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# INHUMAN HUMAN NATURE: LOIS LOWRY'S THE GIVER*

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## Abstract

Lois Lowry (1937-    ) is a prolific author having a number of books – *Number the Stars* (1989), *Gathering Blue* (2000), and *Messenger* (2004) – and awards especially in the field of children's literature. Her significant science fiction novel, *The Giver* (1993), presents a social panorama in order to thoroughly analyze the society's mechanical life style. As an example of dystopia, the author delineates a systematically organized social order where people abide by the rules naturally. Nevertheless, Jonas, the protagonist and Receiver of Memory, is the first person to discern robotic/mechanical order in the society which is transformed into "sameness" eliminating all individual differences and emotions such as pain, happiness, cold, colors, and so on. Therefore, Receiver of Memory storing past memories of the society is the only one who is aware of human characteristics. The crucial point is that human figure, far from the current one, displays inhuman (non-human) features without memories and hope. Mechanical association between individuals and social structure ascertains artificial form of life in which there is no chance to choose. After learning truths behind the strict order, Jonas is in pursuit of real world with all kinds of feelings; however, his recognition is not able to change the whole society. Hence, this paper aims at delving into the relationship between human nature and society with regard to posthuman approach and inhuman human form in accordance with transformation of human nature.

**Keywords:** Dystopia, Memory, Inhuman, Transformation, Posthumanism

## 1. Introduction

Lois Lowry (1937-    ) is a notable American author in children's literature in spite of a range of difficult issues such as racism, Holocaust, and illness. Her dystopian novel, *The Giver* (1993), is one of the auspicious works in contemporary science fiction with its reflection of distinct social order although it is categorized as children's literature due to simple manner of narration. In her alternative dystopia, she creates a perfectly processed society in which human beings live as an object without individual differences, emotions, and ideas. With "sameness", namely disregarding of all environmental and individual incongruities such as colors, cold, figurative meaning in language, seasons, and so on, the society leads a mechanical life style. Everything having potential of being able to damage this ideal mechanism is forbidden to access except Receiver of Memory. In order to prevent people from pain, mistakes, false choices, unhappiness, Receiver of Memory assumes all responsibility of the society by storing memories

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of humanity. Jonas, 11 year-old protagonist and future Receiver of Memory, discerns the details behind the ideal illusion of social order during his training, in order words, the discrimination between being a human and a part of robotic process is blatantly obvious. He undergoes a transformation experiencing emotions he never tastes before through receiving memories from The Giver. Memories are vital for his changing perception of real life. However, the rest of the society is oblivious to the essence of life and only focuses on the strict rules of social order. Hence, the author lures the reader's attention into different manner of life in which human figure, far from the contemporary one, plays an obscure role as an individual. In his path to discover true world, Jonas questions real life full of tough obstacles and his perfectly processed society without humane characteristics. The ideal society he lives is only based on perfectly processed social order. Members of the society are obliged to do unconsciously whatever the Elders decide for them. People are able to examine neither the choices of Elders nor their positions in the society. As a result, human nature alters due to the environmental features, in other words, solely being a part of whole means. Therefore, evolution of human nature through this mechanical social order and Jonas in particular, will be perused from the point of posthuman perspective which elucidates contemporary human in the light of technological developments.

## 2. What is Posthumanism?

Posthumanism is a multidisciplinary approach embracing different fields of study such as art and philosophy. It appears through the end of 20th century as a counter idea of humanism. Humanism's anthropocentric understanding that emphasizes human's potential power transforms into a comprehensive conception. Contrary to human supremacy, posthumanism portrays a human figure with all of his incompetence and in accord with society and culture. Beyond the notion of human's isolated and heroic position over the rest of the species accepted for centuries, this is a new perspective decentring human. The approach draws the attention to human technology relationship. Technological developments especially in 20th century lead to a great transformation of both human being and society. The use of technology in every area of social order forms a new way of living: technoculture. The combination of human, technology, and culture constructs the basis of posthumanist point of view that the contemporary world is already integrated with technoculture with a number of examples like artificial intelligence, attempts to settle on Mars, body transplantation, gene repairment, and so on. As a result, Herbrechter (2013, p. 9) highlights the role of human being compatible with the society: "This approach only becomes posthumanist when the human is no longer seen as the sole hero of a history of emancipation, but as a (rather improbable but important) stage within the evolution of complex life forms." Human condition globally approved is under construction within the technoculture of the contemporary world.

