



# The Augmented Man: Endangered Bodies and Critical Posthumanist Perspectives in A.E. Van Vogt's *Slan*

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**Abstract:** Critical Posthumanism entails the termination of the humanist conviction of man in its entirety and comes up with an advanced alteration to the fore. The term 'critical' has a dual meaning. At the outset, it takes under its purview the receptiveness towards the revolutionary essence of technocultural modification and focuses on a particular progression of thought that is critically betrothed to humanism. This in turn has evolved a long way off from the tradition of humanism itself. Thus, the focus is to reconsider accepted forms of the critique of antihumanism so that they can adapt to the present altered state and revolutionise them when possible. This subject matter can be found in A.E. Van Vogt's *Slan*. The Slans are the scion of human, variants having tendrils on the top of their head that help them study the minds of human beings.

**Keywords:** Posthuman, Slan, Technocultural, Nonhuman other, Deconstructiveness.

## Introduction

The delineation of a more compounded and analytic correspondence between the human and the inhuman or subhuman is theoretically ascertained to be Critical Posthumanism. While the broader term, Humanism focuses on man's prospects, the concept of Critical Posthuman reconsiders humans by its association with the nonhuman. Classified in the genre of Speculative Fiction, Critical Posthumanism postulates that humans live in a condition beyond being human. The prefix 'Post' in Posthumanism asserts the emergence of a new era and hints at the inception of a living being who is radically transformed by intermingling with the 'non-human other'.

The origins can be traced back to the French philosopher, Jean-Francois Lyotard's *A Postmodern Fable* which unearths the explication of 'Human'. The opening line of the essay, "What a Human and his/her Brain – or rather the Brain and its Human – would resemble at the moment when they leave the planet forever, before its destruction; that, the story does not tell" (Lyotard 12). Here, Lyotard engages in an incorporeal narration. He questions whether there will be any Homo Sapiens when the world ends or the solar system perishes.

And, if they still exist, they shall entirely mutate themselves reconstructively and technologically as a means to remain alive during the detonation of the Sun. He further interrogates if there will be a continuation of the tale after the apocalypse as few species might have disappeared from the inferno to narrate the tale. Thus, there shall be room for the process of posthumanisation to occur with an aim to empower man to deal with the situations and lead the quasi-humans to go on ensuing intergalactic journeys.

Critical Posthumanism visions itself as being part of a high-level technological growth. It settles in the deconstructiveness of humans and technology which is a medium to attain this. The Professor of Rice University, Cary Wolfe, “opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself” (Wolfe 15). He divulges how humanism envisages that to nurture as a human is equivalent to something superior and considerable than any mechanical and animal form. But he states that “the decentring of the human...is increasingly impossible to ignore, a historical development that points towards the necessity of new theoretical paradigms” (Wolfe 16).

Focusing on the specificity of this matter, in her work, *How We Became Posthuman*, N. Katherine Hales, sets down how in an age of the advancement of technology humans have started to define themselves in a radically different manner. Hayles desires to visualise re-embodiment to “put back into the picture the flesh that continues to be erased in contemporary discussions about cybernetic subjects” (Hayles 5).

Karen Barad, another practitioner of Posthumanism, “marks the practice of accounting for the boundary-making practices by which the ‘human’ and its others are differentially delineated and defined” (136). She chronicles that posthumanism “does not presume that man is the measure of all things. It is not held captive to the distance scale of the human but rather is attentive to the practice by which scale is produced [...] and eschews [...] the body as the natural and fixed dividing line between interiority and exteriority” (136).

This field of inquiry is traversed in A.E. Van Vogt’s *Slan*. In this novel, a nine-year-old lad, Jommy Cross resides with his mother, Patricia Cross in a serene countryside. They have come to the middle of the centropolis which is surrounded by large parks, buildings and skyscrapers. The authoritarian of the whole planet, the ruthless Kier Gray, lives in the main building of the government which is located at the centropolis. Long ago, this region was owned by the Slans who governed the area for a short period. The Slans are the scion of human, variants having tendrils on the top of their head that help them study the minds of human beings.

The humans believe that the Slans are living even now regardless of all the preventive measures. They are captured and the internal parts of their body are examined. They possess a different category of physique with tendrils on their head that allow them to read the thoughts of everyone around them. They can read the minds of people from distances and untwine faraway reverberations into articular impressions.

