



## **Suspending the Sovereign Self: A Posthumanist Reading of Andy Weir's *Project Hail Mary***

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### **Abstract:**

Generations of ‘human’ thought have assiduously constructed narratives that exude dominance over the paradigms concerning the ‘non-human’. The representation of the self through the humanist paradigms of thought has also positioned it as an autonomous, sovereign and centralised entity. It is a recurring leitmotif in the untraversable narratives of human transcendence and human exceptionalism. The need for the suspension of the sovereign self is crucial as the narratives associated with it pervade the sociological structures with malicious ignorance and a forethought of assumed superiority. However, the posthuman predicament and ethos call for the suspension of the sovereign self against high humanistic autonomy and an assumed sense of superiority. Andy Weir, in his novel *Project Hail Mary*, facilitates humanist decentering and replaces it with a relational and dynamic system that emphasises posthuman autopoiesis over humanist autocracy. The sovereign human self is unsettled through posthuman negotiations that challenge human autonomy and exceptionalism. The analysis ultimately reveals a mode of existence grounded in

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conviviality and emotional collectivity. Posthuman narratives are used in tandem with the novel to decenter human centrality, planetary exceptionalism, and human superiority.

**Keywords: Andy Weir, Sovereign Self, Posthumanism, Project Hail Mary, autonomy.**

## Introduction

The spirit of man and the indomitable attitude of humankind are ubiquitous in individual and social outlooks. The perceptions that arise from these miscellaneous vantage points shape local, national and international traditions, rules, practices, and other significant notions. However, the search for truth, idealism, and a utopian certainty challenges the indomitable attitude and exposes its fragile façade. The verisimilitude of the sovereign self is justified by its foregrounded relations to the three triadic forces of religion, the state, and education, which play a pivotal role in shaping the indomitable outlooks on both an individual and a social level. Literary theories and criticism offer an infinite spectrum of approaches in understanding, questioning, reflecting, and correcting the narratives associated with the indomitable nature that shapes the sovereign self. The paper elucidates that Andy Weir's *Project Hail Mary* progressively suspends the sovereign human self through dual posthuman negotiations that are ontological and epistemological, culminating in an immanent mode of existence characterised by conviviality and emotional collectivity.

Existing research on *Project Hail Mary* focuses on the notions of environmental dependence, the representation of otherness, the study of alien networks, extraterrestrial possibilities, actor-networks and the development of human-alien relationships. There are scholarly outputs that employ hybridity between ecocritical study and the posthuman predicament, ecological interconnectedness and posthuman immanence. Critical Interventions are built on the foundational outputs of posthumanists such as Rosi Braidotti, Cary Wolfe, Neil Badmington,

Elaine Graham, Francis Fukuyama and Stefan Herbrechter. They include articles that extensively address relational ontologies, the ontology of multispecies, relational ontology, ontological uncertainty, the human, superhuman, and anti-human. Existing research on *Project Hail Mary* has explored ecological interdependence, multispecies relations, human-alien dynamics and posthuman relationality. While these studies illuminate the novel's challenge to anthropocentrism, they have not sufficiently examined how these relational entanglements collectively suspend the modern conception of the sovereign human self. This gap naturally addresses the following research questions that investigate the process of suspension: (1) How does *Project Hail Mary* suspend the human conception of the sovereign human self through posthuman relationality? (2) In what ways do human-alien, ecological, and technological entanglements in *Project Hail Mary* reconfigure subjectivity as relational rather than autonomous? (3) How does Andy Weir's *Project Hail Mary* envision survival as a process of becoming-with, thereby challenging anthropocentric notions of identity, agency, and sovereignty? By addressing these questions, the study employs a posthuman negotiation that draws on ontological and epistemological frameworks.

The novel *Project Hail Mary* tells the story of Ryland Grace, a molecular biologist turned middle-school teacher who becomes humanity's final beacon of hope to ensure the survival of planet Earth. The crisis emerges when scientists discover Astrophage, an alien microbe that absorbs the energy of the sun with unprecedented efficiency. Astrophage's siphoning of solar output causes the sun to dim and lose heat, thereby thrusting life on Earth towards a permanent ice age. As Astrophage proliferates around the Sun, it siphons off increasing amounts of energy, initiating a long-term cooling trend that threatens to render Earth uninhabitable within a matter of decades. In response to the catastrophe at hand, a transnational coalition forms—the Petrova Taskforce, formed to address the effects of the impending extinction event. Scientists observe that

