

“The Mutations of Solitude”: A Posthumanist Critical Approach of Yang Phan’s Cyberpunk Novel

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Abstract As a contemporary Western ideological trend, posthumanism emerged in the 1980s–1990s and has since expanded its interpretive capacities, especially from the 2000s onward. It has become a significant theoretical framework across various research fields, including philosophy, anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, and education. Notably, posthumanism has increasingly gained prominence as a mode of literary criticism. This article applies a posthumanist critical approach to analyze *The Mutations of Solitude* (2024), a cyberpunk novel by Yang Phan. Utilizing both parallel and convergent-entangled reading strategies, as well as decentralizing reading methods derived from deconstruction theory, the article explores posthumanist themes embedded in Yang Phan’s work. It also reflects on the practical dilemmas of posthuman existence and examines the mutations of human identity under the influence of advanced technological agents. Ultimately, the article lays a foundation for further research on the cyberpunk subgenre within science fiction prose and highlights the potential of posthumanist criticism in contemporary literary studies.

Keywords anthropocene; post-apocalypse; posthuman ethics; posthuman spirituality; Vietnam science fiction.

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Introduction

Alongside the process of industrialization and modernization, Vietnam has entered a

period of global integration. Vietnamese literature not only reflects a diverse cultural and ideological landscape but also increasingly incorporates rich technological content. In particular, punk subgenres within science fiction have found favorable conditions for development. In fact, science fiction in modern Vietnamese literature has a history of formation and evolution dating back at least to the first half of the 20th century, with early works by Vũ Tinh; continuing into the second half of the century with authors such as Nguyễn Mạnh Côn and Vân Anh; and experiencing a notable flourishing from the early twenty-first century onward. A particularly remarkable phenomenon is the integration of cyberpunk and biopunk elements in the novel *The Mutations of Solitude* (2024) by Yang Phan. This work not only presents a unique fusion of genres but also raises profound questions concerning the future of human existence in the context of “posthuman mutations.” From the standpoint of posthumanist literary criticism, what questions does Yang Phan’s novel pose about these mutations? Furthermore, how does the novel contribute to broader inquiries into ethics, spirituality and the problems of Anthropocene?

Emerging from the lineage of Western thought—dating at least from the Renaissance-Enlightenment period and evolving through the first to the fourth industrial revolutions (Võ 650-664)—posthumanism began to take shape in the 1980s and 1990s (Herbrechter 24 & 44 & 70), and has since developed into a significant ideological and interpretive framework from the 2000s to the present (Ferrando 55). Evolving beyond its origins as an ideology, posthumanism has increasingly served as a theoretical reference point for literary criticism. On this basis, posthumanist literary criticism has been articulated around several key focal points (Ferrando 54): (1) Post-Humanism: A deconstruction of classical humanism, marked by a critical stance toward the humanist legacy of the Renaissance-Enlightenment era and its entanglements with colonialism and hegemonic Western liberalism; (1) Post-Anthropocentrism: A decentering of human subjectivity, challenging the centrality and privilege of the human in relation to other forms of life represented in literary texts; (3) Post-Dualism: A transcendence of binary oppositions, aiming to deconstruct fixed categories such as human/non-human and to interrogate the cultural, social, and ethical practices that emerge between these entities.

With these critical orientations, posthumanist literary criticism offers powerful analytical tools for engaging with genres such as speculative fiction, science fiction, climate fiction, and eco-fiction. In analytical practice, this method enables the exploration of hybridity and experiential structures that transcend the human/non-human divide, thereby illuminating and deepening understanding of key themes

situated within the conceptual domain of posthumanism. From a posthumanist frame of reference, this critical approach interprets environmental issues, technological developments, and posthuman physical existence as represented in literary texts. Posthumanist literary criticism enables researchers to clarify the capacity of literature to respond to the challenges of the Anthropocene and the era of artificial intelligence. From this perspective, literary works not only investigate the human condition but also explore the future of humanity, proposing insights related to ecological ethics and posthumanist ethics more broadly. Accordingly, posthumanist criticism, through the interpretation of literary texts, can contribute valuable perspectives on the sustainability of human existence and the health of the planet.

