

THE HUMAN AND NON-HUMAN: AN ANALYSIS OF AGENCY IN UNDER THE SKIN BY MICHEL FABER THROUGH A POSTHUMANIST LENS

1 Syed Abuzar Naqvi

Lecturer, Minhaj University Lahore

Abuzar.eng@mul.edu.pk

2 Waqas Yousaf

Lecturer, Minhaj University Lahore

waqas.eng@mul.edu.pk

3 Ayesha Malik

Mphil English Literature (Scholar)

Abstract

This research paper explores the concept of agency in Michel Faber's novel Under the Skin (2000) through a posthumanist perspective. Posthumanism challenges traditional human-centered worldviews and examines how the boundaries between human and non-human are redefined. In Under the Skin, the protagonist, Isserley, exists between human and alien identities, raising questions about agency, ethics, and subjectivity. This study analyzes how the novel critiques human exceptionalism and explores the ethical implications of non-human agency. Through textual analysis and posthumanist theories, the paper examines Isserley's experiences, her interactions with humans, and the ways in which her agency is shaped by her hybrid existence.

Introduction

Michel Faber's *Under the Skin* (2000) is a novel that defies easy categorization, blending elements of science fiction, horror, and social commentary. At its core, the novel explores themes of identity, agency, and ethical responsibility by presenting a protagonist who exists in a liminal space between human and non-human. Isserley, the main character, is an extraterrestrial being surgically modified to resemble a human woman. Her primary task on Earth is to abduct male hitchhikers, who are then processed as meat for consumption by her own species. Throughout the novel, her dual identity as both predator and victim, human and alien raises fundamental questions about the nature of agency, autonomy, and moral responsibility.

The concept of agency is central to philosophical and literary discussions about what it means to be human. Traditional humanist thought often associates agency with qualities such as rationality, autonomy, and self-awareness. These ideas, rooted in Enlightenment philosophy, assume that humans have a unique capacity for self-determination and moral decision-making. However, posthumanist thinkers challenge this perspective, arguing that agency is not exclusive to humans but is instead distributed across a network of relationships involving technology, animals, the environment, and even non-human entities. In this light, *Under the Skin* serves as a compelling text for exploring how agency is constructed, constrained, and redefined when the boundaries between human and non-human are blurred.

Isserley's character is a prime example of this destabilization. Although she possesses a human-like appearance, her alien origins, biological modifications, and ingrained social conditioning complicate her ability to act freely. Her decisions are influenced by external forces, including the hierarchy of her home planet, the technological modifications imposed upon her body, and the societal structures that normalize the exploitation of other beings. At the same time, she exhibits moments of resistance, questioning the morality of her actions and struggling with feelings of alienation and empathy toward her human captives. This tension makes *Under the Skin* a rich text for analyzing agency from a posthumanist perspective.

Posthumanist theory, which has gained prominence in recent decades, critiques anthropocentrism the idea that humans are the central and most important beings in the universe. Scholars such as Cary Wolfe (2010) and Rosi Braidotti (2013) argue that traditional humanism reinforces artificial boundaries between humans and non-humans, often justifying the exploitation of animals, technology, and the environment. *Under the Skin* challenges these distinctions by presenting Isserley as a being who is both an enforcer of systemic exploitation and a victim of it. Her situation parallels real-world issues, such as factory farming, the commodification of bodies, and the dehumanization of marginalized groups.

This paper examines the novel through a posthumanist lens to explore how agency operates within a world where species boundaries are fluid and hierarchical power structures shape individual choices. By analyzing Isserley's character, her interactions with humans, and the ethical dilemmas she faces, this study aims to answer key questions: Does *Under the Skin* reinforce or challenge traditional notions of human agency? How does Isserley's hybrid identity complicate the idea of subjectivity? And what ethical and philosophical implications arise when agency is extended beyond the human?