They are the mysterious race of mutated humans who are skilled with magical powers. They are hiding themselves from the human race that fears and despises them and strives to wipe out them in its entirety. The entire novel is set in an unidentified location in the future time, where the involvement of automation has considerably come to the fore.

The presently accessible technologies are involved in reinstating former functionalities of the human such as visual, hearing and reflex performance of limbs. It also empowers man with new capabilities that he has experienced formerly.

At the beginning of the novel, Jommy Cross’s mother is shot by an agent of the secret police at one corner of Capital Avenue. He is left alone to seek a way to survive. As he grows up to his adulthood, he is unaware of any other Slan who can assist him. Providentially, Jommy Cross being a Slan is more powerful and quick-witted than any man of the same age. He spends his childhood in hiding from the world. When he blossoms into adulthood, he initiates his quest for the technology that is devised and concealed by his father. This technology can rescue the Slans from being slaughtered in their entirety.

Jommy’s mother is more skillful than him. She can traverse spaces and untwine faraway reverberations into comprehensible caricatures. As they enter the centropolis, the secret police attempt to capture them and Jommy tries to keep pace with his mother. The thoughts of his mother pierce his brain, “There are some ahead of us now, Jommy, and others coming across the street. You’ll have to go, darling. Don’t forget what I’ve told you. You live for one thing only- to make it possible for slans to live normal lives” (Vogt, *Slan* 9). The slans can live peacefully only if their opponent, the autocrat, Kier Gray is killed.

Jommy is abducted by the agents of the secret police. His mind encounters a series of reflections of people who contact and inform the police about a boy being seized by occupants in a car. He can read the minds of men who are seated inside the car. A heavy-built man named, John Petty, the leader of the secret police of Kier Gray, makes an effort to guard his contemplations. Despite that, he can read the undercurrent of his thoughts that states about killing a slan girl named Kathleen Layton so that the authoritarian, Kier Gray can be enfeebled. Sam Enders, the chauffeur and guard to John Petty requests the chief to go on a search for the Slan named, Jommy Cross. As Jommy tries to flee before the car stops, he is hit by the rear end of the car. He attempts to run past an old lady and secrets himself near an empty space. Enders makes an effort to shoot the boy but misses his aim. John Petty warns, "Enders, do you realize that we left Capital and Main ten minutes ago? That boy- There he is! Shoot him, you fool" (Vogt, *Slan* 11)! John Petty orders the headquarters to border the district with police and soldiers at Fifty-seventh Street to capture the little shrimp. "We've got to surround the district at Fifty-seventh Street. Concentrate every police car and get the soldiers out to" (Vogt, *Slan* 11).

The whole world around him becomes blurred and lusterless. Jommy stumbles through the dark storehouse. The street has become deserted. He fails to peruse the indistinct thoughts that are crept forward from the gloomy buildings. He hauls himself down and the night becomes darker as he contends across the pavement. Many people are behind him as they are enticed by the news of getting rewarded with ten thousand dollars, who could get hold of the slan. He is terrified of being thwacked by the mob with brooms and sticks. He vigorously makes his way towards a space that unfolds to the earth. Although it is annoying for him, he adjusts himself inside a hole. The police force searches for him in every nook and cranny. While he does his utmost to get out of the stringent site, he is banged by the thought of the presence of a person. He is grasped by an old woman and utters with shrillness, "Granny'll take care of you, she will. Granny's smart" (Vogt, *Slan* 14). The old woman tries to control her thoughts as she knows that slans are efficient in reading the minds of other people.

She believes that "because slans can read thoughts, she kept mind very still, thinking only of cooking" (Vogt, *Slan* 14). The rapacious old lady hits his head with a stick and he is dragged towards a tottering old cart. Then, he is spirited away by the avaricious old dame.

The institutor of the Society for Psychical Research, Frederick Myers, has devised the expression, 'Telepathy'. He suggests that the connection of one mind with the other is feasible in the absence of any intervention of the body. This operation can travel over large regions and can connect to other beings to sense them regardless of any material contact. He puts forth that, "all cases of impressions received at a distance without the operation of the recognized sense organs" (147). It is generally the assimilation of the notion of intuition. Consequently, it is apparent that the idea of Telepathy allows one to comprehend the mind of other humans with the help of mental linkages bereft of the use of any indicator or language (147).

Meanwhile, Kathleen's slan tendrils heave distinctly from her hair and oscillate gently with the wave of air. The tendrils appear like thin filaments of brightened gold shimmering dully in the twilight against the black hair that covers her plain and youthful appearance. The intimidating musings that trickle from the palace percolate through those delicate antennas.