However, statements like end of humanity or closure of human epoch may not reflect the truth, because of the changing stand on traditional human figure. In the historical process, human being and human behaviors have been delineated with various approaches such as humanism, poststructuralism, feminism, postmodernism, nevertheless, the significant issue is human, himself, and reinterpret his situation according to changing living conditions. Due to the human's being a cultural entity, the posthumanist perspective presents an alternative way of understanding in order to expound the question of what the human is. Besides other approaches, the human and his values – customs, historical connections, social manners - are complementary elements for posthumanism in the light of technological developments. As Wolfe (2010, p. 16) purports "… the point is not to reject humanism tout court – indeed, there are many values and aspirations to admire in humanism – but rather to show how those aspirations are undercut by the philosophical and ethical frameworks used to conceptualize them." Thus, posthumanism shares some basic features with humanism rather than a separate matter. Through the evolution of the human and the society, every contribution to this relationship is fundamental for the increase of multiple points of view.

Delving deeply into posthuman approach, it is important to note that it is still in progress. By means of technological advancements promoting life style, both the human and the society undergo a transformation. The key point is to consider effects of developments on the human

and the society into account. The new human figure away from the qualities of distinctive power and superiority does not mean to be a machine-like creature or a different species. Pepperell (2003, p. 171) discusses the human's position in relation to the society by asking a substantive question: "What is meant by the 'posthuman condition'? First, it is not about the 'End of Man' but about the end of a man-centred' universe or, put less phallocentrically, a 'human-centred' universe." Integration of human, technology, and society also signifies a new social structure that human as posthuman subject plays a minor role compared to human supremacy in humanism. This social structure is shaped through changing human nature; consciousness, perception, metabolism, and personality. In addition to physical enhancements facilitating human life as a person, human's sense differentiates in accord with social and cultural mechanisms. Pepperell (2003, p. 171) accounts for the contemporary human after the end of human-centred point of view: "posthumanism is about how we live, how we conduct our exploitation of the environment, animals and each other. It is about what things we investigate what questions we ask and what assumptions underlie them."

As a term, posthuman (post-Human) was used for the first time by Blavatsky (1888) (cited in Herbrechter, 2013, p. 33) and since then has been interpreted with various aspects by many critics and academicians. Especially after the Second World War, perpetual development in the world, nature, technology, and science also contributes to the evolution of human. Incompatible with ascendency of a human being in respect to humanism, human as an individual has been reshaped with his attitude to internal and external mechanisms. Badmington (2010, p. 374) marks the significance of human for a better understanding of the theory: "Posthumanism marks a careful, ongoing, overdue rethinking of the dominant humanist (or anthropocentric) account […]. In the light of posthumanist theory and culture, "we" are not who "we" once believed ourselves to be. And neither are "our" others." Responsibility or power imposed on human is not conveyed in the modern world. Although the human is not dehumanized with the effects of technoculture, the concept of human alters from human – traditional figure – to inhuman – still having human characteristics but restructured with technology and the way he lives.

