New Academia: An International Journal of English Language, Literature and Literary Theory

ONLINE ISSN 2347-2073 **Vol. 14, Issue I, Jan. 2025**

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

BODIES OF HORROR: MEDITATIONS ON MONSTROSITY AND IDENTITY IN CHARLES BURNS' *BLACK HOLE*

Riju Chakraborty
PhD scholar, Dept. of English & Culture Studies,
The University of Burdwan
rijuchakraborty01@gmail.com

Abstract

This research paper attempts to understand how the conventional tropes of monstrosity, mutation and the liminality of body play out within the margins of a society in context of Charles Burns' graphic novel, Black Hole. Through the lens of critical posthumanism, this study aims to analyse how the narrative's portrayal of physical and psychological transformation interrogates conventional notions of human identity, the body, and social belonging. Set in the Seattle suburbs of mid 1970s, Burns' novel is a coming-of-age tale of sexual awakenings, long winding acid trips, and much more. Throughout the narrative, the sanctity of the human form is questioned time and again. The overbearing nature of the existential crisis is binding. With its characters mutated beyond recognition, one often wonders what it means to be human anymore. As the narrative unfolds, we bear witness to a large-scale metamorphosis of a group of high school students into deformed monstrosities. Driven out of society and forced to go into hiding, multiple lives come together and collide head on. The boundaries between human and nonhuman becomes a site of disruption. The afflicted characters' experiences underscore how monstrosity reflects societal anxieties around difference, contamination, and the fragility of the normative body. Eventually, throwing caution to wind, the infected start to embrace the hybrid essence of their existence as they try to take back what the society had repeatedly denied them, therefore, setting off a new dawn of posthuman beings. Their waking up to a posthuman condition, thus, rips into societal norms and conventions and carves up new identities in staunch defiance of anthropocentric humanism. In examining the text's intersections with themes of exclusion and transgression, this paper argues that Black Hole reframes the mutated body as a locus of resistance and redefinition. The analysis reveals how Burns' narrative challenges anthropocentric frameworks, portraying the monstrous not only as a symbol of fear but also as a representation of fluidity and potentiality within the human condition. Ultimately, this study

contributes to the discourse on posthuman identity by situating Black Hole within broader conversations about bodily transformation, alienation, and the subversion of social norms.

Keywords - Posthuman condition, Transgression, Hybridity, Monster studies, Identity formation.

This research paper attempts to understand how the conventional tropes of monstrosity, mutation and the liminality of body play out within the margins of a society in context of Charles Burns' graphic novel, *Black Hole*. Through the lens of critical posthumanism, this study aims to analyse how the narrative's portrayal of physical and psychological transformation interrogates conventional notions of human identity, the body, and social belonging. Set in the Seattle suburbs of mid 1970s, Burns' novel is a coming-of-age tale of sexual awakenings, long winding acid trips, and much more. Throughout the narrative, the sanctity of the human form is questioned time and again. The overbearing nature of the existential crisis is binding. With its characters mutated beyond recognition, one often wonders what it means to be human anymore. As the narrative unfolds, we bear witness to a large-scale metamorphosis of a group of high school students into deformed monstrosities. Driven out of society and forced to go into hiding, multiple lives come together and collide head on. The boundaries between human and nonhuman becomes a site of disruption. The afflicted characters' experiences underscore how monstrosity reflects societal anxieties around difference, contamination, and the fragility of the normative body. Eventually, throwing caution to wind, the infected start to embrace the hybrid essence of their existence as they try to take back what the society had repeatedly denied them, therefore, setting off a new dawn of posthuman beings. Their waking up to a posthuman condition, thus, rips into societal norms and conventions and carves up new identities in staunch defiance of anthropocentric humanism. In examining the text's intersections with themes of exclusion and transgression, this paper argues that *Black Hole* reframes the mutated body as a locus of resistance and redefinition. The analysis reveals how Burns' narrative challenges anthropocentric frameworks, portraying the monstrous not only as a symbol of fear but also as a representation of fluidity and potentiality within the human condition. Ultimately, this study contributes to the discourse on posthuman identity by situating *Black Hole* within broader conversations about bodily transformation, alienation, and the subversion of social norms.

