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**ACULTURE, COLONIALISM AND POSTHUMANITY: A POSTCOLONIAL
READING OF THE EIGHT NOVELS IN IAIN M. BANKS' *CULTURE* SERIES**

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Abstract: The study will attempt a Postcolonial reading of the Posthuman elements present in the eight novels belonging to Iain M Banks' legendary *Culture* series. The eight novels undertaken for the purpose of the study are as follows: *Consider Phlebas* (1987), *The Player of Games* (1988), *Use of Weapons* (1990), *Excession* (1996), *Look to Windward* (2000), *Matter* (2008), *Surface Detail* (2010) and, *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012). The study will show how colonial and imperial impulses not only co-exist along with Posthumanism and post-singularity but also derive sustenance from the manifold technological advancements that are the hallmark features of such Posthuman cultures. Also, the paper will further attempt to analyze how even in a Posthuman and post-scarcity age, the religious tropes and beliefs will continue to exert a strong influence that shapes the worldview of various groups and civilizations while posing interesting questions for Culture. In the godless universe of the Culture series, various super sentient AIs and powerful machines strive to assume godhood.

Keywords: Posthumanism; Transhumanism; Cyber culture; Singularity; Postcolonialism; Iain M. Banks; Culture Novels.

Introduction:

The study will show how the truly Posthuman and godlike empire of Culture acts like a colonial, imperial power that seeks to model the world after its own pattern and feels itself to be morally superior to other technologically less advanced civilizations in the galaxy. Culture's attempt to shape the entire galaxy is primarily driven by the Posthuman, Post-singular equivalent of 'White Man's Burden' under the assumption of which it seeks to uplift, ennoble and transcend other civilizations that it deems as primitive and barbaric. Now, since the entire study will be founded on the analysis of Trans-/Posthuman elements in the *Culture* series, it is of great importance that we first discuss very briefly the meaning and scope of Posthumanism. It is to be noted, however, that while in most of the traditionally acclaimed definitions of Posthumanism, the emphasis quite clearly lies on the human as these viewpoints seek

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to present Posthumanism more as reconfiguration or remodeling of the human and his relationship with the world, the study will adopt a predominantly anti-Anthropocentric posture which is quite in keeping with the spirit of these works. This study will show that in a truly Posthuman civilization, especially the one where a galaxy-spanning imperial power like Culture dominates, the human will be displaced, debentured, and moved to the periphery while sentient machines will occupy the central position. While Posthuman, post-scarcity empires like Culture will continue to function as technoutopian heaven, yet any disobedience to or criticism of their authority will be met with severe consequences. Let us now look at some of the most critically acclaimed definitions or viewpoints posited by some of the most renowned philosophers of our time. According to Hayles, "...the posthuman view configures human beings so that they can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals" (2-3). Ranisch and Sorgner note: "posthumanism actively tries to overcome the predominant dualistic paradigm and seeks for a new ontological framework" (22). Now, if Posthumanism is "an umbrella term, covering a span of

related concepts: genetically enhanced persons, artificial persons or androids, uploaded consciousnesses, cyborgs and chimeras (mechanical or genetic hybrids)" (Thweatt-Bates, *Cyborg Selves* 1), then Banks' *Culture* series is undoubtedly an unparalleled exercise in the field of Posthuman literature. However, as has been already stated earlier, the Posthumanism of Banks is essentially anti-Humanist, in that it displaces and decenters the normal, unaugmented human the center to the periphery and instead of projecting him as becoming equal to various other non-human or machinic agents around him, the machines and the non-humans are shown as occupying the dominant position. Cary Wolfe's definition of Posthumanism posits such a picture of Posthumanism in which the humanist view of the human placed at the center of all rational thoughts is demolished "...posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore, a historical development that points toward the necessity of new theoretical paradigms (but also thrusts them on us), a new mode of thought that comes after the cultural repressions and fantasies, the philosophical protocols and evasions, of humanism as a historically specific phenomenon" (Wolfe xv-xvi). This view is again repeated in

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Halberstam & Livingstone's definition in *Posthuman Bodies* (1995).

According to them, "The posthuman does not necessitate the obsolescence of the human; it does not represent an evolution or devolution of the human. Rather it participates in redistributions of difference and identity" (10). Speaking in Braidotti's terms, we may say that in the *Culture* novels, it is the "Zoe, the non-human, vital force of life", or "the transversal entity that allows us to think across previously segregated species, categories and domains" (A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities, 42) which reigns supreme. The Minds are the most extreme illustration of the power of 'Zoe' in this high Posthuman culture. Braidotti has also maintained that Posthumanism fosters an "enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human..." (*The Posthuman*, 48). This is also quite true in the case of the novels, where we see man and machine, mind and matter, the living and the dead, real and virtual all come together to complement and co-exist with each other. However, Braidotti's view that "to be posthuman does not mean to be indifferent to the humans, or to be de-humanized (*The Posthuman*, 190) is what seems to be contradicted in the novels time and again. In the extreme Posthuman environment of the novels, we see humans as we know them today are not only

becoming marginalized and otherized but also pushed to the periphery and whoever undergoes a Trans-/Posthuman transformation no longer seems to relate to his/her non-augmented counterpart in any recognizable way. So, the study stresses that the *Culture* novels should best be studied as an affirmation of the non-/anti-Anthropocentric power of Posthumanism. Though the study has not adopted any formal theoretical framework as proposed by the scholars of postcolonialism, the spirit of the postcolonial perspective employed throughout the study to analyze *Culture* and its motives is largely derived from the ideas and theories of Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Hardt and Negri. Said's emphasis on the "political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference" (43) between the normative and ideal, and the other or strange is quite relevant in our analysis of the actions of *Culture* and other colonial empires that seek to annex, expand, threaten and subdue other groups and smaller, less advanced civilizations. Also, the *Culture* wants to normalize and stabilize the galactic neighborhood around it through indirect means of colonization the parallel of which is again to be found in Marx and Engels' comments on the bourgeoisie in their *The Communist Manifesto*: "the bourgeoisie ... draws all, even the most barbarian nations into civilization, it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e. to become bourgeois themselves. In one

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word, it creates a world after its own image” (1976, vol. 6: 488). The Culture, even though is not a bourgeoisie power but a techno-socialist one where everyone in the society has an equal share in all the resources, yet behind this benevolent mask it attempts to create a world after its own image not through direct annexation, but by compelling other cultures to accede to its demands and then join with it. Also, Frantz Fanon’s idea of countering the colonialist impulses of the dominant power with violence bears close parallels to the wars that various smaller cultures engage in with Culture. Fanon writes, “colonialism is not a thinking machine nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence” (*The Wretched of the Earth* 84). In the same work, Fanon further remarks that it is through force and force alone that the state of colonization or decolonization can be ultimately realized: “...there is no compromise; no possible coming to terms; colonization or decolonization is simply a question of relative strength” (84). From Fanon’s point-of-view, the wars that other seemingly barbarous powers fight against Culture form part of the greater process of decolonization, since “Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature. Their first encounter was marked by violence,” (qtd. in Lawrence & Karim, 79). These viewpoints will be extremely helpful in

grasping the full implications of the animosity and resentment that various developing powers often feel towards the Culture. Also, equally important is Hardt and Negri’s (2000) viewpoint that presents the colonial empire as like “a network of powers and counterpowers structured in a boundless and inclusive architecture” (167), that “invade, destroy and subsume subject countries within its sovereignty” (181) to further strengthen its own hegemonic stature. This is also the case with Culture, which operates through networks of machine minds and clandestine organizations, meddles with the internal affairs of other rising powers, and even occasionally orchestrates conflicts from within to topple them. Thus we see that adopting the postcolonial viewpoints will be extremely helpful in grasping the full implications of the animosity and resentment that various developing powers feel towards the Culture.

Last but not least, the study also attempts to see that how an engagement with the religious topes and beliefs in the posthuman culture is also necessary to acknowledge and appreciate the resistive power of the religious ideals that challenge and counter the imperial, expansionist and colonial impulse of the godlike, galactic-scale civilizations like Culture. Indeed, as the analysis of the novels seems to further make it clear to us, the elements that appear to pose most challenges to Culture’s mission of homogenizing and normalizing

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every aspect of the galactic civilization are the religious beliefs and practices of certain civilizations which it collectively labels as barbarous and rebellious. In a Posthuman culture, these religious beliefs and practices are reshaped and modified by the countless technological advancements as machinic power continues to rise to dominate and control each and every aspect of the lives of the humans, humanoids, transhumans and posthuman beings, and this, in turn, prompts Culture to respond to the problems in its own unique way, mostly indirectly but sometimes directly too. Culture firmly believes, like a true colonial, imperial master in intervening by covert and overt means in the affairs of other civilizations in order to bring order in its own terms and thus maintain stability while solidifying the firm grip over its galactic-scale hegemony. The study throws light on the radically transformative power of advanced technologies in the Posthuman culture that can be either used by the Culture to assert and reinforce its perpetual dominance over other civilizations or can be wielded by the rebel powers against its authority.

2. Novel-wise Discussion:

(i) *Consider Phlebas* : The first novel in the series is *Consider Phlebas* (1987). The title is taken from the fourth section of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) named "Death by Water". Banks here intends to "demystify" the epic format of space opera "to bring it down from heroes and princesses to the level of the grunts", just as

Eliot demystified the epic legend of the Holy Grail in the particular section of *The Waste Land*. The atmosphere and the background of the novel are purely Posthuman and post-singular where the fully posthuman Minds control everything but do not seek to enslave or imprison the inhabitants of different civilizations. Culture, however, has grown out of absorbing and subsuming several smaller and technologically less advanced civilizations within itself. This reinforces our conviction that the posthuman, post-scarcity civilization of Culture is indeed highly colonial, imperial at its very core. Commenting on the nature of post-scarcity civilization such as Culture, Brown stresses on an unlimited supply of energy and the role of supersentient AIs: "post-scarcity interstellar civilization that rests on two pillars; access to unlimited supplies of energy [...] and the existence of benign, sentient, Artificial Intelligences" (Brown, 626).

Also, descriptions of such God-like Elder civilizations like Dra'Azon which have decided to 'Sublime' or upload their persona in hyper-dimensional reality also challenges our limited sense of the material reality bounded by our mundane perceptions of time and space and prepares us for a new world of adventure. Even after undergoing Sublimation or cybernetic transcendence, civilizations like Dra'Azon fail to let go of their colonial impulses. The Dra'Azon empire colonizes in the name of

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preserving the planets which have been destroyed as a result of some cataclysms and are now called 'Planets of the Dead'. Dra'Azon thus can be said to be equivalent to some kind of gods in the post-apocalyptic worlds. Dra'Azon belongs to the Sublimed civilizations, the highest and most powerful rung of the power strata. The Sublimed ones like Dra'Azon occupy a higher dimensional plane of existence and seldom interact with corporeal and embodied entities who are still bounded in the bodily form of existence.

The novel primarily centers around the action of one character named Bora Horza Gobuchul, who is one of the panhuman Changers who can assume various shapes and change into any being he desires and is also an Idiran agent. The Changers destroy all attempts to distinguish between not just the male and female but also the original and the simulated since the Changers can alter even the genotype of their cells while keeping the original structure of their native stem cells intact. Most of the humanoid species which put emphasis on the external appearance as a means of ascribing identity find it almost impossible to see through the incredibly flawless impersonation or disguise of the Changers and as such they kill the Changers as soon as they see one. The Changers compel us to speculate about the ambiguities and ambivalences that invariably accompany a genderless or bodiless discourse in a Posthuman culture.

As Melzer remarks, "Reconfigurations of gender roles and gender identities, as well as sexual desires, are central to the challenging of existing social orders—and the body becomes the main contested territory" (Melzer, 20). She also comments on the subversion of the gendered binaries through the construction of gender-neutral or highly androgynous entities: "Science fiction's nonnormatively gendered and sexed bodies explore not only how transgendered identities are technologically produced but how they rely on existing notions of how sex, gender, and sexuality are correlated, at the same time as they subvert the gender binary" (Melzer, 29-30). A Changer almost completely resembles the Cyborg as envisaged by Haraway, in that it is "a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity" (150). The Changers also embody Haraway's "hope for a monstrous world without gender" (Haraway, 181). Now, Horza Gobuchul has been assigned with the task of capturing a Culture Mind from the planet Schar's world where it has taken refuge following the galactic-level Idiran-Cultural war. Now, Idirans had their beliefs entrenched firmly in their religious ideas which was based on the idea of one true God referred to as the *Great One (Chapter 1)*. Their warships

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bear the lines from Quran “*Idolatry is worse than carnage*” (2:190), and traits like hybridity, plurality, man-machine symbiosis which are some of the hallmark features of Culture appear to them as highly repugnant combination of things they most detest: “*The Culture must seem like some fiendish amalgam of everything the Idirans have ever found repugnant*” (340) . To them, the Minds on which the very foundation of Culture rests also appear as “*the very image and essence of life itself, desecrated. Idolatry incarnate*” (341). They also cherish the beliefs about souls residing in biological bodies and their journey after death to the Upper World is also guided by their religious beliefs of the transmigration of souls. Culture, however, has been strongly opposed to their belief systems and religious thoughts. However, as the Culture citizens are not so thoroughly indoctrinated in the values of sacrifice, and sufferings for the greater good or for any religious ideals, the Culture could not afford to take the risk of waging an all-out war against the Idirans lest it destroys their own hedonistic technoutopia of unrestrained wish fulfilments. So, in the early years of war, the Culture evacuates all their citizens from the Vavatch Orbitals which was under the Idirans’ radar, while also simultaneously deploying huge warships against the latter. Thus instead of letting their heavenly Vavatch Orbital fall into the hands of Idirans, the Culture following the ‘scorched

earth’ policy destroys it completely before defeating the Idirans.