Thoughts hover over Kathleen's mind, driven by a sense of insistence. An indubitable kaleidoscope is carved that is significant of multitudinous intrigues, misadventures and nightmares of people with psychological insinuations. The deadliness of the thought is so controlling that it rowels Kathleen to hopelessness. At the present moment, she is aware that the man who is going to assassinate her has been trying to evade her for a long time.

Kathleen screams that a man John Petty, the chief of secret police, is trying to kill her. Overhearing this possibility, Kier Gray responds with utter astonishment, "John Petty's bid for supreme power. I almost feel sorry for the man, he is so blind to his own shortcomings. No chief of secret police has ever held the confidence of a people. I am worshipped and feared; he is only feared. And he thinks that all-important" (Vogt, *Slan* 22). His intention of murdering Kathleen before a certain date will diminish the standing of Kier Gray in the council. John Petty tries to dishonor Gray with the council by circulating the notion that Gray wants to keep Kathleen alive so that he can replace Gray politically.

Kathleen overtly makes a rejoinder, "He's a fool to go against you, that's what I think. And I'll help you all I can. I can help, with reading minds and things" (Vogt, *Slan* 22). Kier Gray replies with contempt that they (human beings) are at times weird to the Slans. They are filled with hatred that resulted in a war

between humans and slans long ago. He adds that the Intelligence Quotient of an adult slan is two to three hundred times higher than that of a normal human. Kier Gray orders Kathleen to stay in his office chamber and read the minds of John Petty and other council members who are going to arrive at the moment for an investigation regarding the attempt to kill Kathleen before the notified date.

Kathleen acts according to Kier Gray's thoughts as he commands her to move to the seat that is present in the corner of the oak-panelled room so that she shall be invisible to the members present in the chamber. At the present moment, Kathleen can't show her telepathic abilities as the minds of men are controlled and their whole attention focuses on what should be said and done.

Kier Gray responds with a vague countenance; it gives the impression that this is not merely an altercation for power between Petty and Gray but it has something more to it. With regards to this, John Petty yells, he has no such intention of splitting into two groups when the situation of failure in slanizing the human babies is awful. The attempt of the slans "to slanize the human race, with its resultant horrible failures, is the greatest problem that has confronted a government" (Vogt, *Slan* 27). John Petty adds at that moment that Kier Gray should resign from his position and this is supported by other council members.

The inclination to land up at the stars has thrust the astronomers to review the evolution of cosmic energies. It initially started by seeing through bare eyes and later optical telescopes have been used by scientists to keep track of the interstellar. The mechanism of orbits and the movement of stars are observed by scientists using satellite mechanics. Space voyaging has become possible with Voyager I and II. Astronomers are travelling to outer space to gain information regarding the exoplanets and stars. These technologies are quite common in this novel.

The region of the Air Center is governed by the whole aircraft manufacturing around the globe. Jommy stops near the door of the Air Center as the stranger slan disappears from the place. This is the region from where the slans work and govern the greatest transport in the cosmos. The place is occupied by thousands of slans. As he moves forward, he encounters two bareheaded and tendriless slans. "His gaze searched almost frantically for the golden strands of tendril that should have been there. Tendriless slans! So that was it! That explained they couldn't read minds" (Vogt, *Slan* 42).

There are two varieties of slans, one with golden-colored tendrils and the other, with no tendrils. The slans possessing tendrils on their head have many psychic abilities. They can spot and telepathically commune with other slans. At the same time, they can also read the mind of humans. But the tendriless slans lack any psychic ability. They can hide their thought process from the slans possessing tendrils. The first category of Slans can be assassinated to near extermination. Both types of slans have enormous intelligence.

Jommy moves speedily although he is unaware of his way. He finds a metal box and takes it out with his trembling fingers. He struggles to imagine his father hiding before the slab to conceal the secret for the future so that his son can find. "This thing might be a cosmic moment in the history of slans, this moment when the work of a dead father was passed on to a fifteen-year-old boy who had waited so many thousands of minutes and hours and days for this second to come" (Vogt, *Slan* 54). At that moment, Jommy could sense thoughts of people nearing him. The vibrations are like, "It's probably someone who ran down when the slan ship came, trying to get away from expected bombs" (Vogt, *Slan* 54). Jommy desperately investigates the metal box for its opening. His hypnotic subconscious mind commands him to get all the contents and places the vacant box back in the pit.