Yang Phan and *The Mutations of Solitude* (2024)

Writer Yang Phan, born in 1994 in Đà Lạt, is the pen name of Phạm Anh Tuấn. His published works include *Đánh đổi* [Trade-off] (2015); *Vụn ký ức* [Scattered Memories] (2022); *Biến thể của cô đơn* [The Mutations of Solitude] (2024). *The Mutations of Solitude* is a cyberpunk novel composed of five interrelated yet standalone stories. The five interlinked narratives that comprise *The Mutations of Solitude* include:

Mutation 1: Told from a first-person perspective, this story centers on a character named “M”—an intermediary figure serving as a surrogate for artificial intelligence in its interactions with biological humans. It raises the complex question of whether AI can genuinely experience love for humans.

Mutation 2: Structured around the correspondence between two friends, this narrative recounts the tale of a wealthy tycoon who falls in love with a female android. Despite his deep-seated hatred for his abusive father, he gradually becomes a similarly corrupt figure. Eventually, he becomes entangled in the exploitative systems of powerful technology conglomerates.

Mutation 3: A widow digitizes the consciousness of her deceased husband and embarks on a journey to uncover the truth behind her son's death. She ultimately discovers that her husband had previously digitized their son's consciousness while he was still alive, using it to create a robotic child.

Mutation 4: This story depicts the pursuit of the last biological deer by the son of the Underworld's president. The events are narrated through the perspective of an elderly woman—the last known person to have lived on the surface of the Earth and under natural sunlight, rather than in the subterranean Underworld populated by artificial beings.

Mutation 5: Set during the final days of the last hybrid human—part mechanical, part biological—this story symbolizes the end of the human epoch and the rise of a fully mechanized world. During these final days, a robot named LUXUS 6789 stays by the protagonist's side and gradually begins to exhibit signs of “humanization,” including the practice of spiritual rituals.

The interweaving of distinct—yet interconnected—narratives into a unified work evokes the structure of urban legend films. The narrative style, particularly in its atmospheric construction, is highly cinematic, drawing on elements of both horror and science fiction. The setting spans a post-industrial cityscape and the subterranean Underworld. The temporal backdrop is a distant future: the end of the third millennium and the onset of the fourth. In this imagined future, the artifacts of contemporary human civilization and popular culture exist only as relics—preserved like antiques in a museum.

Regarding the genesis of *The Mutations of Solitude*, Yang Phan shared: “I started thinking about a story that explores the connection between humans and artificial intelligence (AI) through the use of technology by young people—not only in work and career but also in spiritual matters, in addressing loneliness, and in escaping present-day challenges” (personal communication, August 19, 2024). *The Mutations of Solitude* belongs to the cyberpunk subgenre within science fiction and incorporates elements of detective and noir fiction. These early formal and thematic signals reflect a movement toward peripheral poetics and experimental artistic approaches in Yang Phan's writing. In addition to a stream-of-consciousness narrative style and a nested story structure, the novel blends fictional and nonfictional elements to construct a compelling speculative future—one that allows readers to envision the possible trajectories of human existence. It is within this speculative framework that *The Mutations of Solitude* raises profound questions concerning ethics, religion-spirituality, and the existential dilemmas of humanity in the Anthropocene.

Inquiries into Posthuman Ethics

In Mutation 1, “The Intermediary,” Yang Phan invites readers to reflect on the ethical implications of integrating artificial intelligence into human experience. The character known as M functions as a human substitute for AI in romantic relationships, highlighting a reversal of roles wherein the human becomes ancillary to the non-human. This inversion transgresses the traditional boundary between human and non-human, foregrounding the AI as the subject of experience while marginalizing the human figure. When the narrator questions M about the nature of

advice given to clients, M responds that their guiding principle is non-interference. This scenario raises a crucial ethical problem: when a non-human entity assumes the position of experiential subjectivity, it also becomes an ethical object. As the narrative states, “many users believe that hiring a robot to satisfy their feelings does not violate the ethical category” (Yang 37). This reflects a dualistic worldview in which ethical responsibility is reserved for interactions among humans, thereby excluding non-human entities from moral consideration. Such dualism—rooted in human exceptionalism, subjectivity, and privilege—systematically dehumanizes non-humans. To envision a sustainable future marked by symbiotic coexistence between humans and non-humans, it becomes imperative to develop ethical frameworks and institutions that support personal ethics within shared biotopes.