Now, coming back to the discussion of the actual plot, we find the panhuman Changer Bora Horza Gobuchul’s rival is one Culture citizen named Perosteck Balveda who is a Special Circumstancer, a member of the military intelligence unit of Culture during the Idiran-Cultural War. Bora Horza Gobuchul is a humanoid and although he feels no strong affinity towards the cultural values of Idirans, he still wants to fight for them because of his deep-rooted apathy and disgust for the Culture, since the latter, according to him, are so dependent on the machines that they gradually destroying the Culture humans. Idirans too are not particularly concerned about the dignity of the individual and they hold even a humanoid or ‘biotomaton’ like Horza in low esteem: “the Idirans regarded as essentially an animal (their word for humanoids was best translated as “biotomaton’)...” (Banks, *Consider Phlebas* 32). However, Horza has felt the need to side with Idirans for they value human life, no matter how small or petty it appears before the massively advanced and yet highly mechanical Culture civilization. In chapter one, we meet the first human character Balve accompanied by an AI known as knife missile. The authority and prowess of the Culture is ultimately based on the power of the Minds and it is the Minds that Horza holds to be primarily

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responsible for dehumanizing the entire galactic culture.

However, in the actual description of the Minds, they appear to us as quite different from the picture portrayed by Horza. The novel describes, “The culture had placed its bets ... on the machine rather than the human brain. This was because the Culture saw itself as being a self-consciously rational society; and machines, even sentient ones, were more capable of achieving this desired state as well as more efficient at using it once they had” (85-86). The Culture seems to have valued the machinic minds over human minds purely out of its consideration for achieving the most efficient and advanced form of computation imaginable. The Minds' attitude towards the human mind is mostly condescending and which is quite expected since they are the linchpins of the colonial, imperial Culture empire. The Minds sometimes appear fascinated by the fact that “such a puny and chaotic collection of mental faculties could by some sleight of neuron produce an answer to a problem which was as good as theirs” (85). As for the other humans, Culture seems to be quite careful about their well being in general: “There were in excess of eighteen trillion people in the Culture, just about every one of them well nourished, extensively educated and mentally alert” (86). Even though for certain characters like Horza, Culture may appear to be a great Posthuman civilization which is more

machinic than human, yet the novel describes the Culture as a “seemingly disunited, anarchic, hedonistic, decadent mélange of more or less human species, forever hiving off or absorbing different groups of people...” (34-35). So, despite being a Posthuman civilization with a benevolent intention for those who do not oppose or pose a threat to it, it still depends on the colonization of technologically less advanced humans and humanoid species for furthering itself. However, Horza holds a completely contradictory attitude to this. He has always believed that the ordinary Culture citizens could never have wanted the Idiran-Cultural war on such a galactic proportion; in fact, it has to be a part of the long-term strategy of the Minds. Horza thinks that Minds wanted to cleanse the galaxy of the “wasteful and inefficient” human race and thus help it “make it run on nice, efficient lines, without waste, injustice or suffering” (36). The Culture has always stressed its pluralistic identity composed of both humans and machines and as such no sign or symbol is enough for representing it: “The Culture was every single individual human and machine in it, not one thing” (149). However, since the entire atmosphere of the novel is Posthuman, the very dichotomies between the living and the dead and between real and virtual have been annihilated. In the games in Culture, the real and the virtual intermixes into each other. In these games, there are Players and the Lives, and “The Lives were all humans”

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(194). In another card game called Damage, “whenever a player lost a life he lost a Life — a living, breathing human being” (195). The game also allows its Players to alter the emotional states of other players by just beaming the simulated set of experiences: “...virtually every emotional state the human brain was capable of experiencing could be beamed at another player or used for oneself” (196). So, from a Baudrillardian viewpoint, we may state that the simulation has already subsumed and supplanted the real in this posthuman age of absolute hyperreal. This has also become a tool for absorption and colonization of the different groups and cultures for such technologically advanced civilizations as Culture. The impact of this overwhelming power of hyperreal capable of masking and distorting the real will become an even more important theme in the second novel of the series, namely *The Player of Games*. The first book ends with Idiran Empire looking to wage an all-out war against the Culture and in the process threatening to destroy all the civilizations in its way thus provoking a counter-attack from the Culture, and the factors, namely “the loss of its purpose and that clarity of conscience; the destruction of its spirit; the surrender of its soul” (457) which have prompted the Culture to respond to the Idiran attack are profoundly human. However, the first novel seems to have prepared us for further appreciating and experiencing the inevitable rise of Culture as the one

absolute imperial power in the whole galaxy, whose authority no civilization or group can dare to challenge without risking its own destruction.

(ii) *The Player of Games*:

The crux of *The Player of Games* (1988) can be summarily expressed in the following lines appearing in the novel itself: "All reality is a game. Physics at its most fundamental, the very fabric of our universe, results directly from the **interaction of certain fairly simple rules, and chance**" (Banks, *The Player of Games* 39). This view of the entire universe as a game governed of a set of rules and dictated by pure chance and randomness is also echoed in Hayles’ essentially Posthuman vision of the reality that portrays the world as a program being run on a cosmic computational substrate: “Edward Fredkin and Stephen Wolfram [who] claim that reality is a program run on a cosmic computer. In this view, a universal informational code underlies the structure of matter, energy, spacetime—indeed of everything that exists” (Hayles, 11). In one of the interviews given to Michael Cobley in 1990 for the Science fiction magazine *Science Fiction Eye*, Banks stated that the objective of a game should be to teach the players how to regulate the dynamics of behavior in a basic interpersonal level, thus helping them to better understand their relationship with the society around them and help them grow: “The morality of games is the rules. Games have a very

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definite and set morality, you play according to the rules or you don't play at all.... It's trying to make the connection between the games that societies play on each other and on the individuals within those societies and the games played on the basic interpersonal level ... in the books I try to use games as symbols of the way we react to one another and to society" (Eye to Eye: An Interview with Iain Banks, 27).

In this work, we see a depiction of the humans floating leisurely in a socialist, post-scarcity techno-utopia where the Minds and their drones virtually control every aspect of the lives of the common humans. Here, the virtual has not only supplanted the real but indeed established itself as the paramount entity. Also, when the godlike authority of Culture faces threats from another massively powerful but highly hierarchical society named Azad, the clash of ideas ensues, and with it comes the actual confrontation. To Culture, the Azad is barbaric and recalcitrant and thus needs to be taught a lesson or be civilized in Culture's own ways. So, Kipling's idea of 'White Man's Burden' seems to be the main motivating agent in shaping Culture's attitude to Azad. Culture has always presented itself either as an aloof spectator and pacifist that only seeks to normalize and equalize the galactic neighborhood by civilizing the barbarians. It always maintains that for a technologically advanced civilization it is impossible to become space-faring and primitive at the same time: "It is unusual for us to discover an imperial power-system in space. As a

rule, such archaic forms of authority wither long before the relevant species drags itself off the home planet, let alone cracks the lightspeed problem, which of course one has to do, to rule effectively over any worthwhile volume" (74). In this second novel, we come across the partly posthuman and mostly transhuman protagonist named Jernau Morat Gurgeh who is a brilliant player and a Culture citizen living in the ring-world of the Orbital. Gurgeh "would sleep only two or three hours each night, and the rest of the time he was in front of the screen... He was glanding the whole time, his bloodstream full of secreted drugs, his brain pickled in their genofixed chemistry as his much-worked mainland - five times the human-basic size it had been in his primitive ancestors - pumped, or instructed other glands to pump, the coded chemicals into his body" (95-96). He has very few competitors to challenge him in any strategy games and this has led to his dissatisfaction with life. The novel is based on the paradox of loss of desire and possessiveness in an age of excess. In the post-scarcity society of Culture since any individual can have anything he/she wishes, there is no real purpose, drive or desire in the lives of most of the characters and since these drives are an integral part of what makes us humans, the Posthuman, post-scarcity age seems to have altered the very definition of what we consider human. The novel depicts a post-scarcity techno-utopia which is "invaded by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories

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rather than the ground of being,”(Hayles, 5), the very posthuman nightmare that Hayles has talked about. In the Culture cities, the people not only regard their bodies “as fashion accessories” but are also not encumbered with the rigid boundaries of sex and gender; rather with the aid of bio-genetic enhancements they change between sexes to enjoy the promiscuity, fluidity and malleability of sex. When Gurgeh converses with a girl named Yay, this aspect of fluidity and interchangeability of sex becomes clear. Yay thinks Gurgeh is somewhat primitive since he has not yet experimented with his sexuality: “There's something very... I don't know; primitive, perhaps, about you, Gurgeh. You've never changed sex, have you?’ He shook his head. ‘Or slept with a man?’ Another shake. ‘I thought so,’ Yay said. ‘You're strange, Gurgeh.’ She drained her glass” (24). This is a clear illustration of what Melzer dubs as the phenomenon of implosion of gendered binary divisions in a cyborg feminist culture: “the implosion of binaries facilitated by technology will make it possible to think and act beyond Western dualistic reasoning — including binary gender categories” (24). This dissolution of the strictly maintained gender binaries is one such thing that is realized only within a Posthuman culture, and Yay seems to be pointing at this when she converses with Gurgeh. The Minds seem to work as agents catalyzing the process of transcending the very limits of corporeality and embodied nature of human existence. The memory banks the Orbital Hub Mind stores the

human memories and consciousness in the most sacrosanct way imaginable: “The Culture had theoretical total freedom of information; the catch was that consciousness was private, and information held in a Mind - as opposed to an unconscious system, like the Hub's memory-banks - was regarded as part of the Mind's being, and so as sacrosanct as the contents of a human brain; a Mind could hold any set of facts and opinions it wanted without having to tell anybody what it knew or thought, or why” (Banks, *The Player*, 80). Also, it is through the immersion into the virtual realities that have been constructed by the Minds that the boundaries between reality and hyperreality seem to get dissolved. Culture’s ability to weld human and machine consciousness together along with the Hub's memory-banks’ “distributed cognitive system” (Hayles 289) remind us of Hayles’ remarks about embodiment, the possibility of erasure of the body and achieving transcendence of it: “the posthuman offers resources for rethinking the articulation of humans with intelligent machines” (Hayles 287).