Tau Ceti, unlike the Sun and other affected stars, shows no decline in luminosity despite also harbouring Astrophage. This anomaly suggests the presence of something capable of suppressing the organism in the Tau Ceti system. The Petrova Taskforce organises a crew of three to embark on an interstellar mission towards the Tau Ceti system. The interstellar journey takes the lives of the other two members; Grace is the sole survivor. He remarkably comes into contact with an Earth-like life-form from planet Eridani, whose inhabitants are Eridians, and their star is also being drained by Astrophage. Grace realises that he can establish a mutual language with the Eridian and calls him “Rocky”. The two form a cooperative symbiotic partnership, and their research reveals that a microscopic predator organism, Taumoeba, consumes Astrophage and naturally regulates its population in the Tau Ceti system. After extensive experimentation, they identify a way to culture and deploy Taumoeba in conditions suitable for both human and Eridian environments. Ryland Grace ultimately secures enough data and biological material for Earth’s salvation and sends it home. However, when Rocky’s ship suffers catastrophic damage, Grace abandons his planned return journey and chooses instead to save Rocky’s species. This act of self-sacrifice redefines the mission’s purpose and concludes the narrative with an emphasis on interspecies solidarity and ethical responsibility.

The sovereign self is revealed as an autonomous, rational and self-determined human subject. In an illusory fashion, it drives individuality and other traits of distinctiveness. The sovereign self requires a prior vision of similarity and homogeneity where the human subject is the centre of meaning. The self is born into a presumption that it is rationally self-knowing and self-contained. It operates with a capability of certainty that it can interpret and master reality. The self is kept active by human consciousness, which influences the levels of personality for an

individual.

### **Suspending Human Centrality: The Ontological Suspension of the Sovereign Self**

In terms of sovereignty, the assumption of the human sovereign self is dismantled and subjected to enquiry throughout the novel. The fragility of the human self and its self-proclaimed sovereignty is shattered by a microbe: ‘Astrophage’. The assumption that the human ego and its impact on ontology are superior and centralising—the belief that one’s personal will is bigger and self-affirmation determines the meaning of perception—is challenged, and so the meaning of reality is forced towards moral subjectivism, egocentric intellectualism. Both personal and universal levels of identity crumble. Andy Weir elegantly breaks down the monolith by instance of the passive rupture of sovereign self-belief on a global level. News regarding the Astrophage was watched: “More than any World Cup Final. Every network, streaming service, news website, and local TV affiliate was showing the same thing: NASA’s live feed” (Weir 29). Ontology refers to the branch that studies what it means to exist. The ‘self’ is inherent to the notion of existence and, in turn, is influenced by humanist narratives that try to re-inscribe and modify the ‘self’. The natural law is a humanist product that controls the human ‘self’. Natural law is a law of governance that discusses human exceptionalism over the purpose, ethics and moral obligations of the ‘self’. Braidotti discusses how conservative, religious and social narratives in a humanist space use human exceptionalism over natural law to mutate the ‘self’ into a sovereign self. Rosi Braidotti, in her *The Posthuman*, says, “While conservative, religious, social forces today often labour to re-inscribe the human within a paradigm of natural law” (Braidotti 1). The ontological suspension of the sovereign self aligns with Rosi Braidotti’s posthuman predicament, a condition in which contemporary existence is shaped by the interconnected notions of ecological, social, economic, and physiological life. Braidotti situates this predicament against the natural law of human

exceptionalism and within the Anthropocene: the proposed geological epoch in which human activity has become the dominant force altering Earth's ecosystems and planetary processes. She says, "I will take a materialist approach, and inscribe the Anthropocene as a multi-layered posthuman predicament that includes the environmental, socio-economic, and affective and psychic dimensions of our ecologies of belonging" (Braidotti 2). Evidence of this multilayered posthuman predicament is visible in *Project Hail Mary*. The novel employs 'Astrophage' as a motif to reveal the shallow and illusory elements within the Anthropocene. The novel explores how Astrophage causes an anthropocentric crisis that threatens the environmental and social dynamics with an impending extinction event by gradually diminishing the brightness of the sun: "They say it's (Astrophage) getting brighter at the same rate the sun is getting dimmer. Somehow or another, whatever it is, the Petrova line is stealing energy from the sun" (Weir 25). The novel also glimpses the imminent disaster at hand and how 'Astrophage' ensures the dissolution of anthropocentric supremacy in the anthropocene: "A lot of livestock will die. And it's worse than that. On land, crops will fail. The food we eat will become scarce. When that happens, the social order breaks down" (Weir 68).