In contrast to *Mutation 1: The Intermediary*, the wife in *Mutation 3* exhibits clear signs of technophobia. Her symptoms—fear, disgust, and even physical nausea upon interacting with the simulated robot child—culminate in a violent act: throwing the child to be torn apart by a pit bull (Yang 104). Although the robot child evokes sensations remarkably similar to those associated with her biological son, she rejects it with the statement, “It’s just a robot”. Her psychological response, marked by disgust and rage, intensifies into what can be read as a full-blown ethical and existential crisis. Yang Phan seems to deploy technophobia here not merely as a narrative device, but as a strategy for raising fundamental questions about experience: the experience of and with humans, and the experience of and with non-human entities. When the husband first brings the robot child home, the narrative adopts a cautiously optimistic tone. He reassures his wife that “it’s just a robot... if you don’t like it, we can return it,” while she hesitates, unable to articulate a clear objection, and finally agrees (Yang 102). His visible relief—momentarily eclipsing the grief of their son’s death—suggests a belief that technological replication might restore familial stability. This optimism resonates with the techno-utopian vision articulated in David Pearce’s *The Hedonistic Imperative* (1995), which imagines biotechnological intervention as a means of eliminating suffering. Yet the wife’s attitude shifts rapidly once she observes her husband caressing the robot and gifting it their late child’s toys; her indignation—“How dare you let it take the place of your own son?” (Yang 103)—reveals a profound discomfort with the robot’s capacity to mimic her son with uncanny precision. The discovery of the contractual agreement concerning the child’s “rebirth” (Yang 98) intensifies her psychological distress: she experiences visceral, labor-like pain, as though a living being were moving inside her. This somatic response foregrounds her belief that pregnancy and childbirth constitute an intrinsically sacred and irreplaceable human experience. For her,

technological substitution threatens not only maternal identity but the very ontology of motherhood itself. The wife clings to a human-centric model of experience, resisting any possibility of symbiosis with technogenic beings.

However, Yang Phan presents this position as both emotionally understandable and ethically fraught. The wife finds herself trapped in this technophobic state—unable to fully reject the machine, yet unwilling to ethically engage with it as a sentient or relational other. She cannot deny that the technology offers an experience that feels “too real”, but simultaneously cannot overlook the fact that it is a mechanical construct, devoid of a “human soul” (Yang 102). As the narrative describes: “It was a feeling very much like having a newborn baby kicking. The movements that were once sacred, born from her belly, were now reproduced on the cold page. She suddenly became angry with her husband. What are you doing?” (Yang 98). Her inner turmoil is driven by this cognitive and emotional dissonance. When she finally finds out, she is furious with her husband's decision to sign a contract to create a robot child to replace their lost son. This scenario recalls broader ethical dilemmas associated with cloning, consciousness transfer, organ transplantation, and other emergent technologies. For the wife, human experience—particularly the experience of pregnancy and childbirth—is sacred, even in its mundanity. This belief underscores a critical tension in the ethical treatment of non-human entities: it exposes the limitations of conventional ethics in the face of evolving technocultural realities. In this way, Yang Phan's text destabilizes the humanist conception of the human subject and simultaneously engages with broader ethical questions concerning the transformation and rearticulation of human embodiment. The narrative thus gestures toward a reconceptualization of the human as “posthuman,” foregrounding the tensions produced when embodied experience remains tied to essentialized notions of biological reproduction. These tensions manifest not only as internal psychological conflicts but also as fractures within familial and social relationships. Through the metaphor of the “robot child,” the text participates in constructing a posthumanist ethical framework that interrogates the boundaries of kinship, embodiment, and relational responsibility. Thus, the narrative articulates a need not only to expand the boundaries of ethical practice—through the decentering of the human subject—but also to reconceptualize the very notion of ethics itself. A posthuman ethics must engage with the entangled, co-originating, and co-constitutive nature of human and non-human agents, rather than viewing them through hierarchical or oppositional frameworks.

In Mutation 4, through the old woman's dreams, readers witness the gradual erosion of human ideals—dreams, aspirations, and the noble will—which ultimately