However, like the colonized subjects, humans do not possess any individual liberty or personal freedom in a true sense. Patrick Jackson and James Heilman (2008) have put the condition of humans thus: "For Culture humans, it simply makes sense to live in such a way that they are more or less insulated from chance catastrophes, and in this way the Culture’s commitment to reason helps to reinforce its commitment to

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individual liberty by giving its citizens the maximum freedom to do whatever they please without having to worry about environmental restrictions" (10). In the novel, the master player Gurgeh similarly observes, "The individual is obsolete. That's why life is so comfortable for us all. We don't matter, so we're safe. No one person can have any real effect any more" (103). Gurgeh has only a few friends and lives his life in the hope of finding a worthy opponent for him so that he gets to rekindle his old thrill in the gaming. Gurgeh gets to satiate his desire for heroic adventures when Contact and Special Circumstances present him with a seemingly golden opportunity to participate in the real game of the Empire of Azad. From here on, the real and the virtual world of gaming gets blurred and Gurgeh discovers that the game he is about to play is a complex game of life and death where the winner gets to be the Emperor of Azad. The game is built around an incredibly complex model of actual life: "as precise and comprehensive a model of life as it is possible to construct... and such is the pervasive nature of the idea of the game within the society that just by believing that, they make it so. It becomes true; it is willed into actuality" (103-104). Gurgeh is told that the game has been developed over the course of several thousand years and is so complex that "no human brain could possibly cope with a game on such a scale. It was impossible. It had to be" (103). Even though the Empire of Azad looks technologically sophisticated and highly progressive, yet when compared

with the Culture, it appears as a highly primitive, barbaric, and medieval civilization. It conducts eugenic experimentations to create a third sex called the apices who are intellectually vastly superior to normal males and females. The Azad empire's sexual power-balance rests on the dominance of the intermediate or third sex called the Apex ones, who are neither males nor females, and it is this sexual division that Gurgeh finds hard to understand since his own linguistic skills are rooted in the binaristic gender divisions of Culture society: "I have chosen to use the natural and obvious pronouns for male and female, and to represent the intermediates - or apices - with whatever pronominal term best indicates their place in their society, relative to the existing sexual power-balance of yours. In other words, the precise translation depends on whether your own civilisation (for let us err on the side of terminological generosity) is male or female dominated" (92-93). So, even though Culture is purely Posthuman, and its citizens most often transgress the binary divisions of gender, still the gendered way of identifying things continue to determine the linguistic mode of expression. For Azad, even amidst endless waves of gender disparity, discriminations based on sexes and sexual repressions, it violates the binary gender division by adopting a tripartite one. The more Gurgeh learns about Azad empire, the glaring the contradictions seem to become: "He learned more about the Empire itself, its history and politics, philosophy and religion - its beliefs

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and mores - and its mixtures of sub species and sexes. It seemed to him to be an unbearably vivid tangle of contradictions; at the same time pathologically violent and lugubriously sentimental – startlingly barbaric and surprisingly sophisticated - fabulously rich and grindingly poor (but also - undeniably - unequivocally fascinating)” (99). Azad is racist, divided on caste-lines, inflicts forced birth control measures, and seeks to homogenize its citizens along the lines of the same body color and the same physical structure. Paradoxically, whenever the Empire of Azad wants to justify its cruel and inhuman acts: “it uses the phrase ‘human nature’ they used whenever they had to justify something inhuman and unnatural” (303). The Empire of Azad is often compared to a predator, a beast, a virus: “it was like an animal, a massive, powerful body that would only let certain cells or viruses survive within it and as a matter of course killed off any and all others, automatically and unthinkingly” (304). Azad, though outwardly strikes as a civilized posthuman society is at the core is nothing but an imperial, colonial, and expansionist race that “simply produced an insatiable desire for more victories, more power, more territory, more dominance” (268). So, unlike Culture which relies on mostly covert and secret operations organized and orchestrated by its units named Contact and Special Circumstances for toppling governments and rulers across the galaxy, Azad is highly overt and explicitly imperialistic. A character named Worthil

explains to Gurgeh that the concept of an Empire and dominance through the hierarchically organized power structures are synonymous with each other: “Empires are synonymous with centralised - if occasionally schismatised - hierarchical power structures in which influence is restricted to an economically privileged class retaining its advantages through - usually - a judicious use of oppression and skilled manipulation of both the society's information dissemination systems and its lesser - as a rule nominally independent - power systems. In short, it's all about dominance” (71). It is only when Gurgeh is stranded in such a society and blackmailed into playing that he realizes the vast difference between his own civilization, i.e., the Culture and this supposedly heroic Empire of Azad. As Simone Caroti observes, “The very language he (Gurgeh) uses to craft meaning out of his surroundings betrays his belonging to the Culture” (Caroti, 100). Gurgeh realizes that since he himself has come from a civilization like Culture which seeks to “minimize” the process of imposition of values on its residents, it is hard for him to come to terms with how the Azad seeks to impose its values. When Gurgeh is finally compelled to play the game of Azad it destroys all boundaries between virtuality and reality. When Gurgeh starts playing the game he begins on the losing side because he initially has failed to immerse himself in his role in the game, but later emerges victorious when he finally accepts his role and immerses his heart and soul in it. In the

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words of Brendon Keogh, when Gurgeh stops thinking of himself as an “autonomous and distinct from the game”, and instead begins believing in his virtual avatar as an entity “redistributed across a network of information and actors and materialities” (par. 27), that he finally overcomes the challenge. The gamer in the process of playing the games can be said to assume a Posthuman state of being through a redistribution of selves in both the virtual worlds of the game and also in the real, embodied world of physical existence. In Hayles’ words, the player becomes “seamlessly articulated” to the machine through a digitally mediated reality, where the simulation serves as his/her digital prostheses. As a gamer, Gurgeh seems to become a Posthuman cyborg through the process of incorporation of the virtual as well as the material hardware in his flesh. In Keogh’s words, “the player embodies a hybridised body, incorporating flesh, hardware, and virtual objects and beings into their corporeal schema...the hybridity of the videogame text demands a cyborg identity that understands the player as posthuman, as a subject distributed and emergent” (par. 27). Hayles in her article titled ‘Cybernetics’, also similarly asserts the power of “mixed reality”, or “an integration of virtuality and actuality” that helps “physical and virtual realms [to] merge in fluid and seamless ways” (“Cybernetics” 148), in catalyzing the seamless integration between our bodies and the digital realm. Now, Gurgeh becomes Culture’s champion by defeating

Nicosar, the player who has represented the Empire.

The novel also introduces the strategies of switching roles and identities and employing deceptions as part of a grander elaborate strategy which will be the hallmarks of Banks’ later novels. The novel describes how Gurgeh’s drone Mawhrin-Skel has betrayed him by leaking the footages of the games in which Gurgeh has cheated thus blackmailing him into playing the game of Azad. Also, towards the end, we come to know that the drone named Flere-Imsaho which has accompanied Gurgeh to the Empire’s home planet Ea to play the game and also later saves him from the Emperor by shooting the latter dead, is none other than the drone Mawhrin-Skel in disguise. The game in Azad is, in fact, a part of a much larger plot of the Culture to get rid of the barbaric and corrupt regime of Azad and Gurgeh has been implanted by Culture itself in the Azad’s gaming competition to topple the empire from within thus avoiding any possible loss of life and property that an overt interference from Culture could have caused. Commenting on the ending of the *The Player of Games*, Patricia Kerslake asks these questions: “Does the Culture’s use of Machiavellian tactics render it morally reprehensible: a shell of technosophistication surrounding a vacuum of pure anarchy and cynicism? Or is Banks giving us another taste of authentic postcolonialism, by showing us that imperial behaviour does not require the frame of empire in order to accomplish its

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ends, but that imperialism is as much a single act as it is a mode of thought or philosophy” (*Science Fiction and Empire*, 180). Throughout the novel, it feels like as if the highly unambiguous and straightforward way of storytelling itself is being complicit in its attempt of deliberately portraying the Empire of Azad as a downright barbaric, and racially, sexually and socially prejudiced in the most glaring ways imaginable in order to justify Culture’s intervention in the dismantling of the Empire. Gurgeh remembers how he along with most other Culture citizens have been taught from their very childhood to distinguish between the civilized, benevolent, cultured, and morally upright Empire and the barbarians. This belief in a highly compartmentalized and water-tight distinction between the cultured and the barbarians have met a lethal blow at the end when he has come to realize that in their unbridled lust and relentless pursuit of power, authority, greed, and control both the Empire and the barbarians become one and synonymous with each other: “Empires had fallen to barbarians before, and no doubt would again. Gurgeh knew all this from his childhood. Culture children were taught such things. The barbarians invade, and are taken over. Not always; some empires dissolve and cease, but many absorb; many take the barbarians in and end up conquering them. They make them live like the people they set out to take over. The architecture of the system channels them, beguiles them, seduces and transforms them, demanding from them

what they could not before have given but slowly grow to offer. The empire survives, the barbarians survive, but the empire is no more and the barbarians are nowhere to be found. The Culture had become the Empire, the Empire the barbarians” (258). Edward Said’s epochal work ‘*Orientalism*’ (1986) has especially stressed on this aspect of the colonial model of indoctrination through which the Eastern cultures or the Oriental ones are labeled as barbarous, crude and uncivilized while the Western or the Occident is portrayed as the fountainhead of all knowledge, morality, cultural and intellectual refinement, etc. Said has mentioned how the European prose always “points out defects, virtues, barbarisms, and shortcomings in the language, the people, and the civilization” (142) of the colonized while glorifying their own as the one that is superior to everything Eastern.

(iii) Use of Weapons:

Use of Weapons (1990) is the third novel in the Culture series and here we see a peculiar way of interweaving two storylines across three chapters which also involves the use of both Roman numerals as well as words. The Culture is again presented as a highly imperial and colonial power that wants to shape and mould the entire galaxy around them after their own pattern which they deem right. One colleague of the Zakalwe, the protagonist named Beychae whom Zakalwe proceeds to rescue in the opening section of the novel states the following about Culture, "They want other people to be like them, Cheradenine...The

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Culture believes profoundly in machine sentience, so it thinks everybody ought to, but I think it also believes every civilization should be run by its machines. Fewer people want that" (231). Culture, in the godless universe of the novel does not seem to be interested in directly meddling with the affairs of the humans and humanoids in the planetary level, rather it is through the indirect means of implanting its agents and assassins that it seeks to shape the course of things to come.

The three broad Chapter divisions in the novel are named 'The Good Soldier', 'the Outing' and 'Remembrance' respectively and the Roman numerals are used in descending order (XIII, XII, XI...), while the chapter numbers in spelled words are in ascending order. This opening section deals with the adventures of one Diziet Sma and a drone of Special Circumstance named Skaffen-Amtiskaw. Reflecting on the moral ambiguity and incomprehensibly complex ethical codes of such an agency as Special Circumstances and Contact, Sma remarks, "...in Special Circumstances we deal in the moral equivalent of black holes, where the normal laws - the rules of right and wrong that people imagine apply everywhere else in the universe - break down" (253-54). While explaining to Zakalwe about Special Circumstance's relationship to the larger galactic empire of Culture, Sma refers to Culture as "the great, irresistible force behind you" the real nature of which they will never know, because people like them

"are the edge" of this Culture's galaxy-spanning empire and thus they should aim to be "a tooth on the biggest saw in the galaxy" (241). Culture appears to act like a distant, cold and callous galactic God, working on its own inscrutable plan but largely indifferent to the sufferings or wellbeing of its recruits like Zakalwe and more often than not, they are treated as disposable assets. This is also applicable in a larger context for the Culture as well. Sma and her drone want to enlist one mercenary from Culture named Cheradenine Zakalwe whose memory is bristling with images of a past war, the image of a chair, "a ship that was not a ship", "a man with two shadows", a woman and "that which cannot be seen; a concept; the adaptive, self-seeking urge to survive" (143). The chair will become extremely important as we will discover in the context of the unfolding of the events in the novel. We will also find that his work is more about Zakalwe than Culture or any other characters. In the forward-moving, linear section of the novel, we see Zakalwe as one of the most accomplished wielders of weapons and a master assassin whom Culture engages for executing their secret plans, while in the backwardly moving section of the novel with its flashbacks, prologues and epilogues where we see Zakalwe's past unveiling he himself acts as the weapon.

As the story unfolds we find that Zakalwe is looking for a woman named Livueta who is one of his sisters, the other being

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Darckense. It is further revealed that Zakalwe once engaged in a terrible war with his cousin and rival Elethiomel who used to have a secret affair with Darckense. In the battle, when Zakalwe's armies were almost on the verge of winning the war, Elethiomel kidnapped Zakalwe's sister Darckense and took her to a monstrous battleship called Staberind only to eventually kill her and then use her bones and skins to make a chair which he then gifts to Zakalwe and Livueta. Now, it was on such a small, white chair that Zakalwe first discovered Darckense and Elethiomel having sex, and now the chair has been fashioned by Elethiomel to function like a twisted, psychological weapon which will continue to haunt Zakalwe for the rest of his (or Elethiomel's) life. The biggest shock comes when Livueta later discloses that it is Zakalwe himself who is Elethiomel in disguise. Elethiomel had donned the identity of Zakalwe when the latter had killed himself during the battle for the Staberinde. The main storyline ends with Zakalwe/Elethiomel's brain feeling troubled and tormented upon the disclosure of these twisted events, with Livueta leaving him and Sma feeling terrified and speechless at the revelation of these. So, it is against this background of such complex plotting, parallel storylines, and characters in disguise that the action of the novel unfolds. In the first narrative sequence marked with words (One, Two, three...), we find the description of Zakalwe's

forward-moving action unfolding in the present, while in the reversed sequence of chapters marked with Roman numerals we get to experience how the past has played out with him. Zakalwe has been attacked, assaulted, slashed, burned, and even decapitated only to 'retro-age', 'regrow', and rejuvenate again to his previous self. Zakalwe himself has been modified and upgraded so often that he has essentially become a living, breathing weapon cherishing the grim vision "that nothing could be excluded, that everything was a weapon" (104), and this is what drives him relentlessly forward in his quest. However, despite possessing all the traits of a transhuman individual, Zakalwe also possesses the soul of a philosopher, and when the occasion permits, he seems to be reflecting on the puniness and insignificance of human endeavors in the face of the inexorable march of time in the cosmic timescale and the need to find pleasure in whatever one does to keep oneself busy in the present: "...people die; stars die; universes die. What is any achievement, however great it was, once time itself is dead?" (240). As Caroti has pointed out, "There's no God in Banks' universe, no objective network of meaning transcending the bondage of the moment, so the pain of sentience—which the Culture has managed to reduce to its maximum allowable extent—consists in the struggle to laboriously invest the moment with meaning, knowing that such investment