Jean Lyotard and Stefan Herbrechter elucidate how the fabrications of human supremacy and the sovereign self are suspended as illusory and delusive. Stefan Herbrechter, in his *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, corroborates Weir that the destruction of the sun is the destruction and ruination of the supreme humanist fable. He also calls for a relational mode of foresight and how it emerges as an evolutionary imperative through an inevitable process of transformation. He says, "Should there still be any humans by the time our solar system is dying they will have to have completely transformed themselves technologically and evolutionarily in order to survive the explosion of the sun" (Herbrechter 4). Similarly, Lyotard, in his essay, *A*

*Postmodern Fable*, describes the uncertainties of the future associated with the fabrications of the sovereign self and the unfinished ending in the fable of human primacy. He says, “What a Human and his/her Brain or rather the Brain and its human, would resemble at the moment they leave the planet forever, before its destruction; that, the story does not tell” (Lyotard 12).

The anchorage of the ‘self’ and its narratives in the anthropocentric space is vigorously challenged through the interconnection of the human and non-human agency. This bond between the human and the non-human is a product of the posthuman predicament and calls for a relational and shared ontology. While ‘Astrophage’ serves as a non-human agent of impending dystopia in the Anthropocene, the suspension of human supremacy on an ontological level offers us perspectives of collective survival and relationality with the non-human. In the novel, the enigmatic relationship between humanist and posthumanist narratives in the human and the non-human dynamics is explored through the ambiguous nature of the ‘Astrophage’. In a humanist worldview, the ‘Astrophage’ is an existential enemy that consumes the sun's energy output, destabilises Earth’s ecology and pushes humanity toward extinction. In the posthuman domain, the same microorganism that threatens Earth’s survival becomes the saving grace of human survival. Grace’s spacecraft is powered by ‘Astrophage’ because of its extraordinary capacity to store and convert energy: “You’re going to make an Astrophage powered ship, It’s the most efficient rocket fuel ever!” (Weir 98). In a posthuman predicament that focuses on the decentering of humanity, the ambiguous nature of ‘Astrophage’, where it is neither purely destructive nor at the same time beneficial; its significance lies in its relational nature with humans, technologies, and planetary environments. The mutual dependence between the human and the non-human, ‘Astrophage’ and humanity, is primary for the ontological suspension of the sovereign self. Stefan Herbrechter elucidates how mutual relationality between the human and the non-human can be

achieved through Ontological Hygiene. He also explains how Ontological Hygiene plays a vital role in cleansing humanity of its arrogant assumptions of autonomy. He says, “‘ontological hygiene’ is a work in this process, which is supposed to ‘purify’ the category of the human” (Herbrechter 85). Tristan Gleason demonstrates how the bond between the human and the non-human results in a collective survival. He says, “humans and non-humans together as agents responsible for our collective survival and well-being” (Gleason 984). The novel validates Gleason’s claim by depicting ‘Astrophage’ as a non-human entity that participates in collective survival with humanity, and it ensures the well-being of humanity as an indispensable fuel for interstellar travel. The latter reciprocal nature between the human and the non-human is corroborated by authors Kristin Persson, Maria Andrée, and Cecilia Caiman: “When humans and nonhumans encounter each other in fieldwork, there is an intertwined process of reciprocity” (Persson et al. 676). Hence, the ontological sovereign self is suspended through the posthuman predicament that calls for a multilayered cartography that halts the mutations inherent to the natural law of human exceptionalism within the Anthropocene. It similarly suspends the delusive discourses, fabrications and fables on the sovereign self that encourage aimless autonomy and ontological hegemony. The mutual dependence, reciprocity and collective survival between the human and the non-human similarly calls for ontological relationality.

### **From Stable to Fluid Subjectivity: Epistemological Suspension of the Sovereign Self**

The sovereign self in the epistemological space is solidified through centuries of knowledge systems that corroborate the presumed autonomy and primacy of the sovereign self. Epistemology is related to the nature, sources and limits involving the justification of knowledge. It plays a vital role in the sustenance of definitions and narratives pertaining to the humanist discussions on identity, culture, individuality, ethics, and morality. The sovereign self is

constructed through assumptions about identity that reinforce an autonomous and fixed conception of subjectivity. These assumptions are sustained by epistemologies that privilege human rationality and separation from the non-human. *Project Hail Mary* dismantles these fixed epistemological assumptions through its representations of alien reception and alien biology.