Inside the box, there is a metal rod placed on top of the papers. It measures two inches in the middle and narrow at its ends. There is a button at the end of the bulb. It glimmers so efficiently with its own light that there is enough light for him to read the paper underneath. A note is written on the paper, "This is the weapon. Use it only in case of absolute necessity" (Vogt, *Slan* 55).

Regarding the intimacy between slans and human beings, the behavioral, phylogenetic and biological intersections between the human and the nonhuman, the groups together have an extraordinary significance. This feature is obvious in the entire novel. Furthermore, Kathleen is appalled to hear these words from Kier Gray. Within no time, Jem Lorry is on Kier Gray's feet asking for forgiveness. He insists, "I am left no alternative but to state- with qualifications, however- that I am in favor of accepting this offer. My main qualification is this- the slans must agree to be assimilated into the human race. To that end, slans cannot marry each other, but must always marry human beings" (Vogt, *Slan* 68).

Kier Gray concedes the idea and clarifies the plan of action, firstly, to get associated with humans they should initially be identified. The slans must be caught and kept as captives. Secondly, they must be forced to settle on an island at the outset. Once they have gathered, they will be bordered by planes and battleships and eventually slaughtered. Thirdly, they must be strained to carry out fingerprinting and their photographs must be taken to inform the police headquarters in the interim.

Finally, Kier Gray mutters, the slan-human mating requires testing. Multitudinous case studies of slan-human attempts to procreate babies are within easy reach in the library under the title 'Abnormal Marriages'. The men and slans appear similar to a certain extent. The slans are more muscular due to the quickening of the process of electro-explosions that activate the muscle. The two hearts can operate independently of the other with easy pumps. The tendrils that telepathically send and receive information are practised by humans everywhere. Gray continues, "What Samuel Lann did with his mutation machine to his wife, who bore him the first three slan babies- one boy and two girls- over six hundred years ago, has not added anything new to the human body, but changed or mutated what already existed" (Vogt, *Slan* 73). For his experiment, Samuel Lann brings up the babies of the three creatures- monkey, slan and human under extreme scientific constraints. The baby monkey develops learning abilities faster than the slan and human baby. The human baby and slan baby try to communicate faster than the monkey baby. The slan baby develops telepathy soon. The quickness of the brain is seen in slan babies but human baby excels in education. This faculty of telepathy i.e., reading the minds of people is advantageous to a slan baby. It gives him an insight into the psychology and easy ingress to education. But, in case of a human baby, it fails to have a hold over eyes and ears. This makes the slan a distinguishing figure.

He points to the fact that "all metals are held together by atomic tensions" which adds to the robustness of the metal" (Vogt, *Slan* 117). In the matter of steel, he renames it as the theoretical potential one-point. When steel was invented, its capacity was about two thousand points and gradually with new procedures its capacity increased to one thousand points.

He thus states further:

Tendriless slans have made five-hundred-point steel, but even that incredibly hard stuff cannot compare with the product of my application of atomic strain, which changes the very structure of the atoms and produces the almost perfect ten-point steel. An eighth of an inch of ten-point can stop the most powerful explosive known to human beings and tendriless slans! (Vogt, *Slan* 117)

He concludes by saying that although an atomic bomb can destroy a huge ship, it cannot even infiltrate the ten-point steel.

As they enter the cave, they see various inoperable machines, saws, and tools lying there. They discuss the secret entrances that lead to this city. Kathleen voices out that, "there are only two entrances given on the list in Kier Gray's desk- and I've located no others" (Vogt, *Slan* 118). Jommy rejoices that this cave is safe for them as the police are searching for the slan.

Jommy looks at Kathleen's dead body in dismay. With a single press of the button, he would have blown John Petty, the murderer of Kathleen to nothingness but he refrains from doing so. Scores of men with machine guns enter the cave from the secret passageway. He races his car with immense speed as the police organization tries to capture him.

## Conclusion

The human and the non-humans share a significant relationship, the mixing of both species results in relatively huge brains, grasping hands and dynamically unique features. The question of what connotes being human in an epoch where there is a species-wise blurring of boundaries of the body and identity-morphing that has dynamically grounded the man-machine interconnection is addressed. The mechanics of cloning, Artificial Intelligence, machine learning, stem-cell engineering, subfreezing of human corpses and Xenotransplantation i.e., grafting of organs and tissues between various categories of species have effectuated the initiation of a new organism.

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