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remains only as long as we do” (126). In a godless universe, it is Culture that wants to assume the godhood by manipulating, stabilizing, and normalizing everything around it after its own vision and thus elevating itself to the status of one supreme and absolute authority. Even when Zakalwe/Ellethiomel is trying to atone for the sins of his past by doing whatever good he can as can be seen in his accompanying the Culture agent Diziet Sma, there is an inescapable feeling that everything is being played out according to Culture’s secret plans which is unfathomable for the mere mortals. The Culture bestows its citizens with endless showers of technoscientific blessings and satisfies all their cravings and desires to the extreme. Here, we see gene-technologies have gifted people with inhuman sexual prowess, and immersive virtual reality environments and seamless integration through neural interlinking between minds and machines have opened the floodgates for indulging in virtually endless and uninhibited ways of wish fulfillment. Also, the notion of private property is dead and since anyone can have anything in the post-scarcity Culture society, no one seems to own anything in a real sense. The drone Skaffen-Amtiskaw is sarcastic in his remarks and particularly dismissive of human intelligence in general. Skaffen-Amtiskaw derisively mocks the Humanists by labeling them as ‘carbon fascists’, since they “refuse to acknowledge machine sentience fully; they exploit proto-

conscious computers and claim only human subjective experience has any intrinsic value” (99). In the unfolding of the events as described in the novel, we see that even such powerful characters like Zakalwe are ultimately nothing but pawns to the grand, imperial Posthuman masters like Culture. Still, for the Culture’s agents such as Diziet Sma, the Culture feels like a techno-utopia at its peak in which each and everyone finds a total fulfillment of all his/her desires. It is a place of ultimate and absolute self-actualization and a utopia of inexhaustible promises and dreams. Faren Miller considers Culture to be “a civilization which commands a vast extent of space and time without turning into a clichéd galactic empire. The Culture is not ponderously, decadently neo-Roman or neo-Chinese, not blandly utopian or blatantly imperialistic. It can interact with less sophisticated systems in a great number of ways, from diplomacy to conventional warfare to gamesmanship to subtle, sometimes sneaky, sometimes daffy manipulations.” (“*Use of Weapons.*” *Locus*, 15). Simone Caroti has pointed out the role of this novel in truly laying the foundation of the sprawling, Post-human, techno-utopian Culture universe for the later novels to play on in the following words: “In its basic setup, *The Use of Weapons* already contained the germ of the dramatic tension that would one day fuel every Culture story: a government-free, labor-free, non-violent, moneyless,

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humane, technologically advanced, AI-administered utopia possessed of bottomless resources that, in those few instances when it has to “stoop to using this sort of person,” finds it necessary to hire someone to handle the unpleasant aspects of having to deal with barbarians at the gates” (27).

(iv) Excession: Now, the fourth installment in the Culture series is the short story collection titled *The State of the Art* which will not be a part of the present study, and so, we will jump straight to the fifth work in the Culture series which is the novel *Excession* (1996). The novel is unique because for the first time it presents Culture as inferior to some greater power which has entered the galaxy from another universe. In facing the Excession, it is not Culture which the novel portrays as being in a danger of getting colonized, rather its colonizing impulses become fully explicit. The novel lays bare Culture’s innate colonizing tendency in the following words: “In a curiously puritanical way for society seemingly so hell-bent on the ruthless pursuit of pleasure, the Culture thought this was itself wrong, and so decided to attempt to accomplish what the gods, it seemed, could not be bothered with; discovering, judging and encouraging - or discouraging - the behaviour of those to whom its own powers were scarcely less than those of a deity” (77). Here, we see a battle of power between two Posthuman, post-scarcity galactic-level civilizations, namely Culture

and Affront over the question of dealing with another even more powerful entity named Excession, which is nothing but “a black-body; an ambient anomaly” and fifty kilometers in diameter. The Culture, following the events of the Culture-Idiran war, seems to be too reluctant to use direct military action for containing its latest rival named Affront, and as such it employs covert strategies for compromising the aggressive postures of the barbaric and expansionist Affront which closely resemblances the Empire of Azad and Idirans in many respects. The Excession seems to remind the Culture of another such object which appeared some thousands year earlier in a dark corner of the universe where there was a trillion years old star and even then another GCU or ‘General Contact Unit’ named *Problem Child* attempted to unravel its secrets only to disappear completely from existence along with every member of its crew. The Culture is built on the use of Hyperintelligent AIs called Minds and it is implied that just as the human mind can harbor some rebellious and destructive thoughts the AI Minds too can harbor them but it becomes a huge problem when they choose to project it outwards. William S. Haney II has specifically described this extensionist aspect of Posthumanism as “a biology/machine symbiosis that will promote this extension by artificially enhancing our mental and physical powers, arguably at the expense of the natural

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tendency of the mind to move toward pure awareness” (vii). In the Posthuman atmosphere of the novel, we see ships and machine minds not merely interacting with humans on some superficial level but are actively partaking in the act of creation of their own reality. While the ship Sleeper Service is creating simulations of the scenes from past battles using the bodies of the hibernating humans as its medium, another ship named Grey Area interacts with the human bodies and minds so deeply that others have started calling it Meatfucker.

The novel describes the power and godlike splendor of the Minds in vivid details and how in their hyper-dimensional ‘Irreal’ worlds and “pleasure-domes of rhapsodic philosophical ecstasy” (130) all built upon the ‘metamathical’ rules they create and recreate new universes at will. In the “multi-dimensioned geographies of their unleashed imaginations”, the Minds operate like a true God “vanishingly far away from the single limited point that was reality” (131). Creuze writes, “Minds truly are gods, irreverent gods yes, but omniscient and omnipotent, at least from the perspective of human beings” (Being a Posthuman, 45). In the infinite-dimensional Minds’ world, the possibilities that are realized exceed everything that the human mind can even dare to dream of: “All that humanity knew and could understand, every single aspect, known, guessed at and hoped for in and of the universe was like a mean and base mud hut compared to the vast, glittering cloud-

high palace of monumentally exquisite proportions and prodigious riches that was the metamathical realm” (131). The metamathical realm of the Minds is governed by the hyperdimensional rules and thus reminds one of Timothy Morton’s “hyperobjects” that “involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to. In particular, some very large hyperobjects, such as planets, have genuinely Gaussian temporality: they generate spacetime vortices, due to general relativity. Hyperobjects occupy a high-dimensional phase space that results in their being invisible to humans for stretches of time... Hyperobjects are not just collections, systems, or assemblages of other objects. They are objects in their own right... (Morton 1). Still, even such virtually omnipotent entities as the Minds will later appear to be succumbing to the basest of human emotions, i.e., plotting and hatching conspiracies against their hated opponent all for ultimately sustaining the imperial, colonial power structure of the Culture. However, even such infinitely powerful entities as Minds can feel threatened when faced with a truly alien power from outside their state of experiences. Excession acts like the strange, unknown which threatens to subvert the authority of the Culture on the galactic scale and when it destroys a formidable spaceship, the Culture to respond to this newly perceived otherworldly threat. For Culture, the Excession is “something

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excessive. Excessively aggressive, excessively powerful, excessively expansionist; whatever” (52). Following Morton’s definition, we may quite comfortably categorize Excession as a ‘hyperobject’ since ‘hyperobjects’ are “hyper in relation to some other entity...” (*Posthumanities : Hyperobjects* 1). Even powerful Posthuman empires like *Affront* and *Culture* identify it as something excessively powerful and extremely dangerous which was forged at the very singularity when the universe came into being and both think that perhaps this entity can be used as some portal to another universe. Robert Duggan has remarked that this novel “inaugurates a movement within the *Culture* novels toward the *Culture* being revealed as a smaller, younger and less powerful civilization than hitherto suspected’ (*Inside the Whale*, 7). In Banks’ cosmography, he envisages a multi-layered reality nested one within another and all arranged in concentric networks of pure energy, and “in the very centre of all the concentric, inflating universes lay the place they had each originated from, where every now and again a cosmic fireball blinked into existence, detonating once more to produce another universe” (303). It is into this energy grid that Excession seems to be linked in an inconceivably efficient way.

The Excision problem seems to come directly under the label of Outside Context problem which is a general term used to

describe a particular problem where one culture or civilization feels threatened with the presence of a totally alien group, culture, or civilization from outside. In the novel, though the *Affront* reminds one of the Empire of Azad yet it poses no threat to the supremacy of *Culture* as the former is primitive, unrestrained, barbaric, and is built on mere copies of *Culture*’s artifacts and habitats. The *Culture* is empowered with the computational power of the Minds which the *Affront* simply does not possess, yet the *Culture* like a highly astute and extremely farsighted imperial power decides to teach the *Affront* a lesson in their own unique ways. The two prominent human characters that we come across in the novel are Genar-Hofoen and his ex-lover Dajeil Gelian, but even here the trans-/posthuman elements are fully at play. Genar-Hofoen and Dajeil Gelian were once two lovers and they each had changed sexes so often that they each got impregnated by the other till Gelian attacked Genar-Hofoen, and the unborn child got killed. Since then, Dajeil remains eternally pregnant with her child. This is the most extreme example of what Melzer refers to as “Reconfigurations of gender roles and gender identities, as well as sexual desires” (20). Also, as the only fully awake member of the *Sleeper Service*, a General Systems Vehicle (GSV) which the Interesting Times Gang (ITG) had ordered to journey towards Excession, Dajeil is of special concern to the *Sleeper Service*, and the *Sleeper Service* demands

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that Dajeil and her lover Genar-Hofoen are given the chance to be reconciled for one last time. Genar-Hofoen has always maintained that any type of advanced culture should not meddle with or attempt to replace the natural course of evolution and for this reason; he has disliked the techno-utopian vision of Culture and its Minds.

However, as the novel makes it clear, “It was not that Genar-Hofoen hated the Culture, or particularly wished it ill in its present form;” rather, he mostly feels privileged to have been born into the Culture and not some other primitive and suffering species “where you suffered, procreated and died and that was about it” (160). So, even though as a human being Genar-Hofoen sometimes pines for those imperfections and uncertainties that any pre-posthuman civilization must necessarily contain, he is not particularly appreciative of those purely human or even humanoid civilizations which are yet to transcend to a Transhuman or Posthuman stage. However, the novel also makes it clear that mere technological advancement does not always guarantee concomitant attainment of an uncannily massive degree of refinement and sophistication in the cultural aspects. The Affront is one such example of a civilization that is techno-scientifically Posthuman and yet highly primitive and barbaric in their treatment of their citizens. They like to play god to a certain sub-class

or section of their population, namely the geldings and the females: “Affronter society rested on a huge base of ruthlessly exploited juvenile geldings and a sub-class of oppressed females who unless born to the highest families - and not always even then - could count themselves lucky if they were only raped by the males from their own tribe” (158).

The Affront masters have genetically modified the female sex so that the act of sexual intercourse becomes highly unpleasant and also extremely painful for them while tweaking the genetic makeups of the Affront males in such a way that they cannot help but rape a female whenever they happen to set their sights on one. Thus “those creatures had all, accordingly, been amended as the Affront saw fit, for their own amusement and delight. The result was what one Culture Mind had described as a kind of self-perpetuating, never-ending holocaust of pain and fear” (157-58). Affronters are also particularly aggressive and display an excess of jingoism and it is the Affront that has been seeking a war with the Culture. The Culture, even though are way more superior to Affront decides to exercise restraint and find ways to peacefully resolve their conflict. Also, we realize that Culture is not the most powerful entity in the galaxy, rather Excision and the Sublimed are two even more powerful Posthuman civilizations than even Culture

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itself. In the next novel *Look To Windward*, we shall see how immensely and almost infinitely powerful Sublimed entities sometimes leave their hyper dimensional realm to enter into and interfere in the affairs of such corporeal civilizations such as the Chelgrians. So, it is quite clear that the various Posthuman and post-singular civilizations are almost always driven by some overt or covert colonial, imperial, and totalitarian tendencies.

As the action reaches towards its climax, we see that the war between *Affront* and *Sleeper Service* has been the result of the manipulation of certain members of the ITG or a group of Minds. Now, when Excision decides to destroy the entire fleet of *Sleeper Service*, the description reveals the godlike power of the Excision: "It was like the energy grid itself had been turned inside out, as though the most massive black hole in the universe had suddenly turned white and bloated into some big-bang eruption of fury between the universes" (398). However, *Sleeper Service* sends off its 'mind-state' to the Excision thus making it aware of all the conspiracies and machinations that have led to this critical situation, and only then the Excession suddenly disappears. It is revealed later that the Excision is like a doorway or a bridge for those who want to travel to a different universe and it often appears in the dark corners of some universe to seek out the members of

civilizations who deserve to be transported to the more sublime planes of higher dimensional reality. Again, we see that in the novel the humans have been decentred from their central position in an utterly Posthuman environment but still various humane qualities like self-awareness, consciousness, and desire for hatching conspiracies, etc. continue to exert a very strong influence on the decision making processes of even the Sublimed Posthuman entities.