The epistemological suspension of the sovereign self is deconstructed through the collapse of its presuppositions about alien life. Human assumptions arise from anthropocentric cultural certainty. The idea of alien life took a physical form and was structured based on what is known. Weir dismantles this illusion through ‘Astrophage’, a microscopic organism that repudiates the traditional and clichéd construct of “other life”—like little green beings or technologically advanced invaders. This discovery validates the illusion that the universe will conform to human imagination—never does. Weir says, “People always assumed our first contact with alien life, if any existed, would be little green men in UFOs. We never considered the idea of a simple, unintelligent species” (Weir 51). This inversion, in which alien life is represented not as a monstrous being but as an organism smaller than bacterium, challenges the anthropocentric assumption that existential threats must be physically large or visually spectacular. The above reference elucidates that an alien microbe can verify the unimaginable notion of being a vector beyond life-ego.

The biology of the alien microbe, ‘Astrophage’ and ‘Taumoeba’, showcases the fragility of anthropocentric epistemology. Astrophage, despite its microscopic biology, demonstrates a level of energy absorption, suffocation and cosmic mobility. Its unusual biological properties demonstrate that alien life can operate through forms of complexity that exceed established human assumptions about biological possibility, thereby challenging the epistemological limits of the Anthropocene. This matter is articulated in the novel as the protagonist Ryland Grace attempts to

understand the biological composition of Astrophage: “It consumes energy, stores it in some way we don’t understand and uses it for propulsion. That’s not a simple physical or chemical process. That’s something complex and directed” (Weir 51). Upon further inspection, Ryland Grace discovers that the alien life-form Astrophage consists of hydrogen and oxygen and maintains an internal temperature comparable to that of many Earth microbes. Ryland Grace is aghast and petrified as he remarks: “Water, Astrophage is water” (Weir 61). Further microscopic examination reveals that ‘Astrophage’ has DNA and Mitochondria: “Most notably, a group of scientists in Perth sacrificed one of their Astrophage and did a detailed analysis on all the organelles inside. They found DNA and Mitochondria. In any other situation, this would have been the most important discovery of the century. Alien life had DNA and Mitochondria” (Weir 75). This remark describes the cell biology of the Astrophage. This examination demonstrates how the novel challenges assumptions about the biological distinction between human and alien life by presenting Astrophage as an organism composed of familiar physical and biological materials. The novel therefore challenges the anthropocentric tendency to understand life according to human categories and expectations. Rather than presenting alien life as fundamentally separate from terrestrial existence, it reveals continuities between human, terrestrial, and extraterrestrial forms of life. The biological continuity between human and alien life thus exposes the inadequacy of the binary epistemologies that structure humanist thought.

The epistemological assumption posits that the ‘self’ is a product of binary oppositions and dialectics that are discursive in nature. Braidotti in her *The Posthuman* says, “This Eurocentric paradigm implies the dialectics of self and other, and the binary logic of identity and otherness as respectively the motor for and the cultural logic of universal Humanism” (Braidotti 15). Braidotti also highlights how subjectivity and otherness possess fixed epistemological explanations. She

says, “Subjectivity is equated with consciousness, universal rationality, and self-regulating ethical behaviour, whereas Otherness is defined as its negative and specular counterpart” (Braidotti 15).

In her *A Theoretical Framework for Critical Posthumanities*, Braidotti argues that proper epistemology on subjectivity and its relation with the human and the non-human traverses established boundaries through relational assemblages. She says, “Subjectivity is not restricted to bound individuals, but is rather a co-operative trans-species effort that takes place transversally, in-between nature/technology; male/female; black/white; local/global; present/past – in assemblages that flow across and displace the binaries” (Braidotti 3). The subjectivity traverses to reach posthuman immanence through the deconstruction of presence, postmodern provocation and sveltiness. Derrida, regarding the nature of presence in his magnum opus *Of Grammatology*, says, “deconstruction of presence accomplishes itself through the deconstruction of consciousness” (Derrida 70). Braidotti corroborates how deconstruction or poststructuralism plays a relational role with Posthumanism in redefining subjectivity and the ‘self’. She says, “Poststructuralism paved the way for this approach, but the posthuman turn materializes it and composes a new ontological framework of becoming-subjects” (Braidotti 3). Postmodernism extends deconstructive critiques in a broader sense, reflecting both on the individual and the cultural. The deconstruction of consciousness from autonomy and the false universalisms pertaining to the humanist primacy of the epistemological sovereign self calls for postmodern provocation and sveltiness. Linda Hutcheon, in her rendition, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, directly states that “the term postmodernism itself. I point to this simple verbal fact in order to begin ‘theorizing’ the cultural enterprise to which we seem to have given such a provocative label” (Hutcheon 3). Here, Hutcheon, one of the celebrated scholars of postmodernism, remarks that the theory of postmodernism claims to theorise or develop ideas, possibilities, or probabilities from

the established false universalisms. She terms these false universalisms as provocative labels. She says that these provocative labels are to be challenged and also explains how these labels are abused, challenged, and subverted through the notion of postmodernism. Hutcheon says that: “Postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges—be it in architecture, literature, painting, sculpture, film, video, dance, TV, music, philosophy, aesthetic theory, psychoanalysis, linguistics, or historiography” (Hutcheon 3).