Through close textual analysis and engagement with posthumanist theory, this paper will argue that *Under the Skin* critiques human exceptionalism and offers a more complex, fluid understanding of agency one that acknowledges the interdependence of human and non-human beings in an ethically fraught world.

Research Questions

1. How does *Under the Skin* challenge traditional notions of human agency?
2. In what ways does Isserley's identity as both alien and human complicate the idea of subjectivity?
3. How does posthumanism help us understand the ethical and philosophical implications of agency in the novel?

Research Objectives

- To analyze how the novel deconstructs the boundary between human and non-human agency.
- To explore Isserley's character as a site of posthumanist struggle.
- To examine the ethical consequences of viewing non-human entities as having agency.

Literature Review

The concept of posthumanism has been explored by theorists such as Cary Wolfe (2010), Rosi Braidotti (2013), and Donna Haraway (1985). Wolfe argues that posthumanism challenges the privileging of humans over other beings, while Braidotti examines how identity shifts in a posthuman world. Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* critiques rigid biological classifications, emphasizing hybridity, a theme central to *Under the Skin*.

Scholars have also examined *Under the Skin* from feminist and ecological perspectives. For example, Carol J. Adams (1990) discusses the connection between gender and animal exploitation, which aligns with Isserley's experiences as both a predator and a victim. Several critics, such as Heather Latimer (2009), have explored the novel's themes of bodily transformation and capitalism, while others have focused on the ethical implications of consuming other beings.

However, few studies have explicitly analyzed *Under the Skin* through a posthumanist lens, particularly in relation to agency. This paper aims to fill that gap by exploring how the novel redefines agency in the context of posthumanism.

Research Gap

While previous research has examined *Under the Skin* in terms of gender, ethics, and body politics, little attention has been given to its posthumanist implications. The novel's treatment of agency, particularly in relation to non-human subjectivity, remains underexplored. This paper contributes to existing scholarship by applying posthumanist theory to the novel's exploration of identity and agency.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research method, primarily using textual analysis. It engages with posthumanist theory to examine how Isserley's agency is constructed and challenged. By analyzing key passages from *Under the Skin*, the paper explores how the novel redefines human and non-human agency. Secondary sources, including books and journal articles on posthumanism, science fiction, and ethics, provide theoretical support for the analysis.

Findings

One of the key findings of this research is that *Under the Skin* challenges the traditional, humanist concept of agency, which is based on the idea that individuals act autonomously using reason and free will. In humanist philosophy, agency is tied to self-awareness, rationality, and moral decision-making traits that are traditionally associated with humans and not with animals or non-human entities. However, posthumanist scholars argue that agency is distributed across biological, technological, and systemic networks rather than being an exclusive human trait.

The novel disrupts this conventional notion of agency in multiple ways:

- **Isserley's Limited Autonomy:** Isserley, despite being the protagonist, does not possess full autonomy over her actions. Her role as a hunter of human men is dictated by the demands of her

home planet and the system in which she operates. She was forcibly modified to fit a human appearance, showing that her body itself is a site of control rather than self-determination. Though she exercises choice in selecting her victims, her agency is constrained by the expectations and hierarchy of her species.

- **Human Characters and Agency:** The novel also questions whether humans themselves have agency in the way humanist traditions suggest. The men whom Isserley captures often believe they are making independent choices such as accepting a ride from her but they are ultimately powerless against the larger system that determines their fate. Their perceived autonomy is an illusion, reinforcing the posthumanist argument that agency is shaped by systemic forces beyond individual control.

- **Comparisons to Real-World Exploitation:** The novel draws parallels between the treatment of humans by Isserley's species and the way humans treat animals in industrial farming. Just as humans assume dominance over animals for food, Isserley's society sees humans as nothing more than livestock. This reversal challenges human exceptionalism and reinforces the idea that agency is not an inherent quality of humans but is dependent on the structures of power that define who or what is considered valuable.