The Anatomy of a Monster

Charles Burns' *Black Hole* problematizes human-nonhuman binaries to the extent that it opens up a third space of existence- a liminal realm that defies binary oppositions of human and nonhuman, normal and abnormal; a place where one is absolved of any corporeal or psychological fixity. This third space serves as a zone of potentiality where new forms of identity and community can emerge. By inhabiting this in-between state, the mutated characters challenge the fixed boundaries imposed by societal norms, suggesting an alternative ontology that embraces fluidity and multiplicity. The monstrous thus becomes a site of both resistance and redefinition, disrupting conventional hierarchies and enabling a reimagining of what it means to exist within and beyond the human framework. Multiple identities take shape; fragments take flight and dissipate into thin air. Ultimately, what comes of it is an existential vortex. In Burns' graphic novel, we witness a dissolving of all forms of heteronormativity. It is to be noted that the sacrosanctity of the human body has been instrumental in foregrounding human superiority over the years. The human form, so to speak, has served as a potent apparatus to ratify power hierarchies and dialogues of human exceptionalism. Therefore, body and its representation in literature and social practices initiate and emphasize an existential powerplay. Furthermore, body, as a seat of discourse, has often been used to mark the boundary between the human self and the nonhuman other; with both being essential in establishing hegemonic relations. Take the character of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde for example. As a matter of fact, along with countless other penny dreadfuls, Victorian High Gothic introduced characters who exemplified an ideological shift and hinted at the possibility of an ontological plurality of human existence. A similar thematic exploration of the monster's body can be traced in Burns' graphic novel.

The graphic narrative, as a whole, functions as a running metaphor for sexually transmitted plagues, alienation, and waking up to one's identity in the drug induced backdrop of 1970's America. From psychedelic hauntings to metaphysical abstractions the story it tells is very much human, albeit on a surface level. *Black Hole* delves deep into the drug culture and counterculture movement of 1970's America, portraying how these subcultures intersect with themes of transgression and identity. The rampant use of hallucinogens, for instance, serves as a backdrop for understanding the characters' descent into a space that defies conventional social norms. The counterculture movement is emblematic of their rebellion against social structures and is associated with exploration and defiance amplifying the novel's themes of bodily and existential fragmentation. The affected youths occupy a liminal space fostering an environment where altered states of consciousness mirror their physical and psychological mutations; a space

where reality and altered perception coalesce, further blurring the boundaries between self and other, and human and monstrous (see fig. 1).

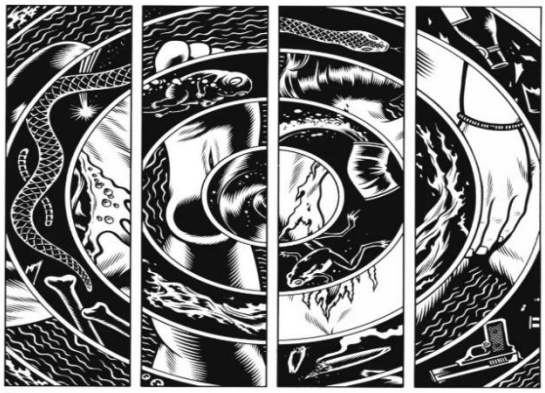

Fig. 1 An abstract take on altered state of perception and being in *Black Hole*

The crisis manifests and deepens in terms of rare mutations, as a by-product of sexual encounters that disfigures the human anatomy for good. Once the sacrosanctity of the physical form is violated there seems to be no turning back. Gobbled up by insecurities and uncertainties while some grow anxious to go back to the lives they once had; desperately clinging on to a sense of bourgeois complacency that now seem far off, some struggle vehemently to eke out a space of their own. Few find solace in companionship, fewer still try to lead a double life, failing miserably. The story revolves around a group of teenagers who contract a mysterious, sexually transmitted disease known as "The Bug". This infection causes grotesque physical mutations, manifesting in different ways for each individual symbolizing their unique traumas and emotional turmoil (see fig. 2 for reference).