The breakdown of presence through postmodern provocation by passing it as a provocative label requires a mind or sveltness. Promod K. Nayar, in his *Literary Theory Today*, offers a great definition for postmodern sveltness. He says, “It (Sveltness) is a condition of the mind, the readiness to confront and displace metanarrative, a permanent vigilance against universalities” (Nayar 224). Sveltness is the connecting point between postmodern provocation and posthuman correction of the infringed narrative. It acts as a bridge between postmodern and posthuman processes towards immanence.

Immanence refers to the idea that existence and meaning arise from within the material world through interconnected and relational processes rather than from external or superior realms. However, it is ironic that ‘Astrophage’ from another star system helps to institute immanence over human transcendence. Transcendence denotes the humanist ideal of rising above materiality, nature, and non-human life. It also positions ‘human’ as autonomous, exceptional, and ontologically and epistemologically superior. Posthumanism privileges immanence over transcendence, replacing hierarchical and binary notions of human supremacy with relational ontology in which humans and non-humans co-constitute existence. It also dismantles the mind-body dualism through postmodern provocation and sveltness. Braidotti corroborates the nature of

immanence and its rejection of mind-body dualism and other binaries: “The emphasis on immanence marks the rejection of transcendental universalism and mind-body dualism. All matter or substance being one and immanent to itself, it is intelligent and self-organizing in both human and non-human organisms” (Braidotti 4).

The epistemological labels of self, subjectivity, consciousness and presence are part of living matter. Braidotti revisualises matter as vital matter. Vital matter refers to the idea that matter is not inert, passive, or merely a resource for humans. Instead, it is dynamic, self-organising, and capable of generating change through relationality. She calls for understanding vital matter through a tempering of immanence that in turn constitutes a web of relationality. She says, “Vital matter is driven by the ontological desire for the expression of its innermost freedom (conatus). This understanding of matter animates the composition of posthuman subjects of knowledge – embedded, embodied and yet flowing in a web of relations with human and non-human others” (Braidotti 4). In the novel, ‘Astrophage’ serves as the vital matter. It possesses the capacity to affect and be affected rather than existing as a passive material subordinate to human control. Hence, the binary epistemology of the self is sterilised of sovereignty and transformed into an embedded and relational subject. The resulting revised epistemology is relocated within relational material processes, rather than being the exclusive product of human autonomy. Finally, immanence through vital matter demonstrates that agency is distributed across both human and non-human entities, suspending the sovereign’s self’s claim to epistemological supremacy.

## **Conclusion**

The suspension of the ontological and the epistemological sovereign self through posthuman immanence, relationality, ontological hygiene, and collective reciprocity between the human and the non-human calls for conviviality and epistemophilia. Conviviality here refers to

the relational coexistence and mutual flourishing of humans and non-humans within shared material and ecological networks, where no single entity occupies a position of ontological or epistemological supremacy. Braidotti says, “It (Posthumanism) is the dream of producing socially relevant knowledge that is attuned to basic principles of social justice, the respect for human decency and diversity, the rejection of false universalisms; the affirmation of the positivity of difference; the principles of academic freedom, antiracism, openness to others and conviviality” (Braidotti 11). Braidotti also talks about how Posthumanism and humanity should encourage epistemophilia over epistemology. She says, “This aspiration also shapes my vision of what a university should look like – a *universum* that serves the world of today, not only as the epistemological site of scientific production, but also as the epistemophilic yearning for the empowerment that comes with knowledge and sustains our subjectivity” (Braidotti 11). She exclaims how epistemophilia plays a crucial role in fighting against the: “provincialism of the mind, the sectarianism of ideologies, the dishonesty of grandiose posturing and the grip of fear” (Braidotti 11). Ultimately, *Project Hail Mary* transforms epistemophilia from the humanist desire and thirst to master and possess knowledge into a posthuman impulse to encounter, relate and coexist. In this epistemological reawakening, conviviality emerges as the ethical horizon where humans, alien life, and vital matter become companions in the shared labour of survival. The sovereign self gives way to a convivial cosmos, where knowledge is no longer owned but co-created, and where the universe is understood not through domination, but through relation.

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