Another key finding is that Isserley's hybrid identity being both alien and human disrupts traditional ideas of subjectivity. Subjectivity refers to an individual's sense of self and awareness of their own existence. Humanist philosophy traditionally views subjectivity as stable and uniquely human, but posthumanism suggests that it is fluid and shaped by external influences, including biological modifications and relationships with non-human entities.

- **Isserley's Dual Identity:** Throughout the novel, Isserley struggles with her self-perception. While she has the appearance of a human woman, she does not identify with human culture or emotions in the same way that actual humans do. At the same time, she no longer fully belongs to her own species due to her physical modifications. This alienation makes her subjectivity unstable—she is neither fully human nor fully alien, which disrupts traditional ideas of identity and selfhood.

- **Body as a Site of Conflict:** Isserley's surgically altered body serves as a metaphor for the instability of subjectivity. She experiences constant pain due to her modifications, highlighting how her identity is imposed upon her rather than something she has freely chosen. This aligns with posthumanist theories that argue subjectivity is not just a product of the mind but is deeply connected to the body and external forces.

- **Ethical Reflections and Moments of Empathy:** Despite being conditioned to see humans as food sources, Isserley occasionally experiences doubt and empathy. Her interactions with Amlis Vess, a member of her species who opposes the killing of humans, force her to question the morality of her actions. These moments suggest that her subjectivity is not entirely dictated by her species' ideology she possesses a degree of internal conflict that challenges the notion of a fixed identity.

A final key finding of this research is that posthumanism provides a useful framework for understanding the ethical and philosophical questions raised in *Under the Skin*. The novel critiques anthropocentrism (the belief that humans are superior to other beings) by forcing readers to reconsider their assumptions about agency, morality, and the treatment of non-human entities.

- **Questioning Human Exceptionalism:** The novel suggests that the idea of humans being superior to other life forms is arbitrary. Just as humans exploit animals for food, Isserley's species does the same to humans. This reversal forces readers to confront their own ethical assumptions about

speciesism (the belief that certain species have more moral worth than others). Posthumanist theorists like Cary Wolfe argue that human exceptionalism is a constructed hierarchy rather than a natural truth, and *Under the Skin* reinforces this idea by presenting a world where humans are no longer at the top of the food chain.

- **Moral Ambiguity and the Limits of Agency:** The novel does not present a clear moral binary between good and evil. Isserley is both a victim and an enforcer she is exploited by her own species yet continues to carry out acts of violence against humans. This moral ambiguity aligns with posthumanist thought, which rejects simplistic ethical frameworks in favor of a more complex understanding of interconnectedness and systemic constraints.

- **Technology and Agency:** Another posthumanist theme in the novel is the role of technology in shaping agency. Isserley's body is surgically altered without her full consent, making her a product of biotechnological intervention. This challenges the idea that agency is solely based on individual choice; instead, it suggests that agency is often influenced by technological and biological limitations.

Conclusion

Michel Faber's *Under the Skin* challenges conventional ideas of agency by presenting a protagonist who exists between human and non-human identities. Through a posthumanist lens, the novel critiques the notion that agency belongs solely to humans, instead portraying it as fluid and influenced by external forces. Isserley's experiences reveal the ethical complexities of defining subjectivity and highlight the consequences of treating non-human beings as lesser entities.

The analysis of *Under the Skin* through a posthumanist perspective shows that agency the ability to make choices and take action is not something that belongs only to humans. Instead, the novel suggests that agency is shaped by external forces like biology, technology, and social structures. It challenges the idea that only humans can think ethically or be self-aware. By blurring the lines between human and non-human, the story makes us question our beliefs about identity, morality, and what it truly means to be a "being" with thoughts and choices.

By examining the novel through posthumanist theory, this paper contributes to discussions about agency, ethics, and the boundaries between species. The study suggests that *Under the Skin* is not just a critique of human exploitation but also a deeper exploration of how agency operates in a world where the lines between human and non-human are increasingly blurred.

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