Fig. 2. An illustration of a group of unnamed infected individuals akin to that of a school yearbook photo from *Black Hole*

The narrative is imbued with symbolic imagery, examining societal fears around sexuality and the isolation of youth. Burns uses stark black-and-white illustrations that heighten the eerie, haunting atmosphere of the story. The plot intertwines multiple perspectives, revealing how each character grapples with ostracization, desire, and existential angst. The disease serves as an allegory for the alienation and transformation experienced during adolescence, depicting the characters' struggle with identity and acceptance within a judgmental society. The stigma associated with the disease creates a rift between the infected and the uninfected, leading to both psychological and physical isolation. Tensions mount as characters navigate their changing bodies and fractured relationships. The novel's dreamlike sequences, often blending reality with hallucinatory imagery, further, heighten the disorienting and unsettling nature of their experiences. The first significant instance of violence is hinted at when the characters discuss the mysterious disappearances and deaths of infected teens who live in the makeshift encampments in the woods. Metaphoric of a forest full of monsters, the narrative sets the tone against the backdrop of a defunct society, inebriated out of its senses.

Burns' graphic novel, thus, serves as a compelling exploration of the concept of the monstrous other, using the framework of a sexually transmitted disease to embody the fear of physical and social transformation. The graphic novel's narrative and visual elements underscore how society constructs and reacts to those deemed aberrant, examining both external and internal responses to alienation. The monstrous other in *Black Hole* is epitomized through the grotesque

mutations that the afflicted teenagers develop. These mutations range from subtle and concealable to overtly horrific, symbolizing how physical changes can alter not only perception but also identity. Moreover, the novel's representation of monstrosity is not confined to its physical manifestation. It also permeates the social dynamics depicted within the story. The infected teens form their own subculture on the fringes of society, an act of communal resilience but also a testament to their complete disconnection from mainstream acceptance. This self-imposed exile echoes sociological themes of how marginalized groups may create insular communities as a means of survival and identity preservation. Then again, unlike its human counterpart, the nonhuman or the monstrous body, for that matter, invokes fear and a subsequent displacement; a disorienting sensation that questions the feasibility of the human form and to whatever degree it can be skewed until it is no longer human. This sense of othering is pivotal in building and sustaining social practices over a long period of time. As pointed out by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses),' "The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read." (4). And it is at this cultural crossroads, that our understanding of the human body is put to test. The human and the nonhuman are part of the same social dialogue with one justifying the other. Likewise, in *Black Hole*, the mutants are very much a social construct and a vivid projection of the pervasive fears and anxieties of those times, articulated through the profound anxieties of adolescence and the consequences of social exclusion. The mutations serve as an allegory for difference, framed by the intersections of bodily change, identity, and social perception. Burns' use of stark visual language, combined with a narrative steeped in existential dread, positions the graphic novel as a powerful meditation on how society confronts and constructs the monstrous other. The mutant's body is a cultural artefact, to be dissected and read. *Black Hole* introduces us to characters that neither conform to societal norms nor do they operate within the stipulated binaries of right and wrong. Their existence does not warrant any adulation. They don't even necessarily advance the human narrative by any stretch of imagination. One could even argue that their mutations are completely unnecessary and do not serve any higher purpose. Furthermore, they neither champion human exceptionalism nor do they advocate human supremacy of any form. Yet, their very presence disrupts the humanist discourse to its core. Mainly because they exist in total violation of normative body, societal laws and all forms of acceptability. Through the character arcs, particularly those of Chris and Keith, Burns explores how the monstrous identity shapes

relationships and self-perception. Chris, who initially attempts to mask her infection, embodies the conflict between desire for acceptance and the inevitability of change. Her journey into the woods—a literal and symbolic departure from normalcy—represents an embrace of the monstrous other and a rejection of societal norms. Keith's interactions with the infected reveal the oscillation between fascination and fear, mirroring society's broader ambivalence toward the unfamiliar. The body, therefore, is the eponymous black hole. Similarly, the nonhuman body is an ideological construction; the epicentre of moral relativism. The lines between what is morally acceptable and what is not are often dictated by societal concerns and needs. Subjective perception motivated by grand ideological leanings and propagandistic practices lies at the heart of interchangeability between the human and the monstrous. As per need and convenience society gives birth to its own monsters, a necessary pre-requisite to ensure uninterrupted flow of power. The simple fact that monsters exist, validates the human. Thus, the essence of the monster precedes their existence. Through the currency of everyday speech, dream, fantasy and such the lore of the monster takes shape. And through repeated insistence and emphasis in discursive practices, over a significant period of time, the monster manifests itself. In ways more than one, nonhuman agents, in a so-called human society are, therefore, indispensable as they are caught in an intricate web of social relations that goes on to shape large scale cultural understanding.