## 3. The Relationship between Human Nature and Memory

Lowry's alternative dystopia presents a detailed community life framed with strict rules but away from all negative or chaotic elements. Jonas, the protagonist, leads a simple life with his parents and sister until his being elected as future Receiver of Memory. In his community ruled by Elders, everything is designed in line with people's basic needs; accommodation, food, work, and safety. Family, fundamental unit of the society, is merely for raising absolutely obedient children like Jonas, his friend Rosemary, and his sister Lily. Nonetheless, family members do not have blood-relations, they know none of the ancestors. The sense of belonging is quite tenuous that members of the society do not mean anything apart from a small piece in the whole. An individual and a family are far away from the traditional ones that strict rules organize the society. In this respect, social order is so flawlessly crafted that people are not in need of questioning. With "sameness", humans had preferred to pass very long time ago, people have to lead lives determined for them. That is to say, distinctions are annihilated in order to circumvent all possible troubles. Jonas' bizarre relationship with The Giver is the only thing representing a real or humane connection because the rest of the society is not able to think, remember, love, and so on. Discerning hidden truths behind perfect order or created world, Jonas questions for the first time:

> 'But what happened to those things? Snow, and the rest of it?'
> 'Climate Control. Snow made growing food difficult, limited the agricultural periods. An unpredictable weather made transportation almost impossible at times. It wasn't a practical thing, so it became obsolete when we went to Sameness.
> 'And the hills, too' he added. 'They made conveyance of goods unwidely. Trucks; buses. Slowed them down. So-'He waved his hand, as if a gesture had caused hills to disappear. 'Sameness,' he concluded. (Lowry, 199, pp. 83)

In *The Giver*, Lowry portrays two different kinds of human: Receiver of Memory who keeps all memories and knowledge, accordingly, all responsibilities of the community, and the rest of the community whose sole aim is to obey and play a minor part in the mechanical social order. Owing to the change of human nature in time, members of the community are unaware of the atmosphere they live in. On the other hand, Receiver of Memory is a highly respected position in the community since he embodies knowledge or essence of the world. He can be evaluated as store of memory or case of past, thus symbolizes authority of wisdom. He maintains an isolated life in which he does not firmly adhere to the rules and is the only one having access to read, watch, and know. But this omniscient power does not mean owner of all community but remote place with burden of humanity, memories. Many years ago, people preferred sameness in order to preserve themselves. Instead of sharing memories and pain, happiness, and all differences, they choose to find/select someone to do. Actually, they repudiate a fecund and alive way of life unconsciously. This new way leads them to forget or delete past traditions, manners, and customs which are integrative parts of the society. Assman (2008, p. 50) defines memory as the most fundamental element of the society: "… a society is able to choose, to think and to speak, but not to remember. It can choose without a will, it can think without the capacity of reason, it can speak without a tongue, but it cannot remember without a memory." Therefore, human nature and the social order before and after "sameness" are not tantamount to each other. The Giver underlines lost values regretfully:

> "Our people made that choice, the choice to go to Sameness. Before my time, before the previous time, back and back and back. We relinquished color when we relinquished sunshine and did away with differences." He thought for a moment. "We gained control of many things. But we had to let go of others." (Lowry, 1993, p. 95)

Throughout the novel, the author stresses perfectly arranged community that members choose. Despite the system's great deficiencies ignoring personal features, the community prefers to make a choice. That reveals a very serious gap between individual and collective or shared memory. Collective memory of the community is limited with daily routine, fortuitous events are impossible. From birth to death, namely retirement in Elsewhere – a place which members are supposed to lead their retirements, yet a kind of lethal injection to kill – everything is planned for a person. However, daily routine is not a true memory both for individual and collective memory. Plato's theory of anamnesis (recollection) (cited in Brockmeier 2002, p. 16) does not accomplish in Lowry's community since collective memory is not as powerful as to recollect memories. Integration of a person and a society is possible with abolishment of demarcation between individual and collective memory. Brockmeier (2002, p. 18) remarks the combination of a culture and individuals as follows: "[…] the centripetal force of a connective structure that organizes a considerable body of thought and knowledge, beliefs, and concepts of self: that is, a worldview rooted in a set of social rules and values as well as in the shared memory of a commonly inhabited and similarly experienced past." Memory is in the state of intermediary between an individual and a society. Discrepancy between individual and collective memory is the pivotal problem to obstruct the relation of an individual and a society. Hence, the lack of interaction distorts the concept of being a family/group/society because the unifying element, sense of belongingness, is absent. Brockmeier (2002, p. 18) summarizes that "At issue, then, is a sense of belonging that binds individual into a culture while binding the culture into the individual's mind."