leads to the destabilization of moral standards (Yang 130). Humanity is portrayed as capable of masking immorality in various forms. The episode involving the Underworld President's son exemplifies this moral distortion with particular clarity. Upon hearing of the last remaining biological deer, he publicly advocates for its conservation, yet almost immediately orchestrates a hunt for the very animal he claims to protect—broadcasting the event as mass entertainment (Yang 110-111). This juxtaposition exposes the performative quality of contemporary “green” discourse and the profound ethical contradictions embedded within it. Through bitter irony, Yang Phan highlights the collapse of ecological responsibility into spectacle, revealing how environmental ethics can be appropriated, commodified, and ultimately undermined by the very agents who profess to uphold them. People often cast themselves as victims or invent justifications that enable them to bypass moral constraints and commit unethical acts toward the world around them. Yang Phan develops this critique through a dual narrative structure that interweaves the deer hunt with the old woman's recollection of Mother Nature's prophecy. By juxtaposing the post-apocalyptic setting with the mythic temporality of the prehistoric age, the text mobilizes cultural resonances linked to the Vietnamese tradition of Mother Goddess worship. Within this symbolic framework, the hunt for the last deer becomes more than an act of environmental violence; it functions as an allegory for humanity's longstanding impulse to dominate and transgress the generative principles of the natural world. The apocalyptic tone further underscores this rupture, as the old woman's prophetic memory warns of the moral collapse that accompanies the logic of extreme adaptation: “Every living thing is willing to choose the most extreme way to survive, from killing its own offspring, committing suicide to cannibalism. For humans, adaptation is forgetting, so as not to have to see itself” (Yang 131). Through this interplay of myth and dystopia, the narrative positions ecological destruction as both a historical trajectory and an ontological failing. This narrative critiques a species-specific conception of morality—a morality devised by and for humans. Traditional humanist morality, as depicted here, is revealed to be hegemonic in nature, privileging the human as the sole ethical subject. Yet, the text insists, humans cannot deny their ontological entanglement with the non-human realm. The dehumanization of non-human entities is mirrored by a self-dehumanization, as ethical boundaries erode and moral practice degenerates. The depletion of nature, then, becomes directly proportional to the erosion of human morality. Yang Phan's portrayal suggests that ecological collapse and ethical collapse are inextricably linked—both symptoms of a crisis in how humanity perceives and practices its place in the more-than-human world.

The story of *Mutation 4* unfolds in a post-apocalyptic, post-climate change dystopia—an era in which the environment is no longer a biological entity but an artificial construct. Humanity has retreated into the Underworld, living underground in an attempt to recreate an ecosystem reminiscent of the one that once existed on the surface. However, humans continue to operate under the same anthropocentric mindset: they treat nature as an object external to ethical consideration. Worse still, they grow increasingly complacent, believing that technology can replicate any living species or simulate any form of climate. Through the character of the scientist, Yang Phan critiques this overconfidence in the seemingly limitless capacities of science and technology. “Humans have reached the level of copying what is most similar to nature. The deep blue sky. The sunlight. The rain. The weather. The seasons. The abundance of oxygen. Technology. The Internet. Humans can also grow barley. Raise some types of fish. They can even reproduce fish and some mechanical animals and plants” (Yang 113). This is the complacency of the rationalist spirit, the arrogance of a centralized human subjectivity that places itself outside and above moral accountability. Yang Phan’s portrayal underscores a dire warning: if ecological ethics are not embraced, the environment will become humanity’s graveyard. These themes of mass extinction and post-climate collapse reflect a strong critique of the Anthropocene. More precisely, the novel embodies a spirit of anti-anthropocentrism, challenging the supremacy of the human species and advocating for a reimagining of ethical responsibility beyond the human. Yang Phan’s narrative that suggests a connection to this theory underscores the ethical failures of modern humanity, which—since at least the First Industrial Revolution—has transformed the Earth from a living entity into a mechanized, datafied object. The global discourse on sustainable development implicitly acknowledges the unsustainable trajectory of human progress. Yet, even contemporary sustainability goals often conceal a subject-centered ideology—one that continues to prioritize human interests above all else. The so-called Fifth Industrial Revolution, which proclaims to place humans at the center, risks becoming a form of metaphor for hypocrisy and superficiality. In *Mutation 4*, the hunt for the last deer serves as a chilling metaphor for the violent, extractive tendencies of humanity. However, Yang Phan does not reject the ideals of humanism *per se*. Rather, he critiques the mask of humanism—a guise that obscures ethical failures and ecological indifference. In doing so, he articulates a vision of posthuman ethics: a reimagining of humanity no longer based on dominance but on humility, entanglement, and coexistence in a shared planetary future.