Battles within and without

In a way, *Black Hole* holds up a mirror to a society where genetic transformation leads to social estrangement. The outcasts struggle to withstand and survive under radically modified conditions; with nowhere to go and, no one to turn to. Among others Eliza, the lizard queen, Rob with a little mouth on his neck, Chris Rhodes, a girl who starts to shed skin once she gets infected are all just walking acts of transgression who defy any categorization. The extensive allegorical ploy harps on the theme of alienation as the characters in question work their way through stiff social structures in an attempt to come to terms with their new-found identities, which eventually leads to assuming one's place in this brave new world and confronting the self-other binary head on. Thus, a war is waged, both within and without. The randomness of the disease's effects- where some individuals display barely perceptible symptoms while others develop pronounced deformities- introduces a sense of uncertainty and dread that permeates the story. This unpredictability symbolizes the latent anxieties surrounding adolescent sexuality, identity, and the fear of exposure, casting a shadow over even the most mundane interactions.

Thematically, the novel draws on elements of body horror to evoke discomfort and a visceral sense of estrangement (see fig. 3 for reference).

Fig. 3. A panel in *Black Hole* illustrating a horrified Chris shedding her skin

This physical disruption is paralleled by psychological disruption; the characters are depicted grappling with isolation, shame, and a disconnection from both their peers and themselves. The combination of bodily and psychological alienation creates a layered sense of unease that reflects broader fears of adolescence- an experience marked by profound, often disquieting change. In essence, an overwhelming sense of fear dominates the narrative from scratch. The conflict hardly resolves and the characters are left haunted even in their dreams. As the narrative unfolds, madness sets in. Subsequently, the once secured sense of self and belonging gives in to fear. Fragmented lives spawn fractured identities. Once the very idea of self as a unified whole is threatened it seeks validation in its relation to the other. Since self cannot be defined in vacuum, it needs a constant reference point; the nonhuman other, thus, justifies the human self. The so-called human self right from the outset comes to fear this unknown- the nonhuman within- right from the outset. And as fear and desire go hand in hand, overpowering paranoia, eventually, gets the better of sound judgment and cancels out reason, the very foundation on which stands the entire humanist argument. Chris, one of the central characters, exemplifies the struggle for

validation within this self-other dynamic. Initially, Chris' infection manifests as a shedding of her skin, a mutation that she attempts to conceal. Her efforts to hide her condition reflect her internalization of societal judgment and her desire to remain part of the self, the acceptable community. However, as her condition becomes more visible, she becomes increasingly aware of her status as the other. Chris' search for acceptance shifts towards those who share her experiences, illustrating how the construction of identity involves seeking connection with others who share similar stigmas. Keith Pearson, another key character, also navigates the self-other binary in his relationship with Chris and his fascination with the infected. Keith, who remains uninfected throughout most of the story, embodies the perspective of the self but is drawn to the other in a way that suggests both fear and fascination. His interactions with the infected community are fraught with ambivalence; he desires a connection with Chris, indicating his longing to bridge the self-other divide, yet he is simultaneously repelled by the implications of their condition. This duality highlights the psychological complexity of seeking self-validation through proximity to the other, demonstrating how individuals oscillate between empathy and aversion when confronted with the unfamiliar. Despite knowing both Chris and Eliza's condition, Keith fervently desires them and yet shirks from committing himself several times before eventually giving in to his suppressed longings in his relationship with Eliza. She comes to serve as the feared, albeit fetishized, other to Pearson's self. The collective life of the infected living in the woods further illustrates how they attempt to reconstruct their identities by seeking validation in relation to each other. This environment, while fraught with its own internal conflicts, serves as a space where the boundaries of the self-other binary blur. The community of the infected becomes a microcosm where the other is normalized, and relationships within this space provide a counterpoint to the alienation imposed by the uninfected society. However, the unease within these enclaves- evidenced by violent outbursts and the eventual breakdown of trust-reveals that validation through the other is often tenuous and can be destabilized by internalized stigma and fear.