(v) *Look to Windward*: The novel *Inversions* is the fifth in the *Culture* series, but since the trans-/posthuman elements are not particularly strong in this novel, it will not be part of our present study. So, our next focus will be on *Look to Windward* (2000) which is the sixth novel in the *Culture* series and fifth in our discussion. The title of this novel again is taken from the same section of Eliot's *The Waste Land* in which 'Consider Phlebas' is found: "Gentile or Jew/O you who turn the wheel and look to windward/Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you." The novel deals with the problematic phenomenon of the caste system in a Posthuman culture. In fact, as we know the problem of colonial persecution and the perpetuation of the colonial power do have some direct and indirect influence on the organization and stratification of society based on rigid caste-based hierarchies. Now, the main action of the novel is placed against the

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backdrop of events which is related to the problem of cast based division of society in a Posthuman context. Culture itself has also failed to successfully interfere and achieve its objective of toppling the barbaric empire from within through its cover strategy of getting a low-caste person elected to a highly prestigious position in the Chelgrian society. As a result of Culture's manipulation, a Civil War in the society has taken place claiming the lives of some five billion Chelgrain citizens.

The events in the novel take place some eight hundred years after the events of the Idiran-Culture war and the light from the Twin Nova or two induced supernovae is slowly reaching the Masag Orbital. As a result of those twin supernovae, "Worlds had died, entire biospheres had been snuffed out and billions of sentient creatures had suffered - albeit briefly - and perished in these twin catastrophes" (27).

A great part of the Posthuman world-building is based on the use of a technology called 'Subliming', by which one can upload himself into an abstract world composed of pure energy post one's physical death: "it meant leaving the normal matter-based life of the universe behind and ascending to a higher state of existence based on pure energy" (144). The novel equates the act of Subliming to that of the evolution of the stars across the main sequence and as such it is considered to be

an indispensable act for any civilization that wants to be counted as a transhuman civilization: "To flourish, make contact, develop, expand, reach a steady state and then eventually Sublime was more or less the equivalent of the stellar Main Sequence for civilizations" (146). The uploading or subliming of the souls to a virtual afterlife and resurrecting or 'reventing' one's personality following one's death in the physical body bear close resemblance to what Stephen Cave refers to as the 'Resurrection Narrative' and 'Soul Narrative' respectively. The Resurrection Narrative is simply "the belief that, although we must physically die, nonetheless we can physically rise again with the bodies we knew in life. In such a situation death and life both lose their significance and with it the very definition of human" (Cave, 13), while the "believers in the Soul Narrative have mostly given up on this earthly frame and believe in a future consisting of some more spiritual stuff" (Cave, 14). In the novel, Quilan reflects on his Posthuman, post-mortal condition thus: "In the old days people died and that was that; you might hope to see them in heaven, but once they were dead they were dead. It was simple, it was definite. Now...people die but their Soul keeper can revive them, or take them to a heaven we know exists, without any need for faith. We have clones, we have re grown bodies - most of me is regrown; I wake up sometimes and think, Am I still me?" (144). These acts of

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resurrection or reincarnation in new bodies post one's death in the material world is rooted deeply in the Christian idea of Rapture and resurrection. Culture itself facilitates the Subliming of entire societies and civilizations at one go. Martine Rothblatt in her book *Virtually Human* (2014) terms this act of Subliming as the attainment of 'techno immortality' through the preservation and continuation of cyber consciousness.

In her words, "Cyber consciousness implies what is called technoimmortality. Immortality sans technology, living forever, or until the end of time has of course never come anywhere close to happening and is in any event an eschatological concept beyond this book. Humans die within a few decades, and some other forms of nonanimal life can live for centuries or millennia, or even be revived from stats is after millions of years. None of this approaches the end of Time. Instead, we think of immortality as a spiritual concept (as in heaven or via reincarnation) or as a remnant of human existence (as in "Bach's music will live forever"). Cyber consciousness will make it possible, for the first time, for a person to live in a kind of techno immortality forever *in the real world.*" (283). Quilan is not an immortalist in a true sense, as he is mainly driven by the necessity of fulfilling his mission that he embraces techno immortality. As Stephen Cave has pointed out, immortalists do not

care about their bodies as long as their brains keep running on properly functioning psychological software: "The immortalists who dream of uploading and downloading their minds do not worry about whether their new body will have the same atoms as their previous body. In fact, we saw that they often dream of shiny *new* bodies made of much more reliable stuff than carbon-based flesh and bone. All they think matters are that a newly created brain has the right psychological "software" running on it" (118). For Quilan, "The human body is a machine – a massively complex one, to be sure, but still a machine" (de Grey, "Zeno's Paradox and the Faith that Technological Game-changers are Impossible," 94).

However, a serious problem arises when Culture or more specifically its foreign and military affairs managing department called Contact decides to interfere in the workings of a highly caste-based society of the Chelgrians, a predator-evolved species. Even the humans with all their bestial instincts "could not claim quite such a purity of predatoriness in their past as Chelgrians" (112). The Contact/Culture's interference in Chelgrian affairs led to a widespread civil war that took the lives of millions of citizens. Now, in the present, one Chelgrian named Major Quilan decides to avenge his wife's death in that Culture-induced civil war and for this purpose, he decides to contact the gifted high-caste Chelgrian composer named Mahrai Ziller

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who following the events of civil war has been living in an exile in the Masaq Orbital. Major Quilan actually intends to destroy Masaq's Orbital Hub Mind since it is related to the Culture. Also, Quilan is totally convinced that it was because of the Culture's interference that the civil war was fought, and as such he wants to exact his vengeance on the Culture and its military branch Contact, while Ziller has consciously shunned the Chelgrian society to live in a self-imposed exile. Ziller wants to destroy the Masaq and its Orbital Hub Mind because he knows that this avatar is the simulation of one ancient Mind which was a warship named Lasting Damage that took part in the Idiran-Culture war. A great part of the plot is centered on the workings of this Posthuman Orbital Hub Mind of Masaq while Ziller and Quilan seem to move on with their own hidden agendas and strategies. As we delve deeper into our analysis, we discover how the technologies of uploading through 'Soulkeeper devices', wormhole transport, and mind-machine symbiosis play a huge role in deciding the course of the unfolding of the event in the novel. The Soulkeeper devices remind us of Rothblatt's idea of 'mindfile', 'mindware' and 'mindclone'.

The Orbital Hub houses its AI substrate Mind which is a post-singularity level superintelligent machine capable of constructing simulations on the scale of entire continents and even planets: "The

machine oversees all aspects of the Orbital's running. There are thousands of subsidiary systems tasked with overseeing all but the most critical procedures, but the Hub can assume direct control of any and all of them at the same time. The Hub has millions of human-form representative entities called avatars with which it deals on a one-to-one basis with its inhabitants. It is theoretically capable of running each of those and every other system on the Orbital directly while communicating individually with every human and drone present on the world, plus a number of other ships and Minds" (246).

In the ultra-hedonistic, highly egalitarian, and fully post-scarcity society the Minds have obliterated all concepts of needs, wants, and desires. Ziller and Kabe, one of the humanoid journalists who accompanies him in the Orbital once wonder what it means to be alive in such a situation when the Minds not only take care of every aspect of the lives of its citizens but have annihilated the very concept of death. In fact, there is no death by accident unless one wishes for it since even in the most extreme of sports like lava-rafting, people do not die from accident or mistakes as the Masaq's Hub Mind is always there to take care of each and every aspect of the game and maintaining the safety of the players is its highest priority. In the absence of any death or permanent loss, the real-world games grow to be more like their virtual-world counterparts where there are

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several lives and any form of loss in a real, physical is clearly absent. The civilizations that were to later become Culture, had in the past attempted to construct a most flawless and mind-bogglingly immersive kind of virtual reality environment where the real would be supplanted with and subsumed by the virtual: “The dozen or so civilisations which would eventually go on to form the Culture had, during their separate ages of scarcity, spent vast fortunes to make virtual reality as palpably real and as dismissibly virtual as possible” (311). The simulated reality can faithfully replicate all the aspects of the real and even fulfill all of one’s desires and thus offers one the chance to become cyborgs by adopting digital prostheses. As Baudrillard observes, the simulation completely distorts and destroys the binary of real and virtual: “The impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real, is the impossibility of staging an illusion. Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible. It is the whole political problem of the parody, of hypersimulation or offensive simulation, which is posed here” (1994, 19). However, sometimes it becomes necessary for Culture to inject some forms of artificiality into the hyper-immersive virtual environment so that the inhabitants in the virtual realm remains aware of the distinction between real and virtual, for if there is no sense of the real, the very idea of virtual will be challenged. The novel describes Culture’s construction

of the hyper-immersive hyperreal thus: “...the level of accuracy and believability exhibited as a matter of course by the virtual environments available on demand to any Culture citizen had been raised to such a pitch of perfection that it had long been necessary - at the most profoundly saturative level of manufactured-environment manipulation - to introduce synthetic cues into the experience just to remind the subject that what appeared to be real really wasn't” (311-12). This reminds us of Baudrillard’s following words where he too maintains the need to inject realness and artificial cues to keep alive the distinctions between real and virtual: “The only weapon of power, its only strategy against this defection, is to reinject realness and referentiality everywhere, in order to convince us of the reality of the social, of the gravity of the economy and the finalities of production” (*Selected Writings* 182). The novel further elaborates the vividness and flawlessness of the simulated environment that Minds have constructed thus: “Even at far less excessive states of illusory permeation, the immediacy and vividness of the standard virtual adventure was sufficient to make all but the most determinedly and committedly corporeal of humans quite forget that the experience they were having wasn't authentic, and the very ubiquity of this commonplace conviction was a ringing tribute to the tenacity, intelligence, imagination and determination of all those individuals and

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organisations down the ages who had contributed to the fact that, in the Culture, anybody anytime could experience anything anywhere for nothing, and never need worry themselves with the thought that actually it was all pretend” (312-13).

The inhabitants of Masaq are primarily humans and the Mind of the Orbital in its previous incarnation as the warship *Lasting Damage* caused untold destruction in the form of three Cultural Orbitals, millions of humans, and finally destruction of itself also. Now, the Orbital Hub Mind seeks to protect its Masaq inhabitants at any cost. The composer Ziller feels that Culture or its Contact was never directly responsible for the catastrophe that was the caste War among the Chelgrians, rather the situation was already getting so unstable and critical as a result of some “three thousand years of ruthless oppression, cultural imperialism, economic exploitation, systematic torture, sexual tyranny and the cult of greed ingrained almost to the point of genetic inheritability” (61), that it had to explode in one way or another. However, in various ways, even Posthuman civilizations like Culture seem to be incapable of overcoming the various human emotions like vindictiveness, prejudiced attitude, and obduracy towards others. When Idirans wanted to make peace with Culture, Culture only insisted on a total and unconditional form of surrender

which further prompted the Idirans to wage war against Culture in which they induced those two stars to go supernovae resulting in ‘the gigadeathcrimes’ in which trillions died.

The novel makes it clear that Culture’s highly obdurate and adamant stance towards Idirans was responsible for that massive war: “The Idirans had committed the acts, the gigadeathcrimes - their monstrous weaponry, not that of the Culture, had been directed first at one star, then the other - yet still, arguably, the Culture might have prevented what had happened” (27). In the Posthuman atmosphere, both the machine intelligence as well as the warships like GSV warships not only show certain kinds of human emotions but also the ability to empathize with the untold sufferings and afflictions of the human citizens. Two GSV ships, namely, the *Lasting Damage I* and the *Lasting Damage II* are described as twins who took part in the Idiran War and when one of the twins died, the other felt every bit of its brother’s agony and pain in its death throes.

The avatar of Masaq’s Mind is the new incarnation of the once-GSV ship and it tells Ziller that “War can alter your perceptions, change your sense of values. I didn’t want to feel that what I was doing was anything other than momentous and horrific; even, in some first principles

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sense, barbaric” (280). So, in a posthuman age in terms of emotional intelligence and power of philosophizing we see how the boundaries between machines and humans have already gotten blurred to the point of being non-existent. Minds are also highly capable of speculating on the religious aspects in their philosophizing. The avatar of the Mاسaq’s Mind says, “Never forget I am not this silver body, Mahrai. I am not an animal brain, I am not even some attempt to produce an AI through software running on a computer. I am a Culture Mind. We are close to gods, and on the far side” (282). When Ziller asks the Mاسaq Orbital Mind how it felt when it had to witness its twin die along with several thousands of Orbital citizens, The Mind responds by saying that it felt "Appalled. Compassion. Despair. Detached. Elated. God-like. Guilty. Horrified. Miserable. Pleased. Powerful. Responsible. Soiled. Sorrowful" (282).