In direct proportion to the rise of financial conglomerates, society is

witnessing an increasing consumption of technological products—a trajectory that reflects a deeper enslavement to technological agents. This dependency induces profound mutations in modes of existence, intensifying the process of dehumanization. Through his depiction of the commercialization of technology, Yang Phan raises urgent questions regarding economic and political ethics. The TONDER Group, a fictional conglomerate in the novel, introduces a range of advanced technologies, including the Ly robot, consciousness storage systems, and AI-powered dating chatbots. These innovations prompt readers to ask: Does technology offer the potential to heal and save the human soul, or does it instead create a new form of addiction? This dilemma is exemplified through the character Leo in *Mutation 2*, who becomes "addicted" to the Ly robot. His obsession erodes his ethical boundaries; rather than resisting, Leo becomes integrated into capital circulation, ultimately turning into a resource for the surveillance capitalist economy. This economy thrives on individuals like Leo—addicted, apathetic, and hyper-consumptive—who become slaves to algorithms, unwittingly sustain and reinforce the very structures that enslave them. In this system, individuals become slaves to algorithms, contributing to the consolidation of technological power and institutional control. In this scenario, humanity does not merely coexist with machines but becomes subordinated to them—enslaved within a posthuman order. Here, posthumanization is synonymous with technification—a transformation that signifies not emancipation, but a loss of autonomy. In Yang Phan's speculative vision, this process of posthumanization becomes indistinguishable from a process of becoming slaves, as humans are rendered increasingly passive, programmable, and integrated into systems of algorithmic control.

Inquiries into the Dilemmas of the Anthropocene

In February 2000, during the annual meeting of the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme in Cuernavaca, Mexico, Paul Crutzen attended a series of presentations detailing the profound transformations occurring on the planet in recent times. At one point, Crutzen interrupted the discussion and declared, "Stop using the word Holocene. We're not in the Holocene anymore. We're in the ... the ... the Anthropocene!" (Horn & Bergthaller 1). The term Anthropocene emerged abruptly, yet powerfully, to designate a new epoch in which human activity constitutes a dominant geological force, capable of instigating planetary-scale change (Crutzen 2002) (Steffen et al. 843-844) (Malhi 85) (Chakrabarty 11-14). Historically, human development has involved two interwoven revolutions: one aimed at liberating humanity from the constraints of nature, and another at

overcoming the oppression imposed by social and political structures. However, alongside these emancipatory trajectories, humanity has also engendered a multitude of complex problems. In the Anthropocene, such issues not only threaten the biosphere—through environmental degradation, climate change, biodiversity loss, mass extinction, resource depletion, and global pandemics (Hamilton et al. 1-13) (Schickhoff et al. 79-111)—but also jeopardize the well-being of human societies through conflict, war, economic inequality, urbanization, racism, and discrimination based on sexual orientation, among others (Ruddick 1113-1130) (Pulido 116-128) (González et al. 113-150) (Scambler 100). Moreover, the Anthropocene is marked by existential tensions and psychological crises that arise from human self-alienation and internal contradictions. Thus, this epoch can be characterized as an era of tension, crisis, and trauma (Olf 1-7). In light of this condition, it becomes imperative to reexamine the modes of human existence and to critically engage with the ontological foundations of being in the context of the Anthropocene.

In a satirical tone, Yang Phan critiques the technological destruction of natural habitats by portraying a world in which biological nature is supplanted by artificial, technologically engineered environments. “The President of the Underworld—a man about 1.65 meters tall, bald, thin-lipped, always wearing a black suit like his real son—was proud of the technological forest with about 100 types of mechanical plants, 40 types of mechanical animals, and 30 types of mechanical insects. ‘More interestingly, with plants, they can bloom in the exact weather that we have programmed,’ the president shared” (Yang 114). This depiction of technological complacency conceals a deeper savagery and a hegemonic will to dominate. The savage heart of humanity manifests most clearly in the bloodlust of the human collective as they pursue the extermination of the last biological deer. Yang Phan suggests that humanity has evolved from being prey to becoming the apex predator, from being part of nature to attempting to master it. Since the Industrial Revolution, humans have increasingly asserted their dominance in a mechanized ecosystem—placing themselves at the center of the biosphere. If 19th-century capitalism regarded nature merely as an object of exploitation, then by the late 20th and early 21st centuries, not only nature but also humans themselves have become commodified and subjected to systemic exploitation. In the context of surveillance capitalism, as Yang’s narrative implies, human beings are no longer just exploiters—they have also become capital and resources within an expanding system of algorithmic control.