However, any attempt in any form of distinct categorization is misleading to say the least. What we perceive as normal almost immediately loses currency once taken out of context. Therefore, within a social construct the only possible way to define normalcy is in relation to whatever that is abnormal. While on the other hand, socio-political boundaries are anything but static. So, in its evident eventuality any degree of compulsive safeguarding of a society against its trespassers only results in constant moving of its boundaries. The marginal space, therefore, is very much a social design and an inseparable part of social discourse. If anything, it acts as a

reservoir for social residuals over the years. Be it the fringes of human society or psyche, the margin has always been home to the nonhuman, the bestial, the superhuman, where there is no telling them apart. As is evident in Pearson's otherworldly hallucinations, it is only when he comes to terms with the stranger within, that he enters into a third space of existence beyond stipulated conventions and redundant binaries. Along with Eliza, Keith now conscious and accepting of his transformation warms up to a life that sets them apart from the rest of humanity. They are different in a sense that their identities are constantly deferred in the natural order of things. From the perspective of critical posthumanism, it can then be argued that they have broken free of their human condition and have evolved into something not entirely human. In "The Nonhuman" Bruce Clarke contends, "In the parlance of earlier literary, philosophical, and theological texts, the human frays into gradations of subhuman, inhuman, and superhuman- the bestial, the daemonic, or the divine. Evolutionary modernity supplements the human with the prehuman and the posthuman" (141). And while particularly focusing on the nonhuman turn in literary discourse Clarke points out, "The nonhuman operates not by pos(i)ting but by negating" (142). In other such instances, posthumanism as Stefan Herbrechter argues in *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, can be thought of and defined as "the end of a certain conception of the human, namely the humanist notion of the human" (3) and as a contemplation on "the accelerated transformation of the latter" (3). Now it is also to be kept in mind that such transformation may not necessarily adhere to any strict governing telos. Furthermore, posthumanism as a discipline acknowledges all monstrosities and deviants i.e., the nonhuman order of beings that include deities, beasts, demons and angels, and all other forms of physical and fictional entities that were suppressed in the process of rigorous humanization. In a similar vein, Patricia MacCormack in a chapter titled, "Posthuman Teratology" argues, "Monsters are only ever defined in contingent with their time and place; they are never unto themselves. It could be argued that monstrosity is only a failure of or catalyst to affirm the human" (522). She goes on to validate the complex nature and interrelatedness of human and nonhuman beings- the human self and the nonhuman other within a social structure by saying, "Configured as 'subjects' who fail to fulfil the criteria of human subjects, monstrosity points out the human as the icon of what is normal, and thus the monster as what is not human" (522). Any demonisation or abstraction of certain forms of nonhuman beings, therefore, is deeply rooted within hegemonic practices prevalent in particular societies. Now particularly in context of this novel we witness instances of the posthuman predating the human by virtue of its mutation, in that it aligns itself with such forgotten aberrations that had to give way to humanist modernity. At this point, if we

go back to Cohen in 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)' and try to find pointers as to why monsters exist it can also be safely assumed that the monster never truly dies. Quite rightly Cohen claims, "No monster tastes of death but once […] And so the monster's body is both corporal and incorporeal; its threat is its propensity to shift" (5). So, in this case, it is this remarkable propensity to shape shift that blurs the fine margins between a human being and a monster. In Burns' novel the monstrous takes both literal and metaphorical forms. Cohen's statement posits that the monster embodies a mutable threat, constantly adapting to the anxieties of a given era and space. In *Black Hole*, Burns constructs a narrative where the monstrous resists containment, encapsulating the ever-present and shifting fears associated with adolescence, identity, and societal norms. The characters' experiences in *Black Hole, further,* reinforce the notion that the monster's true power lies in its capacity to shift forms and meanings. For instance, while the infected teenagers become outcasts within their suburban community, the disease itself becomes a symbol of larger fears: the dread of exposure, the stigma of difference, and the anxieties surrounding sexual awakening. The fact that "The Bug" spreads without any clear indication of who will be infected or how severe their mutations will be amplifies the sense that the monstrous is an ever-present, shifting threat that adapts to the individual and societal context. The monster's real power lies in its propensity to change forms, perpetually haunting the fringes of human experience and society.

