dimensions of posthumanism, particularly the imperative to decenter the human as the privileged measure of all things.

2.2 Posthumanism and Non-Western Thought

Despite the richness of these frameworks, the conversation has remained largely Eurocentric. Scholars working at the intersection of postcolonial and posthumanist theory have begun to address this lacuna. Pramod K. Nayar (2014) in *Posthumanism* points toward the possibilities of non-Western posthuman imaginaries but stops short of a sustained engagement with specific mythological traditions. Similarly, Mel Y. Chen (2012), in *Animacies*, explores how non-Western and queer of color critiques can expand posthumanist frameworks beyond their Euro-American limitations.

Japanese posthumanism has attracted some scholarly attention, particularly in the work of Yuk Hui, who, in *Recursivity and Contingency* (2019), argues for a philosophy of technology that is sensitive to non-Western cosmotechnics. However, the specifically mythological dimensions of Japanese posthumanism — particularly *kami* and *yokai* — remain underexplored in posthumanist discourse. Similarly, while Indian mythology has been examined through postcolonial and feminist lenses (Doniger, 1999; Pattanaik, 2011), a sustained reading through posthumanist theory is largely absent from the literature.

2.3 Mythology and Hybridity

The theoretical framework of hybridity, developed by Homi K. Bhabha (1994) in the context of colonial discourse, has been productively extended to the study of mythological figures. In mythological contexts, hybridity operates not as the anxious product of colonial encounter but as a primordial condition of being — a celebration of the interpenetration of categories that Western modernity has sought to keep apart. This study draws on this extended understanding of hybridity to read the composite, transformative figures of Indian and Japanese mythology as anticipatory articulations of posthuman subjectivity.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology that combines close textual analysis with theoretical application. The primary texts examined include selected narratives from the *Bhagavata Purana* (describing the *Dashavatara*), the *Ramayana* (the narrative of Hanuman), the *Shiva Purana* (the narrative of Ganesha's creation), and selected texts from Shinto cosmology, including the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, as well as secondary scholarly literature on *yokai*.

The analytical framework is drawn from posthumanist theory, particularly the work of Hayles, Braidotti, and Wolfe, supplemented by postcolonial and decolonial perspectives (Nayar, 2014; Chen, 2012). A comparative methodology is employed to identify structural and thematic parallels between the two mythological traditions, with a focus on four key posthuman concepts: (1) the dissolution of the human-nonhuman boundary; (2) transformation and metamorphosis; (3) hybridity as a source of power and wisdom; and (4) ecological and cosmic interconnectedness.

The study does not seek to reduce mythological narratives to mere anticipations of contemporary theory; rather, it reads theory and mythology in a dialogic relationship, allowing each to illuminate and complicate the other.

The Posthuman in Indian Mythology

4.1 The Dashavatara: An Evolutionary Posthuman Imaginary

The *Dashavatara*, the doctrine of Vishnu's ten principal incarnations (*avatara*), constitutes one of the most sophisticated mythological accounts of transformation and ontological boundary-crossing in world religion. The ten incarnations — Matsya (fish), Kurma (tortoise), Varaha (boar), Narasimha (lion-man), Vamana (dwarf), Parashurama (warrior-sage), Rama (ideal king), Krishna (divine statesman), Buddha (enlightened one), and Kalki (future warrior) — narrate the progressive assumption of diverse biological and ontological forms by a supreme deity.

Read through a posthumanist lens, the *Dashavatara* offers a striking parallel to contemporary discourses of posthuman evolution. The sequence moves from purely aquatic life (Matsya) through amphibious (Kurma) and fully terrestrial (Varaha) forms, reaching the liminal and composite figure of Narasimha — half-lion, half-human — before ascending to fully human and then trans-human configurations. This progression resonates with evolutionary frameworks but transcends them, for the divine presence in each form is not diminished but fully operative.

Crucially, the composite figure of Narasimha is of particular relevance to posthuman theory. As a being who is neither fully lion nor fully human, Narasimha embodies the dissolution of species boundaries that posthumanism identifies as a defining feature of the posthuman condition. However,

rather than representing a crisis or aberration, Narasimha's hybridity is the source of a power unavailable to purely human or purely animal beings — he alone can destroy the demon Hiranyakashipu, who has been granted immunity from death by either human or animal hands. Hybridity here is not a lack but a surplus of ontological possibility.