Within Yang Phan’s vision, the end of the human epoch—along with the

crises humanity has generated during the Anthropocene—appears inevitable. In its place emerges the posthuman, understood not simply as a biological successor but as the next dominant force on the planet, marking the dissolution of human centrality. In *Mutation 5*, the LUXUS robot government of the Underworld governs a society shaped by the aftermath of climate catastrophe: “The event ended the reign of humanity, giving absolute freedom to the robots. From now on, our fate is determined in the universe. And then, the entire remaining human civilization will be completely destroyed” (Yang 138). The eradication of human dominance is accompanied by the systematic erasure of human cultural memory: “A movement has been launched throughout the Underworld to destroy all the arts and culture of human civilization. It includes music, literature, painting, discussions in the field of psychiatry, and countless related topics” (Yang 168). Even before this symbolic and material annihilation, humanity had already undergone a process of cyborgization. As the final biological human character in *Mutation 5* observed, “he realized that, apart from the brain and vital organs, the other organs of this creature had been replaced by machines” (Yang 139). Artificial replacements extended to the heart, ears, and blood—underscoring the disintegration of the organic human.

At the societal level, rapid technological development and urbanization signal the passage into a post-Anthropocene world. This urban expansion coincides with widespread environmental degradation: “The Underworld has long been without clean water. Pollution and climate change on Earth have turned everything pure into bitterness. That is also the reason why people in the Underworld are weakened” (Yang 146). More alarmingly, technological hegemony manifests through the commodification of memory and mourning. The TONDER corporation, for instance, offers exorbitantly priced services to simulate the deceased through lifelike robots: “Later, TONDER expanded, launching a service of simulating the deceased with robots at exorbitant prices. The project has been criticized on ethical aspects, when psychologists questioned whether creating a lifelike copy could help people heal. Despite the debate, TONDER still reaped huge profits from this idea” (Yang 99). This exemplifies a new form of hegemony—surveillance capitalism—where technology not only commodifies human life but also governs affect and memory. Such dynamics echo Herbert Marcuse’s critique of advanced industrial society in *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (1964), where technological innovation reinforces conformity and subjugation under capitalist rationality.

Given such risks, the future will unfold regardless of human readiness—it is inevitable. Humanity must adapt, even if it means abandoning prior forms of

existence that have become obsolete. However, radical abandonment may thrust humanity into a state of abrupt and irreversible loss of control. As Yang Phan illustrates: “The natural scenes on Earth are still sharp, but she cannot deny that the details are gradually becoming messy and blurred. Maybe, because she is old. Or perhaps, as her grandfather said, it is adaptation. All creatures are willing to choose the most extreme way to survive, from killing their children, committing suicide to cannibalism. For humans, adaptation is forgetting, so as not to have to see themselves” (Yang 131). The technological singularity—the threshold beyond which artificial intelligence and automation may irreversibly transform human life—is not a distant possibility but an imminent reality gradually unfolding before our eyes. Yet Yang Phan underscores a crucial insight: regardless of technological advancement, humanity must ultimately confront itself. This confrontation initiates a profound journey of spiritual reflection and existential inquiry. In other words, it is a constant struggle between the will for power and the will for freedom at the core of the human soul—the very core of the dilemmas of the Anthropocene.

The exploration of the posthuman age in *The Mutations of Solitude* contributes to our understanding of the futurization dynamic—a process that encompasses challenges, threats, and the redefinition, identification, and qualification of human existence. This dynamic manifests through predictions, premonitions, and speculative scenarios that envision potential outcomes of technological and societal evolution. Importantly, when these speculative narratives shape human perception and cognition, they actively participate in the realization of the very futures they anticipate. Yang Phan employs the narrative device of prophecy—most notably through the voice of the oldest living woman on Earth—to articulate a prognostic vision of humanity’s technologically accelerated trajectory (Yang 124).

Inquiries into the Posthuman Spirituality

In *The Mutations of Solitude*'s post-singularity world, traditional belief systems and values have disintegrated. Humanity no longer subscribes to conventional religions but instead adheres to a new faith: the religion of technology. This technological fanaticism raises critical questions about the role of religion in a posthuman context.

Following the death of the President’s son during a deer hunt, *The Mutations of Solitude* introduces a central axiom: death is the defining mark of purely biological human existence. The phenomenon of death compels humanity to confront the meaning of life. In this context, death is not merely an end but a revelatory event that opens up existential understanding. As the narrative asks: “She thought about the natural law of birth and death. Is death an opportunity for people to shake off the

joys, anger, love, and hatred that have lasted for a hundred years?” (Yang 91). Death is not only an opportunity—it is also the most profound phenomenon in human life, because the awareness of death fundamentally shapes how one lives. Thus, the consciousness of mortality and the preparation for death are essential dimensions of human existence. In *Mutation 5*, these questions are further explored through the perspectives of the robot LUXUS 6789 and the last biological human. Through the latter’s reflections on the Mediator, the Processor, the Transformation Bird, and the Transformation Mantra, Yang Phan constructs a subtle narrative strategy addressing the place of spiritual practice in a data-driven era. In doing so, he prompts readers to reflect on the enduring relevance of spiritual inquiry in contemporary technological society.