The connection between Jonas and The Giver is the most humane tie in the novel without strict rules and necessities. During the transfer of memories, Jonas is free from his responsibilities such as taking pills for suppressing sexual desires, not using connotations and figurative statements, and not lying. The place The Giver lives is a kind of the community's core which is full of forbidden things – books, information before "sameness", and access to hidden cameras' recordings – for the community. In this respect, it can be evaluated as a sacred place Jonas discovers the real world over again. The first memory The Giver has transferred is snow. Although experiencing of snow and riding a sledge is quiet fascinating for Jonas, history of

humanity does not completely include good memories. The Giver's one of the most painful memories is hunger the world suffers: "And the strongest memory that came was hunger. It came from many generations back. Centuries back. The population had gotten so big that hunger was everywhere. Excruciating hunger and starvation. It was followed by warfare." (Lowry, 1993, p. 111) The discovery Jonas maintains with The Giver is a journey to past, before "sameness", thus, they share both positive and negative feelings at the same time. This emotional transfer provides Jonas to remember or acquire the world history structuring collective memory.

Jonas' path to recollect memories, discarding his mechanic life, is so complicated. On the one hand, he tries to discover unknown feelings and concepts in every session of training and gains a new perspective. On the other hand, he has to continue his monotonous way of life with his so-called family. The rest of the society is totally unconscious of the life behind their mechanical order with the effects of pills and harsh rules preventing their questioning. Moreover, they are not in the position to decide or choose. At the beginning, Jonas is unable to understand narrow perception of members of the community: for example, his father, a baby sitter, in fact kills a baby through injection who is labelled as incongruous with the rules in baby unit on the purpose of sending him to Elsewhere. Planned life for each member provides a rescued existence purged of faults and wrong decisions. Probability of wrong decisions avoids them undertaking responsibilities of life. Jonas even cannot imagine this possibility:

> "We don't dare to let people make choices of their own."
> "Not safe?" The Giver suggested.
> "Definitely not safe," Jonas said with certainty. "What if they were allowed to choose their own mate? And chose wrong?
> "Or what if," he went on, almost laughing at the absurdity, "they chose their own jobs?" (Lowry, 1993, p. 98)

One of the major sine qua nons to be a human is free will. Neither Jonas nor the society is ready to choose, otherwise, this systematic order may collapse. The contradiction between right to choose and perfectly processed existence is of great importance. Brockmeier points to memory in order to overcome this contradiction: "… memory is the golden path to the highest intellectual and spiritual truths a human being could know. True recall could lead one's soul back to its origin" (Brockmeier, 2002, p. 16).

Technological enhancements ameliorating conditions of the community is the cost of members' humane characteristics. With "sameness", they have to compromise on human nature. As inhuman humans, they are supposed to do but not to act/speak/question. The community is deprived of not only environmental factors like color, snow, mountain but also modern concepts like library, art, aesthetic, music broadening a human being's horizon. Fictitious reality conceals ramifications of their choice that public awareness disappears and the community's getting rid of this situation seems impossible. The Giver explains in despair:

> "Listen to me, Jonas. They can't help it. They know nothing."
> "It's the way they live. It's the life that was created for them. It's the same life that you would have, if you had not been chosen as my successor."
> (Lowry, 1993, p. 153)