4.2 Hanuman: The Nonhuman as Agent of Devotion and Power

The figure of Hanuman, the divine monkey and devoted companion of Lord Rama in the *Ramayana*, exemplifies a different dimension of posthuman subjectivity: the nonhuman as a fully agentic, morally complex, and spiritually elevated being. Hanuman is not a subsidiary character but one of the most beloved and theologically significant figures in the Hindu pantheon, venerated for his devotion (*bhakti*), strength, and wisdom.

Posthumanist theory, particularly in its animal studies inflection (Wolfe, 2010; Derrida, 2008), has sought to contest the anthropocentric assumption that rationality, language, and moral agency are exclusively human attributes. Hanuman's figure anticipates this critique: he is a scholar, poet, diplomat, and devoted friend, whose animal form is presented not as a limitation but as an alternative mode of being-in-the-world that is, in significant respects, superior to the human. His capacity for flight, his ability to expand and contract his body, and his indestructibility place him beyond the boundaries of both human and animal as ordinarily conceived.

Moreover, Hanuman's relationship with Rama models a posthuman ethics of care and interspecies solidarity that resonates with Donna Haraway's (2016) concept of 'making kin' across species boundaries. The relationship is not one of human mastery over animal but of reciprocal devotion and mutual enhancement.

4.3 Ganesha: Hybridity as Epistemological Privilege

Ganesha, the elephant-headed son of Shiva and Parvati, is perhaps the most visually iconic of Hindu composite deities and one of the most theologically resonant for posthumanist analysis. Ganesha's form — a human body surmounted by an elephant head — is not the result of an accident or transgression but of deliberate divine intervention (Shiva, in one prominent narrative, replaces the severed human head of his son with that of an elephant).

The posthuman significance of Ganesha lies in the specific symbolism attached to his composite form. The elephant head is associated in Hindu iconography with wisdom, memory, and the capacity to remove obstacles. By combining human and elephant, Ganesha does not merely blur an ontological boundary; he concentrates in a single figure the cognitive and spiritual powers of two distinct orders of being. His hybridity is an epistemological privilege, not a deficit.

This reading aligns productively with Braidotti's (2013) affirmative posthumanism, which insists that the dissolution of the human-nonhuman boundary opens up new possibilities of thought and existence rather than foreclosing them. Ganesha is literally the deity of new beginnings (*vighneshvara*) and the patron of scholars and writers — a figure whose composite being is the very condition of his mediating function between the human and the divine.

The Posthuman in Japanese Mythology

5.1 Shinto Cosmology and the Concept of Kami

Shinto, the indigenous religious tradition of Japan, offers a cosmological framework that is, at its deepest level, fundamentally posthumanist. The concept of *kami* — typically translated as 'spirit' or

‘deity’ — encompasses a vast and heterogeneous category of entities that includes natural phenomena (mountains, rivers, trees, wind), ancestral spirits, and great divinities such as Amaterasu (the sun goddess) and Susanoo (the storm god). The *kami* do not constitute a separate, transcendent realm opposed to the natural world but are immanent presences within it.

This immanentist cosmology resonates profoundly with posthumanist theory’s critique of Cartesian dualism — the sharp separation of mind from matter, culture from nature, human from nonhuman. In the Shinto world, the boundary between the human and the more-than-human is permeable and relational: humans can become *kami* after death, *kami* can manifest in human form, and natural entities possess a form of agency and interiority that cannot be reduced to mere materiality. As Sokyō Ono (1962) observes, Shinto conceives of the world as fundamentally alive and relational, a perspective that aligns closely with what posthumanist scholars have called ‘new materialism’ (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010).

5.2 Amaterasu and Susanoo: Posthuman Deities

Among the principal *kami* of the Shinto pantheon, Amaterasu (the Great Divinity Illuminating Heaven) and her brother Susanoo (the Storm God) are of particular interest for posthumanist analysis. Both are cosmic forces — solar and meteorological respectively — who are simultaneously represented in anthropomorphic form, engaging in deeply human dramas of conflict, grief, and reconciliation.