Now, Quilan is hell-bent in destroying the Orbital Culture Mind through a device that is located in his head and he has blanked out his memories when he reaches Mاسaq. His act could cause the death of some five billion people, an “approximate number of souls barred from the beyond by the catastrophe visited upon us by the Culture” (285). In fact, the ‘souls’ are the virtual post-mortal selves of the deceased Chelgrians during the civil war who have been denied entry into the Chelgrian Aferlife till their death is

avenged, and it is for this reason that Quilan seeks to exact his revenge against Culture’s Mاسaq Orbital. The already Sublimed group of Clegrians known as the "gone before" or Chelgrian-Puen have constructed their own afterlife or heaven based on the Chelgrian mythology and its religious tropes, where the souls of those who have died in a war are not allowed to enter into heaven unless their deaths are avenged with an equal number of deaths. This idea of ‘soul for a soul’ is referred to as “the stuff of barbarism, of the old cruel gods. The death of each Chelgrian had to be balanced by the death of an enemy, and until that balance had been achieved the fallen warriors were held from heaven” (200). Thus again, we see how the religious sentiments bordering on a fanatical obduracy are fuelling the conflicts on a galactic scale. Religious ideas of transmigration and eschatological beliefs about ascending to the Heavens seem to have assumed a radically Trans-/Posthuman dimension in a universe where technological advancements have literally annihilated all distinction between real and virtual.

The use of such religious aspects like committing actual sacrifices of living individuals for preparing the passage for the souls of the deceased to heaven, the concept of a virtual afterlife, etc. all invest the work with a strange religious aura albeit of a Transhumanist flavor. The ending of the novel is particularly brutal and gruesome as the avatar inside Mاسaq’s Hub and Quilan

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are locked in a mutual embrace before being executed and annihilated. The sapient culture terror weapon EDust assassin reminds us of Culture's unimaginable capabilities of weaponizing pure terror when it comes to protecting the empire from any challenge from outside. The EDust assassin seeks and destroys the Chelgrian priest and each and every conspirator who are allegedly involved in the conspiracy of destroying the Orbital. Quilan along with one of the Masaq Minds decides to commit suicide at the exact same moment when the light from the second nova reaches the hub.

The novel is a manifestation of what Chris Palmer in his March 1999 article in *Science Fiction Studies* terms as a "postmodern imaginary" operating "mainly by excess, overload, and exacerbation" (Palmer 1999). The Culture in its core is still presented as a colonial, imperial power operating on a galactic scale which does not shirk from using absolute and brutal power to quench even the first glimmer of a possible future rebellion in order to show its neighboring unruly empires their place and also to further strengthen its grip over the subjects it rules. Huyler, a dead general, and a former companion of Quilan whose digital persona is implanted in Quilan's Soulkeeper device to remind him of the Culture's role in the civil war once observes that for Sublimed Posthuman civilizations like Culture, interfering in the affairs of

other civilizations and producing unrest, chaos, tumult, and agony have become games for such godlike civilizations: "*They have become so blasé about such matters that they try to interfere with as few ships as possible, with as few resources as possible, in search of a sort of mathematical elegance. They have made the fates of entire civilisations part of a game they play amongst themselves, to see who can produce the biggest cultural change from the smallest investment of time and energy*" (300). Consider in this regard Darwin's words in his *Descent of Man* (1871): "When civilized nations come into contact with barbarians the struggle is short ..." (156). This also reminds us of Gloucester's words in *King Lear* when reflecting on the callous, apathetic and supposedly cruel attitude of the Gods towards puny human beings he says, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport" (*King Lear* 4.1. 32–37).

(vi) *Matter*: "Ultimately the galaxy, indeed the sum of the universe in its entirety, was mostly nothing; average it all out and it made a pretty good vacuum. But within the foci of matter that were the systems, the stars and planets and habitats – what a cornucopia of life was there!" writes Banks, in the novel *Matter* (161). Banks' words remind us of Hayles' view on the relationship between information and body in which she advocates not for a total

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transcendence of the body but a kind of informational and computational view of a cohesive reality rooted in the human embodiment: “embodiment can flow from cellular automata as easily as from atoms. No one suggests that because atoms are mostly space, we can shuck the electron shells and do away with occupying space altogether” (Hayles 12).

Matter (2008) is the eighth novel in the *Culture* series. The action in the novel unfolds on the planet named Sursamen where Shellworlds made of Matryoshka-styled concentric circles of worlds host different species. Shellworld of Sursamen is “an 800-million-year-old construct consisting of concentric layers, built for unknown purposes by a long-vanished race and retrofitted for habitation by successive wave of squatter species” (Letson 2008, 23). In the eighth level of the Shellworld where a feudal and humanoid race called Sarl lives, King Hausk is murdered by one Mertis tyl Loesp, who has been King’s most trusted second-in-command. King’s son Prince Ferbin witnesses the murder and decides to run into exile only to seek help from the more powerful groups who live above them on the surface, while his younger brother Prince Oramen is fooled by tyl Loesp into believing that he will be crowned as the next King while tyl Loesp himself pretends to play the role of a regent

till Oramen comes of age. Now, the Sarls have been engaged in a life-long rivalry with the Deldeyn and tyl Loesp wants to seize this opportunity to engage in a bloody and brutal final war against it which is quite unlike how previous King has approached the issue.

As the story moves forward we see that the struggle between Sarls and the Deldeyn is being orchestrated by a moderately powerful transhuman civilization named The Oct who has been using Sarl as its pawns against Deldeyn. So, throughout the Culture universe, we see how almost without any exception, every superior power attempts to manipulate, colonize, lure and entrap various groups or races which are technologically less advanced than it, so that it could carry out its own hidden agenda through them. The Octs are in fact looking for a Nameles City which is now buried under the Hyeng-zhar waterfalls in the Ninth level where the Deldeyns live. So, Octs colonize the ninth level with tacit approval from the higher level Morthanvled culture. However, this act antagonizes the Aultridia race which is the mentor or guardian to the Deldeyns in the same way as the Octs are to the Sarls. Also, the Sarls seem to have a decent relationship with the Culture. The highest levels in the Sursamen’s Shellworld are known as the ‘Optimae’ or the level of the ‘High Level Involved’, to which the Culture itself belongs along with another

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Posthuman civilization, introduced here, namely the matriarchal Morthanveld. “The Morthanveld were the highest-level Involved species around Sursamen” (92). Even amidst the most advanced and most powerful civilizations, we see there are hierarchies, strata, and various levels of divisions according to their command over technologies. The Involved ones are the second most advanced group in the galaxy next only to the Sublimed ones and even among them, there are subcategories like Low-level Involved (LLI), Mid-level Involved (MLI), and High-level Involved (HLI). The Involved still continue to interfere and intervene in the affairs of the lower level civilizations and in this respect, they are different from the highly aloof and mostly indifferent godlike Sublimed. Another such division can be seen in *Surface Detail*, where the civilizations are subgrouped into ‘Levels’ according to their respective commands over technologies. According to that classification, Culture belongs to the Level Eight, while it is also a High Level Involved (HLI) civilization. So, even in an ultra Posthuman environment, we see the postcolonial impulse manifests itself in terms of these groupings, stratifications, classification, and hierarchization of groups and empires.

The Morthanveld are as much imperial, expansionist and colonial in their attitude as

Culture itself: “The Morthanveld held sway over vast regions of space... They had been there, or spreading slowly out in that direction, for longer than the Culture had existed” (92). Also, “The Morthanveld were technologically on a par with the Culture” (170).

These Optima cultures are not generally interested in meddling with the affairs of the developing cultures below them until the situation demands them to do so. Amidst all these chaos, enter Hausk lineage’s eldest child, Djan Seriy Anaplian, who was ostracized from the Hausk royalty for being a girl but has since been trained by the Culture as a Special Circumstances agent. Anaplian is immensely powerful and a gifted Special Circumstances soldier, but when she decides to return to Sursamen, she abstains from using the full range of her exceptional powers and skills, since at first she is sent by Special Circumstances on a diplomatic mission. It is only when she comes to know of the situation that she reactivates all her extreme enhancements of mind and body, again, at the commands of Special Circumstances. Anaplian seems to illustrate Hayles’ dream of “a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by the fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude, as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a

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material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival” (Hayles 5).

Now, the more highly developed civilizations like Morthanveld or Culture cannot interfere in the affairs of the Shellworlds because of their adherence to a pact or treaty even though Morthanveld is generally depicted as being in charge over the affairs of planet Sursamen and as such free to act without any such constraints that various non-interventionist treaties generally place upon them. So, when Prince Ferbin goes on asking for help from whomever he meets, this protocol forbids the comparatively more powerful civilizations from directly intervening in the affairs of the lower level Shellworlds. Now each of those Shellworlds also contains a Machine Core and in Sarl’s case, it is occupied by one entity named Xinthian Tensile Aeranothaur, whom Ferbin along with all other residents of Sarl worship as their WorldGod. There are the Nariscene, which oversee all political and military affairs and are the mentor-species of Sursamen. One such general from Nariscene states about Xinthia, “They were the second or third largest airborne species in the galaxy and, for reasons known solely to themselves, sometimes one of them would take up solitary residence in the machine core of a Shellworld” (68).

According to Kincaid, “the Xinthia are only the most overt manifestation of a fascination with the idea of godhood that runs throughout the novel” (128). This novel, of all others seems to most explicitly deal with the machinic gods in a Posthuman universe as a great part of the action seems to be directed round and towards the WorldGod, or “the God-beast in the basement” (59). We see how the human and humanoids all are guided by a sense of religiosity even in a culture that is directly under the supervision of a Posthuman empire, and their idea of God is shaped by their socio-cultural conditioning. The theme of religious beliefs runs deep in the novel and religion is portrayed as a very powerful driving force behind much of the actions of the protagonists. However, the belief in the machinic Gods and religious ideas are mostly rooted in desperation and helplessness in a highly divided and uncertain society. Ferbin’s father believed that “only the very poor and downtrodden really needed religion, to make their laborious lives more bearable” (206). The technologically lesser developed species or races like Sarl can be seen as powerless and indirectly colonized subjects who cannot act according to their own interests, rather they always have to depend on the approval of the higher level cultures or powers. This is the hierarchy and colonizing tendency those post-scarcity, Posthuman empires like Culture deliberately seeks to sustain. When Prince Ferbin expresses his inability and

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powerlessness to one Xide Hyrlis, the latter replies to him thus, “What god would so arrange the universe to predispose its creations to experience such suffering, or be the cause of it in others? What master of simulations or arbitrator of a game would set up the initial conditions to the same pitiless effect? God or programmer, the charge would be the same: that of near-infinitely sadistic cruelty; deliberate, premeditated barbarism on an unspeakably horrific scale” (330).

The Prince however never stops harboring a deeply reverent fervor towards his World God. However, like most other Sarlians he too holds a deep-rooted distrust in the Culture and the Minds and never accepts them as their god. He even refuses to invest the act of Subliming with any spiritual aura, but only of it is supervised or encouraged by Culture. While considering World God, Ferbin’s devotion is unmistakably present: “some had made thinking machines that had their own sets of imponderable and semi-godlike powers; some just were gods, like the World God, for example, and some had Sublimed, which itself was arguably a form of ascension to Godhead” (206). The Prince is accompanied by his servant Choubri Hulse both of whom struggle to overthrow the weight of their cultural upbringing and the values they have been taught to adhere for so long. Both of them gradually come to realize that there is only matter which

matters and nothing beyond and that the world is hopelessly random, chaotic, and ultimately devoid of any final purpose or meaning. While traveling on the Nariscene ship, Hulse and Prince realize the finitude and ultimately diminutive stature of their Shell worlds. The futility and meaninglessness of their own trials and tribulations playing out in their narrow level of Shell world become apparent to the Prince Ferbin and Hulse when they struggle to grasp the godlike qualities of the truly Posthuman empires like Morthanveld. Seeing the grandeur of one of Morthanveld’s most populous settlements in the entire galaxy, Ferbin only wonders, “What uncounted lives were lived within those dark, unending braids? How many souls were born, lived and died within those monstrous curling twists of tubing, never seeing – perhaps never feeling the need to see – any other worlds” (380). He further reflects, “We might disappear into this wilderness of civility and progress and never be seen again. We might be dissolved within it forever, compressed, reduced to nothing by its sheer ungraspable scale. What is one man’s life if such casual immensity can even exist?” (381). So, it is this search for the meaning of life by the marginalized others when placed against the enormity of the galaxy-spanning, imperial Posthuman civilizations that invests the novel with a human dimension. The highly class-bound structure of the Sarlian society reminds us of Chelgrian

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stratification based on rigid caste-divisions. Culture again being prompted by the Posthuman equivalent of their 'White Man's Burden', decides to do away with this class-based divisions among the societies once and for all and once again proceeds to interfere with the workings of another developing civilization. The novel too seems to justify Culture's role as a benevolent colonial master whose sole aim is to pattern the entire galactic neighborhood after their own definitions of right and wrong. The climax of the novel features a final battle between Sarlian World God Xinthia and the devilish, machine-god called Iln, which has been accidentally unearthed by Oramen.