Excitement Jonas feels through memories encourages him to search for the real world outside his community. He decides to escape since he is forbidden to go beyond the borders. The author leaves the last scene of the novel to the reader's imagination with Christmas house in his memories. Jonas is able to run away but also confronted with results of his first choice. While he is going further, the weather gets cold and snows. He and Gabriel, the baby his father brings home for his adaptation, travel for a while. The author tries to revive a traditional atmosphere with Jonas' memory he struggles to reach. Family members in decorated Christmas house are so happy that they have all elements of Christmas rituals: love, presents, a huge family, snow, fireplace, etc. This celebration evokes feelings Jonas seeks, therefore,

reconciliation of culture and an individual is about to come true. However, the scene ends in suspense due to the fact that he loses his consciousness. The author promotes the reader to consider Jonas' action: to make a choice whatever the consequences are or to maintain life in spite of repercussions. Fukuyama (2002, p. 13) highlights the coherence of human and society: "[…] human beings are by nature cultural animals, which means that they can learn from experience and pass on that learning to their descendants through nongenetic means. Hence human nature is not narrowly determinative of human behavior […]". Jonas follows his acquired feelings and bits of memories in his road to achieve essence of being a human.

Jonas' individual memory flourishes with the effect of The Giver's transfers. Additionally, this influences flow of his life that he undergoes a transformation. However, the change is limited with Jonas because there is no interaction between individual and collective memories of the community. Memory is one of the notable elements of humanity connecting past and present and strengthens the sense of belonging. Combination of memory and human nature is inseparable part of human existence whereas the community in Lowry's dystopia does not have either. Utopic social order does not go beyond fictitious reality without memories. Hanson (2009, p. 48) enunciates the role of memory in dystopian novels as Jonas' recognition: "Memory is integral to the dystopian project […] and the recovery of memory […] that allows the protagonist to recognize his or her 'situation for what it really is and thus to trace the relationship between individual experience and the operation of the entire system.'" Recollection of memories is solely possible with the integration of individual and collective memory. In Lowry's dystopia, the community chooses to live in monotonous way without memories and personal characteristics by means of technology eliminating environmental factors. Furthermore, members of the community, as parts of "sameness", evolve into inhuman humans because of losing memory, the essence of human nature. Despite Jonas' recognition with transfers, the community remains stable and pursues the mechanical order without questioning.

## 4. Conclusion

Lowry (1993) depicts a perfectly processed community in which members expunge all of individual and environmental differences. In monotonous living, members are not allowed to do any other things except regulations. Personal features are forbidden and suppressed by medical treatments. In spite of strict rules in the community, the characters are not machine-like creatures as in Haraway's (1991, p. 149) well-known definition: "A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction". It is consequential to point out that members of the community are not prone to be dehumanized, nonetheless, they are inhuman characters in "sameness". Throughout the novel, the author emphasizes the connection between automatic manner of life and characters. In order to escape from vagaries of real world such as hunger, cold, war, pain, poverty, etc., members abnegate everything, even right to choose. Hubler (2014, p. 23) outlines preference of the community briefly: "In *The Giver*, Lowry warns that dystopia results from efforts to construct an ideal society and that a loss of individual freedom is the cost of utopian striving." The heavy cost results in transformation of human nature that members of the community become inhuman (non-human) human without memories. The loss of sense of belonging turns members into small pieces of this mechanical order. The lack of integration between a human being and memory destroys members' abilities like questioning and perception whereas Wang and Brockmeier (2002, p. 50) put emphasis on unification of a human and memory: "… neither memory nor self is an isolated psychological phenomenon blocked in one's head […], and that, rather, both are interpersonally shared, socially constructed and integrated into the same cultural context." Jonas' personal struggle after the transfer of memories is not enough to change the community's perspective. It is not obvious if Jonas accomplishes in search of the true world or not. Even though the author is criticized on the point of some parts' lacking details like how memories are transferred from The Giver to Jonas, presentation of the community's mechanisms is of great importance. Moreover, the author stimulates the reader to deepen his/her point of view going beyond a work of children's literature.

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