

Received: 9 April 2024 Accepted: 20 May 2024  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/joph.v4i3.3312>

## Clarke, Bruce. (Ed.) (2020). *Posthuman Biopolitics: The Science Fiction of Joan Slonczewski*. Palgrave.

Soorya Alex<sup>1</sup>

*Posthuman Biopolitics* (2021) is a thoroughly researched collection of critical studies, which focuses solely on the science fiction novels of microbiologist Joan Slonczewski within the framework of posthumanism. These critical studies amply and substantially throw light upon the posthuman world of biological/ecological upheavals. They take the readers on a futuristic journey into the narrative diversities of liminal worlds where humans coexist with other organisms, actors, and objects on an egalitarian plane of existence. Bruce Clarke's book anthologizes the novel age of the Anthropocene and provides fictional insights that texture Slonczewski's work, through a diverse range of essays contributed to by a galaxy of academics, including; Christy Tidwell, Chris Pak, Derek J. Thiess, Sherryl Vint, Colin Milburn, and Alexa T. Dodd. Moreover, Clarke's own interview with Slonczewski enriches the book's exploration by emphasizing the grim yet imperative realization that the world we inhabit teeters on the brink of environmental cataclysm. As contributors highlight, Slonczewski's works challenge conventional boundaries between humans and nonhumans through the lens of posthumanism, prompting her readers to critically examine notions of agency and subjectivity. Within the framework of biopolitics and biopower, her works focus on symbiosis and explore how the control and regulation of biology and bodies extends beyond human populations to encompass all species, including animals and plants. Ethical considerations surrounding technological advancements, such as genetic engineering, gene hacking, and environmental degradation are central themes in her narratives, emphasizing the interconnectedness between the human world, technology, and the environment.

The novels of Slonczewski offer a spectral focus on ecology, posthuman life, biopolitics, and involve a great blurring of boundaries that divides the worlds of the human, of animals, and of microorganisms. This volume traces the evolution of Slonczewski's thoughts across her novels from her very early work such as *A Door into Ocean* to her most recent publication *The Highest Frontier* (2011), arguing that Slonczewski's novels exhibit excellence that reaches far beyond feminism to gesture towards a new culture of human behavior. *The Highest Frontier* (2011) is a near future science fiction novel intricately concerned with the politics of habitation, which charts new technologies and developments. As here, Slonczewski's works stand as cautionary tales that ask readers to reconsider the after-effects of environmental degradation, power operations, ardent use of biotechnological advancements, and so forth. Her work also has breadth; another seminal work by is her textbook *Microbiology: An Evolving Science* (co-authored with Jon W. Foster and Erik R. Zinzer).

---

\* This article was published through an open-access model that charged no article processing fees.

<sup>1</sup> Affiliation. Soorya Alex, Doctoral Fellow, Department of Studies in English, Dr Janaki Ammal Campus, Kannur University, Kerala, India. E-mail: [sooryaalex7s@gmail.com](mailto:sooryaalex7s@gmail.com)



The volume's chapters are formed of critical posthumanist engagements with intersectional orientations; they comprise discursive deductions arrived at with interdisciplinary research in the areas of science and cultural imagination.

The first chapter of the book is an interview with Joan Slonczewski where Clarke brings into the focal purview the novelist's fictional and scientific interests, such as humanity and microbial categories, derived from hybrid biological matrices like microbiomes, probiotics, symbiosis, extremophile metabolisms, and corporate medical concerns. In her fiction, daily interaction and contact between the human and nonhuman world have transmuted the ecological planes as microbiomes or multi genomic organisms, and viruses are gradually becoming a part of human microbiomes with chromosomes being used to make our own viruses. The corporate medical complex becomes the background of Slonczewski's hard science fiction by restraining and controlling our bodies through biopolitics. The question that reigns supreme across all her novels is what it means to be human in the coming ages; her works all possess the revelatory and visionary tone that characterizes the genre of science fiction. Her works emerge as critiques of the inherent ontological malaise woven into the fabric of anthropomorphic power politics within science. Slonczewski's fictional worlds are constituted with humans, primates, gorilla hybrids, cyborgs, automated human machines, and microbes. Slonczewski expresses the idea that even these microbes' shapes become characters and subjects of her narrative. For her, our society is a microbial society where humans are considered as multi-genomic organisms, and microbes subsequently bear a prominent role as characters in her fictions. The discourse of posthumanism itself has shifted away from a narrow focus on robots and cyborgs towards a broader consideration of a more-than-human world. This shift involves transcending the traditional boundaries of human-centered perspectives to encompass a nonhuman cosmos, with a particular emphasis on the planetary system.

In the volume's second chapter, "Posthuman Narration in the Elysium Cycle", Clarke's primary focus lies upon the exploration of the science fiction novels of *The Elysium Cycle*. This chapter delves into the social dynamics between various characters, addressing disparities in class, ethnicity, and religion, while also examining a spectrum of existence from microscopic organisms to humans and beyond. As Clarke underscores, her *Elysium Cycle* contains works of great profundity and fascinatingly provocative science fictional studies such as *A Door into Ocean* (1986)—winner of the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, *Daughter of Elysium* (1993), *The Children Star* (1998) and *Brain Plague* (2000), all of which deal with coexistence. The series entails a decentering from human-centric perspectives towards an exploration of the interconnections between social organization, political action, and personal autonomy within the context of the nonhuman or inorganic world. These novels construct a coherent narrative with a shared history, forged within the context of this posthuman cosmos.