(vii) *Surface Detail* The eighth novel in Banks' *Culture* series is *Surface Detail* (2010). Here, the tension between the Real and Virtual takes the center stage as the simulacrum seeks not only to disrupt and destroy the reality but to become the new reality itself. The action takes place in and over the virtual Hells which certain civilizations have constructed as a form of afterlives in which souls of the deceased individuals are sent to be punished for an indefinite amount of time: "It was part of the punishment of some of the virtual souls in that place that each day they be profusely bled for as long as they could without falling unconscious" (54).

The power of the virtual to affect and alter the course of action in the real world is not new in Banks' works and this work is another powerful demonstration of the fact. Here, the main characters are killed, re-killed, brought back to life to be killed again on multiple occasions over and over again. Lededje Y'breq is killed by Veppers only to be brought back through a virtual reconstruction of her previously uploaded strands of personality; the soldier Vateuil dies on several occasions in the virtual battlefield only to come back again and be victorious before finally deciding to take the battle to the real world; Yime Nsokyi dies in the virtual world as part of a bigger plan while Prin and Chay find a way to secretly enter into the virtual world of Hells where Chay, becoming convinced that everything is just a grand illusion enters into another world of virtuality in the already virtual world of Hell. The Culture, like the great manipulative, imperial power that it is, seeks to destroy the virtual Hells from within by attacking the substrates on which the Hells run while appearing from outside as if it has been trying to prevent the attack.

All throughout the novel, various hyper-immersive VR and mind-state transference technologies seem to complement and reinforce each other thereby building a most flawless and immersive posthuman atmosphere: "...life in virtual environments beckoned seductively. Deeply immersive

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and impressive VR was an effectively inevitable adjunct to mind-state transcription technology” (132). The virtual becomes so powerful and immersive that those who have dwelt in those environments become completely oblivious of the material plane of being and instead decide to remain on the virtual world for the rest of their lives. Kurzweil in his *Singularity is Near* envisages a trans-/posthuman vision of an eschatological future which bears close resemblance to the world presented in the novel. He predicts, “we will continue to have human bodies, but they will become morphable projections of our intelligence...Ultimately software-based humans will be vastly extended beyond the severe limitations of humans as we know them today. They will live out on the Web, projecting bodies whenever they need or want them, including virtual bodies in diverse realms of virtual reality, holographically projected bodies, foglet-projected bodies, and physical bodies comprising nanobot swarms and other forms of nanotechnology” (324-25). Turkle in his *Simulation and its discontents* (2009) has commented on this irresistible appeal of the hyperreal or virtual thus, “Simulation makes itself easy to love and difficult to doubt. It translates the concrete materials of science, engineering, and design into compelling virtual objects that engage the body as well as the mind ... Over time, it has become clear that this ‘remediation’, the move from physical to virtual

manipulation... can tempt its users into a lack of fealty to the real ... The more powerful our tools become, the harder it is to imagine the world without them” (7-8). Over the course of some millions of years, The Virtual Afterlives and the process of Subliming to them have gradually acquired an almost numinous and religious dimension: “So, for many millions of years there had been a network of Afterlives throughout the galaxy, semi-independent from the Real and constantly changing just as the galactic community in the Real changed, with civilisations appearing, developing, steady-stating or disappearing, either changing beyond recognition, relapsing in some way or going for semi-Godhood, sidestepping the material life altogether by opting for the careless indifference that was Subliming” (136).

Sebastian Seung, an ardent Transhumanist advocate feels that “it’s the destiny of humankind to transcend the human condition. This is not merely what will happen, but what should happen” (271) and this can be achieved through the uploading of mind and consciousness. Commenting on the possibility of the attainment of a godlike status via such uploading he said, “The bible said that God made man in his own image. The German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach said that man made God in his own image. The transhumanists say that humanity will make itself into God” (273). In the novel, Representative Errun,

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one old pro-Hell campaigner and a staunch supporter of the Hells once attempts to justify the existence of virtual Hells by investing it with a spiritual and religious aura and thus linking the question of whether these virtual afterlives exist with the very idea of God and His will: “we believe that they exist in the greater reality – beyond our limited understanding, and yours – that is the true Afterlife, the one that awaits all who faithfully believe, regardless of whether they have these ‘soulkeeper’ devices or not. We are content to leave such reward and punishment to God. We would not presume to take on the work of God” (254). Again, we see how religious tropes and beliefs are used to justify the various inhuman and cruel practices which in turn pose problems for the Culture even though in the novel it is not Culture but another equally powerful Sublimed civilization that actually puts an end to this practice without causing any significant loss to the Real. Culture and other Sublimed races of Involved Posthumans want to play god before other civilizations who are much less powerful than them but are nonetheless advanced, and as such, strong religious beliefs and principles that these civilizations adhere to pose certain obstacles for their mission.

In the novel *Look To Windward* we have already come across the idea of such virtual Afterlives where all the souls of the Chlegrians want to migrate to after death,

but here alongside the concept of technoutopic Heavens, we also see the Hells in the virtual afterlife in all its gory, gruesome and grotesque details. Various Posthuman cultures want to take the idea of eternal torture to a whole new level by reconstructing in the virtual world the afterlife or Hell where the souls of the dead will be subjected to horrific tortures for the crimes they committed in their earthly existence. Though the Culture and Special Circumstances have always been against institutionalized perpetration of tortures and barbaric treatments, they are initially not much concerned about the Hells. However, the Culture is indirectly involved in it because when one Lededje Y'breq, a sex slave to the notorious industrialist Joiler Veppers dies, her consciousness wakes up in the virtual substrate inside the Culture GSV named *Sense Amid Madness, Wit Amidst Folly*. In fact, even though Veppers himself has murdered her, years before her murder one of the avatars of Culture ship contacted Lededje Y'breq to help her transfer her consciousness to the virtual substrate in the Culture ship and that is why the ship has every bit of her consciousness preserved and encoded in the substrate. So, Lededje gets ‘revented’ or resurrected in her body: “here she was, “revented” as they called it, her soul, the very essence of her being, rehoused – as of only an hour or so ago – in a new body. And a fresh new body, she was relieved to know, not one that had belonged to anybody else” (154).

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Dorien Zandbergen who has studied New Edge, prefers to cast these highly transformational ideas and concepts “in terms of escape from physical limitations”, or sometimes “in terms of ‘re-embodiment’, sometimes in terms of an escape from the bounds of the earth, sometimes in terms of culture-creation and community-building” (95). In fact, in the Posthuman world of the novel, Y'breq is told that one’s soul can be ‘revented’ into anybody one chooses to but since “Context is everything, and the first context we find ourselves in is that of our own body” (100). Thweatt-Bates in his *Cyborg Selves* observes that uploading of one’s persona “is a transhumanist construction, proposed as a desirable but still theoretical possibility for shedding the problematic biological body for a virtual existence or a more durable artificial body” (5). Hava Tirosh-Samuelson in his article ‘Utopianism and Eschatology’ observes, “The uploading of ourselves into human-made machines is the spiritual goal of transhumanism, as it promises transcendence and even immortality: while the body, the hardware of the human computer, will die, the software of our lives, our personal “mind file,” will continue to live on the web in the posthuman future, with holographic avatars interacting in this venue with other bodiless posthuman entities” (163). Lededje also has on her body a beautiful tattoo which used to function as the reminder of her slavery or

the mark of her owner’s ownership, but following the event of her resurrection, becomes a weapon of revenge. So, the beautiful, recursive tattoo which replicates itself into perfect smallness down to her very DNA, no longer remains a Haylesian “fashion accessory” but transforms into “a ground of being” (Hayles, 5).

Now, the civilizations have been divided into two factions, where one group consists of the supporters of Hell, while another is anti-Hell. Vatuail is one such character fighting all his lives in anti-Hell faction and has died numerous times only to be brought back again to life in the virtual world. The virtually endless conflict between pro-Hell and anti-Hell factions plays out in the virtual world of War of Heavens game and is also known as ‘Confliction’: “Confliction was the technically correct term for a formal conflict within a virtual reality – i.e. one where the outcome mattered beyond the confines of the virtual battle environment itself – but mostly people just called this one the War in Heaven” (173). Also, we come across two alien academicians Prin and Chay and one Yime Nsokyi, who is against all forms of body or mind augmentations and is a member of the Quietus. Now, when Prin and Chay decide to visit the Pavulean Hell for gaining firsthand information about the horrific details of torture in Hell, Prin somehow manages to get reuploaded back to his physical self while Chen fails to connect

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back to reality and gets stranded in the hell. Prin gets back to the world above to report the horrific details of the Hell but to no avail, while Chay is placed in the virtual place called The Refuge, where she is directed to develop her faith in religious beliefs and hopes.

Chay has been an agnostic all her life and as such, for her punishments in the Hell down below to be complete the masters of Hell feel she must develop her faith fully. A demon lord says to Chay that “there must be hope. To abandon hope is to escape part of the punishment. One must hope for hope to be destroyed. One must trust in order to feel the anguish of betrayal. One must yearn, or one cannot feel the pain of rejection, and one must love in order to feel the agony of witnessing the loved one suffer excruciation” (285). Chay, however, is so shocked by the gruesome scenes of Hells, that she decides to retreat into the virtual world forever: “The Hell had been virtual, but the experiences and the suffering had felt entirely real. She had lost her mind and retreated to a belief that her earlier, Real life had been a dream, or some thing invented within the Hell to make the contrast between the two all the more painful” (340). The virtual experiences in Hell have subsumed and supplanted her sense of reality and even convinced her that this is the real: “...her real life, she supposed – had itself been a dream, or something that had been part of the torture:

concocted, imposed to make the suffering worse. Now she accepted that it probably had been real, and she had simply been driven out of her mind by her experiences in Hell” (341). The details of the tortures inflicted on the subjects in Hell have been described vividly with gruesome details. The novel describes how, “Far beyond, beneath boiling dark skies, the stream gave out onto a great blood marsh where sufferers planted and rooted like stunted trees drowned again and again with every acidic rain and each fresh wash of blood” (55). Now, Culture has always abstained itself from interfering with the affairs of Hells, and as such the sufferings seem to continue indefinitely with no sign of ever diminishing. However, not all civilizations like to remain passive and non-interventionist in this matter like Culture, “which – despite being firmly of a mind with the anti-Hell side of the confliction – had thought it politic to take no active part in the virtual war” (173). So, the anti-Hell factions decide to put an end to these abominable practices for good all by themselves. Their brave soldier Vatuail first decides to cheat in the “War in Heaven” game where the winning party gets to decide whether virtual Hells will be allowed to run. The game again becomes a medium powerful enough to shape the reality here as it was in Banks' *The Player of Games*'. When all of Vatuail's attempts fail to produce results, he decides to take the war to the real world outside, and as

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such, the virtual and real seem to be heading for an unprecedented head-on collision. Also, Lededje herself befriends a lethal, super-sentient, but "borderline eccentric and very slightly psychotic" warship named *Falling Outside the Normal Moral Constraints (FOTNMC)*, and decides to put an end to the Hells. Now, Lededje also gets the help of one woman from the multi-planet society named Sichultian Enablement, to which Lededje as well as her murderer and slave-trader Veppers belong. In fact, Veppers is the most influential person in his society.

However, the plot gets further complicated when we see that a Level-seven Civilization named Geseptian-Fardesile Cultural Federacy (GFCF) which used to belong to the anti-Hell faction decides to transform the entire Tsungarial Disk along with its millions of habitats into a military ship manufacturing hub. The Disk was rumored to be the basic Substrate on which the virtual worlds of Hells run. The Disk, in turn, is part of the Restoria section which is another offshoot of Contact "charged with taking care of hegemonising swarm outbreaks, when – by accident or design – a set of self-replicating entities ran out of control somewhere and started trying to turn the totality of the galaxy's matter into nothing but copies of themselves" (180). Now, since Joiler Veppers has already bought these substrates, the *GFCF* assures him that they intend to place all the blames

upon Culture itself. So, when the *FOTNMC* warship led by Lededje decides to take action against the Hells, *GFCF* attacks it to prevent Culture from finding about its elaborate plan. During the battle between *GFCF* and *FOTNMC*, most of the Hells get destroyed and the souls are absolved and set free. Finally, we see Vatuail is revealed to be none other than Zakalwe from the *Use of Weapons* who has been seeking her beloved Livueta's forgiveness all along. Vatuail is forgiven by Livueta but Chay decides to stay in the virtual afterlife as the angel of death whose sole purpose would be to provide comfort and hope to the souls of the deceased in this Virtual life by permanently killing them one each day. So, again we see how the Culture though is never directly present yet through the workings of various organizations, secret agents, and groups it makes its presence felt very strongly. The planet-destroying Abominator-class warship *FOTNMC* is a Culture warship, while the group the Quietus to which Yime Nsokyi belongs is part of the Special Circumstances organization which in turn is part of the much larger Contact, which is again a Culture organization.