Cometh the Hour Cometh the Übermensch

Right from the get go *Black Hole* sets up a struggle for a posthuman future. In many ways, it can be argued that keeping in line with a complex dialogue between transcendence, societal norms, and bodily otherness the mutants in this novel prefigure the coming of Nietzschean Übermensch. Nietzsche defines Übermensch as an ideal that humanity can aspire to. Breaking free from the constraints of conventional humanism, Nietzsche's Übermensch comes off as life affirming and emancipatory. In their coming to terms with the nonhuman within, moral compulsions are rendered obsolete and the novel ends on a liberating note. Chris' journey in particular serves as a focal point for examining how the Nietzschean Übermensch intersects with the posthuman condition within the graphic novel. Chris' journey is marked by an initial struggle to conform to societal expectations and maintain her human identity despite her disfigurement. However, as her condition becomes more pronounced, Chris begins to navigate a new existence that challenges her previous understanding of selfhood (see fig. 4 for reference).

Fig. 4. A metaphorical representation of Chris' journey in *Black Hole*

This evolution parallels the Nietzschean call for the Übermensch to create their own values beyond the confines of conventional morality. Chris, and others like her, are forced to construct new identities in the face of ostracization, suggesting a form of transcendence that embraces their monstrous otherness. The almost mythical Nietzschean Overman leads by setting an example that the rest of humanity can work towards. As Herbrechter points out, "It appears that Nietzsche's 'revaluation of all values', which dismisses the traditional distinction between truth and falsehood in a moralist and humanist sense, and instead aims to describe a radically new, non-moralist and posthumanist situation, is within reach today" (2). The posthuman condition in *Black Hole* also explores the monstrosity inherent in rejecting conventional humanist ideals. The infected teenagers' physical transformations are not only a manifestation of their posthuman state but also a direct challenge to societal norms of purity and normalcy. The Nietzschean Übermensch seeks to overcome fear and societal constraints to forge a new path, which resonates

with how the characters in *Black Hole* navigate their altered realities. For instance, the makeshift communities formed by the infected in the forest represent an attempt to reconstruct social structures that reflect their posthuman identities. This environment becomes a space where traditional human values dissolve, and the monstrous is normalized, pushing the boundaries of the Übermensch's ability to redefine existence in the face of alienation and chaos.

Nietzsche's Übermensch also embodies the idea of embracing life's suffering and using it as a catalyst for growth and transformation. The infected characters in Burns' work, through their grotesque alterations and the ensuing social rejection, embody this philosophical journey. Rob's experience, characterized by an initial attempt to fit into conventional norms despite his infection, eventually shifts as he begins to find a new sense of belonging and identity among the outcasts. This trajectory echoes Nietzsche's notion that one must embrace and transcend suffering to achieve a higher state of being. The posthuman condition thus becomes a proving ground for the Übermensch, where the monstrous elements of their new forms are not solely a source of despair but a means of redefining existence. The visual and narrative elements of *Black Hole* further emphasize the posthuman and monstrous as spaces for potential transcendence. Burns' use of stark black-and-white art, depicting surreal and unsettling imagery, creates a world where boundaries between the human and monstrous blur. This visual style amplifies the existential themes present in the text, illustrating that the characters' bodily mutations are not simply markers of tragedy but symbols of a new, complex existence. The Übermensch's task of overcoming conventional boundaries to create new meaning is thus reflected in the characters' posthuman struggles, as they seek to reconcile their internal realities with an external world that perceives them as monstrous. The monstrous other slowly move towards a posthuman reality. Moreover, morality throughout the course of the narrative seems overrated if not outright one dimensional. Nietzsche in The Geneology of Morals thinks of a realm "beyond good and evil" and longs to get "a glimpse of a man that justifies the existence of man, a glimpse of incarnate human happiness for the sake of which one may hold fast to the belief in man!" (26). *Black Hole* tells a daunting tale of human metamorphosis. It is as much a tale of ideological reconfiguration as it is of physical transformation. In a way, the graphic narrative charts a journey from subhuman aberration to waking up to the possibilities of a glorified posthuman condition. Their salvation lies in breaking free from their human cages in all shape and form as they slowly drift off into oblivion. The idea of whatever that is human, all of a sudden, seems too limiting in all its vulnerability. The prophet Zarathustra in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* speaks to the people "I teach to you the Overhuman. The human is something that shall be overcome. What