The third chapter, authored by Christy Tidwell and titled "A Door into Ocean as a Model for Feminist Science", argues for *A Door into Ocean* as a work of feminist science fiction which is still politically relevant a quarter of a century later. *A Door into Ocean* is distinguished for inclusively encompassing the domain of science as a way of comprehending the world, whilst incorporating a critical feminist perspective on science itself. The epistemology of science is often faced with the critical issues of ethics, morality, and humanness. It efficaciously brings within its narrative ambit women's scientific contributions, challenges to gender related dichotomies, and political and ethical ramifications. Tidwell elaborates on the conflicts and dichotomies in the novel that are exposed through the planetary settings of Valedon and Shora; whilst Valedon represents a conventional generic setting with age-old hierarchies of gender, military authority and capitalism, Shora is a



heterotrophic ocean world of female species that is biologically and socially well adapted. Valedon culture forges ahead with violence and practices of exclusion that allegorically allude to the genocidal annihilation of Native American clans in the USA—the Shorans or Sharers live on rafts and have webbed fingers and physical resources that empower them to live in harmony with the oceanic ecosystem. Tidwell looks upon the Sharer’s world as a heterotrophic feminist world that advances the cause of women’s struggles through the amateur sciences of midwifery and indigenous epistemologies of nature and natural self-sustaining foods. Slonczewski posits an alternate vision of science to include the accomplishments of women and indigenous communities in such a way that women obtain a niche and representation in the world of science. As a biopolitical novel, *A Door into Ocean* streamlines the natural habitat and poses several pertinent questions that disturb the edifice of hierarchical conventions of male oriented systems. All of the characters and action in the world of the Sharers espouse the ideology of sharing natural resources and the respectability of sustaining life on the planet for better life and a healthy future. Tidwell’s study also gives due emphasis to the linguistic constructs of this ideology of sharing and how it radiates the ethical spirit of sharing and responsible living, with due importance on morality. Through the discussion of metaphors, the ethics of nonviolence are dovetailed in a world with feminist concerns.

In the fourth chapter “‘Then Came Pantropy’: Grotesque Bodies, Multispecies Flourishing, and Human–Animal Relationships in *A Door into Ocean*”, Chris Pak investigates the adaptational human strategies known as terraforming. Terraforming involves the modification of Earth’s space and pantropy, alongside the reconfiguration of human bodies to adapt towards to the natural environments common to Earth. He examines how the grotesque symbiogenetic community of Shora challenges the colonial forces that indulge in the terraforming and exploitation of the earth and its ecology. In Pak’s investigation of the workings of the grotesque in the collection of multispecies communities in the novel, the objective is to thrash out an aesthetic paradigm in the biopolitics of animal studies. Adopting the ideas advanced by Sherryl Vint in her essay “Animal Studies in the Era of Biopower”, the writer examines the ways in which the grotesque opens up possibilities for the formulation of posthuman taxonomic categories. The Sharer community maintains symbiotic and sustainable relationships with nature and natural creatures like clickflies who facilitate their modes of communication in the water-bound existence. In the Bakhtinian sense, a sort of carnivalesque uncrowning happens when the clickflies become an inevitable part of the lives of the Sharers. The colonially rapacious Valens represented by the character Spinel—a male freak—and Lady Berenice encounter the harmonious living of the Sharer community in sync with the strange little creatures. Quoting Sherry Vint, Slonczewski’s world poses an exemplary structure for conceiving biopolitics and human animal interactions. There are numerous dichotomies of existence found in the relationship between these two communities with conflicting interests of life.

To conclude, the essays compiled in *Posthuman Biopolitics* are an excellent vantage point for scholars and researchers pursuing work academically or otherwise on posthumanism and science fiction, from which they can gain a better understanding of Joan Slonczewski’s work. The bizarre spatio-temporal realities, new materialities of existence, and posthuman ontologies jointly reconfigure the world of humans, animals and natural organisms. Consequently, readers encounter a perplexing yet compelling replacing of conventional categories of the world and natural life throughout her novels. This is a highly socially and politically relevant book that enriches readers academically, shedding light on the forces at work all around us. Especially during troubling times of fighting various viruses, our lives are in a puzzling condition, challenging us to survive and navigate as both humans and posthumans. The book *Posthuman Biopolitics* is a profound and valuable contribution to the fields of science fiction, biopolitics, and posthumanist inquiry.

## References

- Braidotti, Rosi. (2013). *The Posthuman*. Polity Press.
- Clarke, Bruce. (Ed.). (2020). *Posthuman Biopolitics: The Science Fiction of Joan Slonczewski*. Palgrave.
- Nayar, Pramod K. (2013). *Posthumanism*. Polity Press.