The figure of Amaterasu exemplifies the Shinto conception of *kami* as entities that are neither reducible to natural forces nor to human personalities, but inhabit a liminal space between these categories. She governs the sun, the source of all agricultural life, and her withdrawal into the Ama-no-Iwato (Heavenly Rock Cave) — causing the world to be plunged into darkness — dramatizes the dependence of all human and nonhuman life on her continued benevolence. This narrative encodes a posthuman ethics of ecological interdependence: the human world exists only in relation to a community of more-than-human agencies.

Susanoo, conversely, embodies the unruly energies of the nonhuman — storm, sea, and chaos — that resist domestication or control. His eventual reconciliation with Amaterasu and his role in slaying the eight-headed serpent Yamata-no-Orochi suggest that posthuman disorder, far from being merely destructive, is a necessary dimension of cosmic creativity and regeneration.

5.3 Yokai: Animacy Beyond the Human

Perhaps the most productive site for a posthumanist reading of Japanese mythology is the category of *yokai* — a vast and heterogeneous class of supernatural entities that populates Japanese folk belief and literary culture. The term *yokai* encompasses beings as diverse as the shape-shifting fox spirit (*kitsune*), the water creature (*kappa*), the long-necked woman (*rokurokubi*), animated household objects (*tsukumogami*), and numerous other entities that defy categorical boundaries.

The concept of *tsukumogami* — objects that acquire consciousness and agency after one hundred years of use — is particularly resonant with posthumanist new materialism (Bennett, 2010; Barad, 2007). It encodes a belief in the animacy of the material world that challenges the sharp distinction between subject and object, animate and inanimate, human and thing. In this cosmology, objects are not passive matter acted upon by human subjects but potential agents in their own right, capable of forming attachments, seeking recognition, and exercising will.

The *kitsune*, the shape-shifting fox, further exemplifies the posthuman dissolution of species boundaries. The *kitsune* can assume human form, enter into relationships with human beings, and even

produce offspring — a narrative motif that radically destabilizes the boundary between the human and the animal. As Foster (2015) argues, *yokai* function in Japanese culture not merely as entertainment but as imaginative resources for thinking about the edges and limits of the human.

Comparative Analysis: Posthuman Parallels

6.1 Hybridity as Power

One of the most consistent patterns across both mythological traditions is the valorization of hybridity as a source of power, wisdom, and mediating capacity. In the Indian tradition, Narasimha's lion-human composite gives him the power to transcend legal and ontological constraints; Ganesha's elephant head grants him wisdom and the capacity to remove obstacles; Hanuman's divine-monkey form endows him with capacities unavailable to either humans or monkeys alone. In the Japanese tradition, *kitsune* and other shape-shifting *yokai* derive their power precisely from their capacity to inhabit multiple ontological categories simultaneously.

This shared valorization of hybridity stands in productive contrast to the Western philosophical tradition, in which the blurring of categorical boundaries has more often been associated with pollution, monstrosity, and transgression (Douglas, 1966). Posthumanist theory (Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 2016) has sought to rehabilitate hybridity as a positive concept, but this rehabilitation finds a much deeper cultural grounding in the mythological traditions examined here.

6.2 Transformation as Ontological Fluidity

Both traditions share a conception of being as fundamentally fluid and transformative, rather than fixed and essential. The *Dashavatara* narrates the progressive assumption and relinquishment of diverse forms by a single divine principle; *kami* shift between cosmic, natural, and anthropomorphic modes of manifestation; *yokai* are defined by their capacity for metamorphosis. In both traditions, identity is not a stable essence but a dynamic process, perpetually negotiated across ontological thresholds.

This ontological fluidity anticipates what Braidotti (2013) calls the 'nomadic subject' of posthumanism: a subject defined not by essential properties or fixed boundaries but by the capacity for becoming, for forming new connections and assemblages across the human-nonhuman divide. The mythological narratives examined here suggest that this nomadic ontology has deep cultural roots that long predate the philosophical articulations of contemporary posthumanism.