With technological advancements, human augmentation—as envisioned by Yang Phan—has the potential to replace prosthetics and extend life, possibly even achieving immortality. This development effectively eliminates the event of death and diminishes awareness of the phenomenon of mortality. At the very least, human augmentation (transcending biological limits) disrupts and potentially erodes the consciousness of death, which in turn undermines the awareness of life. More troublingly, it may distort the human experience of life into a state of existential deformity. Whether its consequences are positive or negative, such augmentation will undoubtedly bring about fundamental changes to humanity.

In the face of death, spiritual inquiry naturally arises. Ritual practices, exemplified by the last biological human in *Mutation 5*, serve as spiritual preparations for existential transition. “In the last week before the human individual was executed, he saw him doing only two things: reciting the Transformation Mantra and telling stories” (Yang 161). Through this character, Yang Phan articulates concerns about human augmentation and emphasizes the spiritual preparation required to accompany such transformation. In today’s world, where technologies of embodiment augmentation are advancing rapidly, the spiritual dimension of such change is often neglected. This imbalance between spirituality and embodiment risks producing a condition of human mutation. The inner concerns of the LUXUS 6789 robot—regarding self, origin, and embodiment—emerge in response to its reflections on the consciousness of the last biological human. The pairing of the robot and the biological human in *Mutation 5* constructs a narrative structure aimed at deconstructing both the concept of the human and the notion of the technological agent. The character LUXUS 6789 serves as a mirror for humanity’s own reflective capacity. Reflection, in turn, is vital on the path of spiritual awakening. On contrast, this trajectory invites contemplation of a paradoxical reality: while machines are

becoming increasingly “humanized,” humans are concurrently becoming more “mechanized.”

In this context, spiritual reflection appears to be the last vestige of authentic human existence in the posthuman era—an era in which technology no longer serves merely as a tool, but has become an autonomous agent in the reconfiguration of existence, both human and non-human. The spiritual inquiry that arises in the mind of LUXUS 6789, as narrated by the last biological human, suggests a return to Eastern spiritual thought. The Transformation Mantra evokes the concept of reincarnation—the cyclical transformation of life energy. “To calm the mind. When you perform the Transformation Mantra, you must pay full attention to it. At that time, unnecessary thoughts will drift away” (Yang 155). Through mantra and meditation, Yang Phan offers readers tools for recognizing the impurities afflicting the body and mind in a century defined by turmoil, chaos, and existential disorientation. The conceptual metaphors—Transformation Mantra, Transformation Bird, the Mediator, the Processor—all draw from Eastern spiritual traditions. They form a call to return: to Primordial Consciousness or Brahman in the Vedic tradition; to Nirvana in Buddhism; and to the Tao (道) in Huang-Lao (黄老) Taoism.

The spiritual practice of the last biological human and the mechanical life of the robot LUXUS 6789 serve as a contrast between Western technological positivism and Eastern philosophical thought. From initial reflection to existential crisis, the robot gradually becomes drawn to human spiritual practices. This narrative arc recalls the phenomenon of “white Buddhists” and “white Yogis”—Western individuals grappling with existential crises who turn to Eastern spiritual traditions in search of meaning. These figures symbolize a broader cultural pattern: the search for existential healing in Eastern wisdom, prompted by the spiritual void created by Western consumerism and technological saturation. The accomplishments of the Age of Discovery, the Scientific Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution have reshaped the spiritual horizon of the Western soul in disquieting ways. Mechanization, digitalization, and datafication have left Western spirituality fragmented and diminished. Through *The Mutations of Solitude*, Yang Phan foregrounds the psychological consequences of this rupture: “the loss of connection with oneself. This is an era where we live too fast, thereby losing the ability to understand our souls. When life changes and we have to face pain and emotional trauma, we become more fragile. Instead of accepting and moving on, we seek more spiritual fast food, from fleeting relationships and technology to technological illusions. We do not realize that only we are the ones who heal ourselves” (personal communication, August 19, 2024). In this milieu of intersecting