have you done to overcome it?" (11). Like the monsters of yesteryears, the Overman never dies but is reborn time and again in a constant struggle of overcoming the human self. This begs the question what it is to be human in a hetero-normative society in the first place. There seems to be no definite answer. However, there are definitely somewhat varying set of parameters, relative in time and space to which one must adhere. From a discursive standpoint, to some, especially to the "tagged" (a clever reference to the game of tag to label the infected), the idea of being human might appear as a point of privilege that has been denied to them; to others it is more of an existential safe word.

Throughout the course of the narrative, Burns seems to question the sanctity of the human body as is evident in his drawings. The apparent aberrations seem to function as contextual markers that speak of surpassing the human for better or worse and going beyond its ideological constraints. Being a mutant, in an otherwise functional society, thus, creates a sense of difference and all those contextual markers serve as a regular and timely reminder of the same. This allows for a rift in the human experience in general. The rise of the monster and the monstrous put human exceptionalism under the cosh. The mutants in *Black Hole*, likewise, are somewhat forced to go through a complete ideological overhaul. The nonhuman, for that matter, effectively shatters and destabilizes humanist meta-narratives. Their departure from conventional human experience is a testament in itself that the human is no longer at the centre of the universe. Then again, in terms of critical posthumanism, the human is anything but whole; it is a merely limiting ideological construct. Zarathustra, likewise, speaks of the human experience, "The human is a rope, fastened between a beast and Overhuman-a rope over an abyss" (Nietzsche 13). He further elucidates, "what is great in the human is that it is a bridge and not a goal: what can be loved in the human is that it is a going-over and a going-under" (Nietzsche 13). The beast and the Overhuman are thus not mere physical manifestations but much more than that. Nietzsche speaks of the human experience in terms of a journey; it is an ongoing process. A journey that Keith, Chris, Eliza and others like them go through. Years later in *Steppenwolf* Hermann Hesse speaks of a similar experience. Hesse writes, "For it seems that all human beings are born with an absolutely compulsive need to imagine their selves as unified wholes" (62). Building up on the idea of fragmented identities Hesse finds human beings as "not fixed, enduring forms […] but rather experiments, creatures in transition" (64). A Similar sentiment is echoed throughout Burns' graphic novel. *Black Hole* offers up the human body on a platter to be experimented on that in turn further complicates this experience. It serves as potential ground zero upon which discursive understandings are built. The human body in its mutated glory

transcends its physical limitations and ventures into a new space of understanding. Any twisted disfiguration of sort tarnishes an otherwise sacrosanct image of man similar to the God he worships. Mutative changes on a physical level bordering on monstrosity thus open up the human to the possibility of multiple identity formation. Following up on these arguments, it can be justifiably said that such metamorphosis on a literal level of these characters, into something odd, something different, and something other than human, may be viewed as their potential posthumanization. The characters' transformative journeys, marked by physical mutations and societal alienation, echo Nietzsche's call to transcend human limitations and redefine existence. Their struggle to find meaning within their altered states embodies the posthuman condition, where the monstrous becomes both a site of suffering and potential transcendence. The narrative's exploration of these themes underscores the complex interplay between identity, otherness, and the creation of new values in the face of societal rejection and existential challenge.