6.3 Ecological Interconnectedness

A third significant parallel is the embedding of both mythological traditions in a larger ecology of interdependence. Shinto cosmology, with its attribution of *kami* status to natural phenomena, encodes a deep ecological consciousness that recognizes the agency and interiority of the natural world. Similarly, Hindu mythology, with its narratives of Vishnu's descent to restore cosmic order, encodes an understanding of the human as embedded in, rather than elevated above, a larger community of beings.

These ecological dimensions of both traditions resonate with what Donna Haraway (2016) has called 'staying with the trouble' — an ethics and politics of multispecies cohabitation and entanglement. They also align with the growing field of posthumanist ecocriticism (Oppermann & Iovino, 2016), which seeks to develop an environmental ethics adequate to the ecological crises of the Anthropocene.

The mythological traditions examined here suggest that such an ethics need not be invented from scratch but can be recovered and renewed from existing cultural resources.

Discussion

The comparative analysis undertaken in this paper yields several significant insights for posthumanist theory and for the broader project of decolonizing academic knowledge production. First, it demonstrates that the posthuman condition — the dissolution of the human-nonhuman boundary, the valorization of hybridity and transformation, and the recognition of ecological interdependence — is not a uniquely modern or Western phenomenon but a feature of ancient cultural imaginaries across multiple civilizations.

This finding has important implications for how we periodize and geographize posthumanism. If posthuman imaginaries are embedded in the cultural memories of Indian and Japanese civilizations, then the emergence of posthumanist philosophy in the late twentieth-century West cannot be understood simply as a response to the specific challenges of digital technology and biotechnology; it must also be understood as the belated theorization of insights that have long been encoded in non-Western mythological traditions.

Second, the paper demonstrates the productiveness of reading mythology through posthumanist theory, and posthumanist theory through mythology. Mythology illuminates the cultural depth and affective resonance of posthumanist concepts; posthumanist theory provides a rigorous analytical framework for identifying and articulating the philosophical implications of mythological narratives that might otherwise remain under-theorized.

Third, the study has implications for postcolonial and decolonial posthumanism. By recovering Indian and Japanese mythological traditions as sites of posthuman thought, the paper contributes to the project of pluralizing posthumanism and challenging its residual Eurocentrism. This is not a merely academic exercise; it has ethical and political stakes, insofar as the way we theorize the posthuman will shape the way we respond to the ecological, technological, and biopolitical challenges of the twenty-first century.

The paper also raises questions for future research. A more extended comparative study might examine posthuman imaginaries in other non-Western mythological traditions — African, Indigenous American, Polynesian — thereby further enriching and pluralizing the posthumanist theoretical framework. Similarly, a more sustained engagement with the theological and philosophical dimensions of the traditions examined here, drawing on the resources of Hindu philosophy (particularly Advaita Vedanta and Samkhya) and Buddhist and Shinto philosophy, would deepen the theoretical insights generated by this study.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that posthumanism, understood as a philosophical and cultural orientation that celebrates the dissolution of the human-nonhuman boundary, the valorization of hybridity and transformation, and the recognition of ecological interdependence, is not a novel modern phenomenon but a primordial pattern embedded in ancient mythological traditions. Through a comparative analysis of Indian and Japanese mythology, the paper has demonstrated that figures such as Narasimha, Hanuman, Ganesha, *kami*, and *yokai* encode sophisticated posthuman imaginaries that

anticipate and, in some respects, exceed the conceptual resources of contemporary posthumanist theory.

The study has argued that integrating these mythological frameworks into contemporary posthumanist discourse offers a richer, culturally plural understanding of posthuman subjectivity — one rooted not in technological anxiety but in deep-seated cultural memory. This integration requires, however, a methodological humility that acknowledges the difference between mythological and philosophical modes of thought, and an ethical commitment to avoiding the reductive assimilation of non-Western traditions into Western theoretical frameworks.

Ultimately, the posthuman is not a stranger arriving from a technological future; it is a familiar figure returning from a mythological past. Recognizing it as such may help us face the challenges of the present with greater wisdom, resilience, and cultural richness

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