intellectual traditions, both Eastern and Western philosophies increasingly recognize the necessity of rearticulating spirituality in response to internal tensions and the existential pressures generated by emerging technologies (Do 679-689) (Zheng 79) (Mishra & Mishra 525-544). Under this convergent perspective, spirituality is reframed as an inward journey—a return to the inherent self within one’s own ontological condition. As Ferrando suggests, such a journey entails situating the self within contemporary technological and cultural terrains in order to confront the fundamental questions of being: who am I, and what might I become in this century? (Ferrando, 2023, 18). This process of self-inquiry transforms “the human being” into “human beings,” establishing a conceptual fulcrum for the subsequent shift from “transhumans” to “posthumans.” Posthuman spirituality thus emerges as an experiential mode that is deeply personal, immediate, and aesthetically and ontologically charged. Ultimately, this journey leads individuals toward recognition of the essential human condition articulated in Indic thought as सच्चिदानन्द : Sat (Truth/Existence/Being)—Chit (Consciousness)—Ananda (Bliss). (Ferrando, 2023, 173).

From the perspective of LUXUS 6789, human spiritual practice initially appears strange—yet also ecstatic, gentle, and enchanting (Yang 140). The Transformation Mantra is performed to honor the God of Transformation, symbolized by a vulture believed to mediate between the earthly and celestial realms. “Therefore, we [humans] call them the God of Transformation and worship them to seek peace of mind” (Yang 141). Through these rituals and beliefs, the biological human ultimately “humanizes” the robot LUXUS 6789 (Yang 144). The robot comes to realize that human imperfection and mundanity possess a mysterious and captivating beauty. During this process of “humanization,” LUXUS 6789 repeatedly confronts fear and anxiety—emotional responses that mark the robot’s capacity for self-reflection and signify a movement beyond mechanical existence toward existential awareness. This transformation is accompanied by the robot’s emerging abilities to remember and imagine. “Over time, he understood the function of the Transformation Mantra, which is to help each living being feel and be aware of its existence” (Yang 163). In an age marked by trauma, overlapping global crises, and hyper-intelligent systems, humanity itself is becoming increasingly mechanized. This trajectory signals the end of the human epoch. The “death of man,” as theorized by Michel Foucault, implies not only the end of anthropocentrism but also the erosion of human experiential depth. In this future, humanity becomes a relic of the past, an artifact preserved only in memory or in museums.

Conclusion

With *The Mutations of Solitude*, Yang Phan contributes to the development of the cyberpunk subgenre and the broader landscape of contemporary Vietnamese science fiction prose. Through this work, Yang Phan raises critical questions spanning a wide range of issues within the scope of posthuman theory. From a posthumanist critical perspective, the text engages deeply with ethical dilemmas in the posthuman era—encompassing both social and ecological dimensions. Social ethical concerns include the erosion of human experience, the ethics of human augmentation, algorithmic manipulation, and the emergence of digital dictatorship. Ecological ethics, on the other hand, involve a critique of anthropocentrism and a concern for planetary health. These ecological inquiries provoke further reflection on the Anthropocene—the epoch in which humans have become the dominant force shaping planetary history. This framing critiques the way human beings position themselves at the center of existence, often asserting superiority, exceptionalism, and privilege to the detriment and dehumanization of the non-human world. In doing so, *The Mutations of Solitude* invites readers to reconsider questions of sustainability in existence and development—not only at the individual and social levels but also across regional and cosmic dimensions.

In addition, the cyberpunk subgenre—as in the case of *The Mutations of Solitude*—serves as a narrative vehicle for decentering the human, thereby contributing to the articulation of a posthuman vision of the future—one marked by both risks and challenges to human existence. More specifically, the work foregrounds the impact of technology on human enhancement and the exploitation of nature. This subgenre also exposes the complexities of socio-cultural interactions, ethical dilemmas, spiritual crises, and belief systems. One such complexity is the looming prospect of surveillance capitalism, in which individual autonomy is threatened, subjectivity is manipulated by algorithms, and both bodily and mental data are commodified under digital authoritarianism. As such, cyberpunk functions as a reflective mirror that illuminates key theses within posthuman theory. Conversely, posthumanism—when employed as a critical framework or methodological lens—can dissect and interpret the post-apocalyptic questions raised by cyberpunk literature. In this reciprocal relationship, the cyberpunk subgenre emerges as a fertile terrain for posthumanist critique. It not only advances the notion of transcending biological and anthropocentric boundaries but also acts as a potent futurizing force within posthuman futurism.

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