The Resolution

Going back to Clarke's argument, it can be safely assumed that unlike the nonhuman, the human self operates both by positing what it is and by negating what it is not. In its attempts to be assertive enough the human self assumes multiple identities, consciously or otherwise, to suit the need of the hour. The search never stops. Ironically enough, such an exercise contradicts the very idea of human as a fully operational cognitive whole. This creates a perfect paradox. From a critical point of view, it can also be assumed then that one can never be truly human or rather one has never been truly human in the strict sense of the term. Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* writes, "Before the end of the eighteenth century, man did not exist- any more than the potency of life, the fecundity of labour, or the historical density of language. He is a quite recent creature, which the demiurge of knowledge fabricated with its own hands less than two hundred years ago." (336). In a similar vein, critical posthumanism, questions this very idea of unified existence in man. In that light, it can be justifiably argued that the so-called aberrations and human caricatures in *Black Hole* put such ideological construct of man to test. Once, the idea of man is jeopardized, so is the idea of a monster. What is more interesting is that, genetic mutation in the novel is completely random and offers no governing telos or evolutionary consolation. The "tagged" individuals are no progenitors of alien monstrosities. Theirs is not a glorified mutation, if anything it grosses out the common, rational man who fears yet desires the unknown nevertheless. As it appears, the heroes in question are completely useless to the human narrative. Bodily transformations in *Black Hole*

are neither planned nor experimented upon by eugenics. These manifestations hardly follow any evolutionary footprints to begin with, rather they come off as some accidental and equally bizarre offshoot of the Anthropocene, however speculative though it may seem. Yet, what they represent is somewhat liberating in that the now desecrated image of man questions the redundancies of commonly placed constraints and ideologies. Anatomical distortions, on a deeper level, signify a jailbreak from the binding concerns of society. It pushes the notion of complacency and acceptability regarding the image of man to extreme. How should one define a human being then? Is it the image of man or the idea behind what that image represents? Or is it an uncomfortable coming together of the two? As far as the human body is concerned, N. Katherine Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* rightly points out that "the posthuman view thinks 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" (3). The narrative, thus, problematizes the idea of body further and interrogates its role in identity formation. On a metaphorical level this change entails an awakening- a sort of waking up to one's fragmented identities. It also brings about a loss of an ideal, where the affected individual can no longer identify with some supreme absolute. In their given state, they exist only in transgression. In a more discursive turn, however, the change so to speak spews and validates a counter culture or subculture of sort. So, the posthuman condition per se facilitates or rather forces a change of perspectives-both in regard to how the affected individuals perceive society and how the society perceives them.

Despite the mutation and a subsequent change in physical appearance the infected individuals cling just enough to their past selves that they can neither let go nor can unabashedly march on towards a posthuman future. Hence a third space of existence. This evidently brings one to question where exactly humanity is headed. Is it towards happiness or towards liberation? What starts out as an accident eventually turns out to be a conscious choice for an alternate lifestyle. It rings particularly true for Keith as he goes on a taxing quest to find validation of a self that never had a firm sense of belonging. In a way, their altered bodies present altered points of reference that no longer conform to humanist ideals. Bodies are where apparent binaries are juxtaposed and negotiated. In addition to that, such aberrations serve as labels of resistance in a disenchanted society. As the nonhuman rise up in rebellion; the grandiose of anthropocentric humanism fades in the distance. *Black Hole* navigates the interplay between monstrosity, mutation, and counterculture as mechanisms to question and destabilize entrenched humanist

ideals. By positioning the grotesque and transformed body as a site of ambiguity and potential, Burns challenges the rigid boundaries of identity and social conformity. This third space of existence- where the mutated and marginalized find community and expression- offers a compelling critique of normative structures and invites a reimagining of identity that embraces fluidity and resilience. The novel's narrative thus becomes a profound meditation on the mutable nature of the human condition, revealing the possibilities that emerge when the boundaries of the self are blurred and redefined.

Works Cited:

Burns, Charles. *Black Hole*. Jonathan Cape, 2005.

Clarke, Bruce. "The Nonhuman." *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman*, edited by Bruce Clarke and Manuella Rossini, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 141-152.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)." *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, pp. 3-25.

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Routledge, 1970.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. The University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Herbrechter, Stefan. *Posthuman: A Critical Analysis*. Bloomsbury, 2018.

Hesse, Hermann. *Steppenwolf*. Translated by David Horrocks, Penguin, 2012.

MacCormack, Patricia. "Posthuman Teratology." *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, The University of Minnesota Press, 2020, pp. 522-539.

Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *The Geneology of Morals*. Translated by Horace B. Samuel, Boni and Liveright, 1921.

---. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and Nobody*. Translated by Graham Parkes, Oxford University Press, 2005.