(viii) *The Hydrogen Sonata* : The last and ninth Culture novel is *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012). In this novel, we come across the events which are set in motion when one of the civilizations named Gzilt

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which joined culture thousands of years ago and is a Level Eight Involved by the time they are introduced to us, has finally decided to Sublime to the higher plane of existence. “The Gzilt were a sort of cousin species/civilisation to the Culture. Nearly founders, though not quite, they had been influential in the setting up and design of the Culture almost ten thousand years earlier...” (73). Gzilt possesses more or less the same technological capabilities as their more advanced counterpart, i.e., Culture: “Gzilt ships were highly regarded – approximately equiv-tech by Culture standards” (91). However, by deciding to Sublime and, by harnessing the full power of the machine Minds, Culture has successfully evolved to a fully Posthuman status while Gzilt have lagged far behind. Various civilizations, even when they are not fully on a level of the Involved, they nonetheless imitates the more advanced ones albeit imperfectly as is the case with the Gzilt. Gzilt relies heavily on AIs, virtual reality technologies and Minds for undertaking voyages across interstellar spaces or for committing acts of annexations: “Minds and AIs in the Gzilt dominion were regarded either as mere tools, without rights, or as housing for the uploaded personalities of ex-humans. Even their warships were commanded not by true individual Minds but by virtual crews of deceased or copied bio-personalities running on highly sophisticated and very fast substrates” (90). So, the difference

between a truly Posthuman and a would-be Posthuman civilization lies in its attitude towards the machine sentience as the former appreciates and utilizes the machinic consciousness and mind to the fullest extent possible. Culture has given full freedom to its Minds to take over and fully direct the course of progress of its civilization and that is one of the reason it is now a full-fledged Posthuman civilization: “The Minds took over long ago. The Culture stopped being a human civilization almost as soon as it was formed; it’s been basically about the Minds for almost all that time” (196). So, while in the initial stages of a Posthuman culture, a co-emergence and co-evolution of the machinic minds and human consciousness as manifest through technologies like mind uploading remains of vital importance, as it continues to expand and extend further, machines do seem to take over and control the rate of progress in the longer run. Rosi Braidotti has also emphasized on this aspect of machinic agency when she writes, “As they become smarter and more widespread, autonomous machines are bound to make life-or-death decisions and thus assume agency” (*Posthumanism* 44). *The Economist* (2012: 11) similarly observes, “As robots become more autonomous, the notion of computer-controlled machines facing ethical decisions is moving out of the realm of science fiction and into the real world.” However, before the Gzilt undertakes the Subliming, an envoy from

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The Zihdren- Remnanter craft attempts to deliver them a message since it has been the custom for all the galactic communities to not only greet each other on the eve of one's Subliming, but also to reveal everything to the race that is about to Sublime no matter how disconcerting its repercussions might be. The Remnanter of a culture is what remains of that culture after once successfully Sublimes to a realm of higher dimensional existence leaving the mundane Real. The Zihdren is an even older civilization than Culture and as such the message they want to send to the Gzilt is of special importance. However, the Zihdren emissary named Ceremonial Guest is killed and its Zihdren-Remnanter craft destroyed in a violent burst of planet shaking energy released by the Gzilt warships but their purpose which was to make sure that the real truth about the Book of Truth does not get out becomes a challenging task even for the Gzilt military. They fear that if the truth about the origin of their highly revered sacred religious text gets leaked, it might discourage many of their citizens from embracing the Subliming and so they decide to track down anyone or anything and hunt every corner of the galaxy to make sure that whoever might be aware of this truth does not get to speak about it. The truth is that their religious text named Book of Truth which has always proven to be miraculously true was in fact a product of an experiment conducted by a Zihdren scientist on the Gzilt culture. This

revelation had come as a shock to the Gzilt leadership and the forces commanded by one Septame Banstegey were then ordered to destroy the Zihdren emissary. Now, Zihdren powers also order the musician with four arms Vyr Cossont to find out a Culture citizen named Ngaroe QiRia who has been alive since the time of the creation of The Book of Truth. In this way, the Gzilt authorities can verify whether the miraculous nature of their scared Book is a fabrication. It is here that Culture gets involved indirectly in the unfolding of the action. So, again in the subtlest and most indirect ways, Culture seems to get involved in this complication and again religious feelings appear to be posing new challenges to the Culture's otherwise unchallenged and universally acknowledged supremacy. Then when Septame Banstegeyn's ships attempt to destroy Cossont, the Culture ship *Mistake Not...* saves and rescues her. Cossont has with her the mind-state that QiRia has given her but QiRia cannot be tracked down so easily since the memories contained in that mind-state have been all erased. Then in order to track down Qi Ria, another of her close acquaintances and a Contact agent named Scoaliera Tefwe is reactivated by a group of Minds. Here too, we see how the story continues to progress towards its culmination through multiple interweaving plot strands which not only complicate the entire situation but also add depth to the world-building effort. Culture once again

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seems to act like a godlike being pulling the strings from behind the curtain and only actively interfering when they think it is necessary to keep the balance of power intact. Culture is friendly toward Gzilt and even congratulates them on their Subliming but it is also keeping a close eye on the next two species who will be taking the much-coveted place of Gzilt once they Sublime into the higher dimensional realm. The realm of the Sublime is described thus: “The Sublime. The almost tangible, entirely believable, mathematically verifiable nirvana just a few right-angle turns away from dear boring old reality: a vast, infinite, better-than-virtual ultra-existence with no Off switch... The Sublime was where you went when you felt you had no more to contribute to the life of the great galactic meta-civilisation” (70). Theologian A. J. Conyers has termed the desire of transcending to a higher plane of existence as “the dream of always transcending limits” (*The Listening Heart*, 147). When one of the ship Minds named *The Zoologist* tries to relate to another ship named *Caconym* the experiences it actually had in the Sublime, the spiritual nature of the experience seems unfishable. The act of Subliming is a purely Posthuman act and as such implies a radical change beyond recognition. No purely biological and unaugmented human being could hope to remain intact after undergoing Subliming for it would annihilate their human nature before transforming them into something

radically different, and only high-level AIs could hope to successfully survive the utter annihilation of the integrity of its being: “all the information you brought with you remained – but the persona, the individual as a functioning, identifiable and distinctive entity – that was gone. Civilisations, and the individuals within those civilisations, survived and flourished in the Sublime over galactically significant periods of time, though they gradually changed beyond comprehension” (23). Patrick D. Hopkins in his article ‘A Salvation Paradox for Transhumanism’ addresses this problem of the radical change of what we consider as the essential human nature upon the attainment of Posthumanity: “Therein lies the problem with the posthuman approach. Radical changes will leave us behind. That poses no problem for the beings that will result, but it also provides no reason for humans to anticipate posthumanity as our future” (79).

As two powerful, colonial, and imperial powers, both Gzilt and Culture share some similarities but the main difference lies in the Subliming, as the former is yet to Sublime while the latter has completed it long ago. When placed in direct comparison with Culture, the Gzilt appear to be a merely developing civilization that can match Culture in terms of their technological prowess and military capabilities but not in other respects. The commander Septame Banstegey is a savage and uncontrolled brute who can go to any

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lengths to ensure a smooth and hassle-free Subliming while its pleasure-loving transhuman citizens like Ximenyr has no other drive to Sublime themselves other than just indulging in an even more hedonistic life than what their embodied existence in the lower dimensional realm currently offers. The Gzilt does not present before its citizens some higher philosophy of life which Culture with its godlike presence does even though Culture's citizens also like spending their artificially extended lives engrossed in various artificially manufactured and digitally mediated forms of pleasures. Gzilt's primary drive for Subliming lies in their faith and their faith is based on their Book of Truth which has proved to them scientifically accurate beyond imagination and thus the Gzilt have derived their purpose and meaning of life the Book and achieving transcendence to the higher plane is part of that purpose: "...the Book further insisted that the Gzilt were a people favoured by fate, by the universe itself, as part of an ongoing thrust towards a glorious, transcendent providence. They represented the very tip of a mystical spear thrown by the past at the future, the shaft of that spear being formed by a multitude of earlier species which existed before them..." (78). The dilemma that the Gzilts are facing over their Book of Truth is a perfect illustration of Clarke's third law which states, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from

magic". Here, what the Gzilts have for so long believed to be a piece of indisputable evidence of pure magic or miracle, is, in fact, a part of a scientific trick played by a super-sentient race. Another cruel joke can be seen with Vyr Cossont and her attempt to play the 'Hydrogen Sonata' music which again proves to be an impossible task. The Sonata if played to its perfection will sound exceedingly unpleasant while the instrument needed to play it simply does not exist, and also the people who have composed it do not have enough limbs to play it well. This is also true of the message contained in the Book of Truth according to which the Gzilt citizens are not only destined to transcend to the higher plane but will become the elites in the next realm following their Sublimation and when that message proves to be a hoax following the revelation from the Zihdren-Remnanter emissary, things get complicated and tensions ensue. Gzilt's irresistible fascination for undergoing the Sublimation is to a great extent has been founded upon and fostered by their strong and imperturbable belief in the miraculous nature of their Book of Truth: "Even after the Gzilt achieved genuine space travel, artificial intelligence, insight into hyperspace and contact with the rest of the galactic community – and discovered that there had indeed been a species called the Zihdren around at the time the Book of Truth had come to light, though they had since Sublimed – that belief in their own

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predestined purpose and assured distinctiveness had persisted, and it was, arguably, that imperturbable sense of their own uniqueness that had prevented them from joining the Culture all those thousands of years ago” (78).

3. Conclusion: “... *the Culture doesn't really exist. It's only a story. It only exists in my mind and the minds of the people who've read about it,*” writes Bank in his ‘A Few Notes on the Culture’ (4). The study attempts to analyze the story of *Culture* spread across eight different novels to show how under the garb of an altruistic, benevolent and techno-utopian empire, *Culture* acts like the imperial, colonizer which does not tolerate any opposition to its galaxy-spanning supremacy. Paul Kincaid also speaks of this indirect mode of colonization by *Culture*, “The *Culture* does not directly colonize anyone; rather, they maneuver a change of government to one that would be less oppressive for its people who are therefore more likely to choose to join the *Culture*, an indirect form of colonization” (*Iain M. Banks* 54). William Hardesty (2009) after labeling the *Culture* as “an odd utopia—not a dream or plan of a future its readers might work toward,” proceeds to point out that the techno-utopian, post-scarcity image of *Culture* does indeed help it to project itself like a benevolent despot but *Culture* does not in any way tolerate a “counter-narrative that interrogates, problematizes, and

criticizes the myths of good will and good deeds that the master narrative promotes”, the master narrative being the narrative which portrays *Culture* as a truly benevolent empire always acting for the greater good. Just as Banks points out that *Culture* itself exists only in our mind, so does the shackles that colonial powers use to entrap and enslave its victims. The study attempted to show how even in a Posthuman, post-singular world, the colonial-imperial powers reign supreme and by using their command over mind-machine interlinking, sentient machines, advanced warships and virtual reality technologies the ruling powers further seek to perpetuate their powers and solidify their imperial tendencies. Farah Mendlesohn also points towards the expansionist and imperialistic nature of *Culture* which is conspicuously present in its attempts to sustain the techno-utopian heaven that it has built for its citizens but at the expense of others. Its colonial, imperial nature is best reflected “in its foreign policy: its expansionism, imperialism and attempts to ‘civilise’ the barbarians on its borders [...]”. It has secured the good society for its members at the expense of others and at the price of abandoning its commitment to communism and to a related understanding of the dynamics of social change” (“Dialectic of Decadence,” 116).

The study also shows how religious tropes and strong-rooted beliefs of certain groups and civilizations that *Culture* considers

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being recalcitrant or barbarous to it, do seem to pose threats to its otherwise unchallenged, godlike supremacy. Culture and its Minds want to function as the mechanic gods in the godless universe: “artificial gods have been constructed to fill the void that was never filled by God” (Creuze, 29). This tendency is also inextricably interrelated with and also reinforced by its imperial mindset. The study thus shows the need to adopt a theoretical framework based on both Posthumanism and postcolonialism to address the various complex questions that a vast, varied, post-singular, expansionist, and imperial civilization like Culture poses.

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