

**Monstrosity, Othering and Hegemony: A Posthumanist Perspective of the  
Film *The Shape of Water***



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**An Abstract of the project entitled**  
**Monstrosity, Othering and Hegemony: A Postcolonial Perspective of the Film *The Shape of Water***

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Monsters are considered as fearsome creatures. The idea of the monster allows the construction of difference. Monster studies depict the structures of exclusion through which some races and bodies are marginalized and demonized as beastly. Strange animals, different physiognomies or skin colour and different bodies were also regarded as monsters as they defied classification. The film *The Shape of Water* by Guillermo del Toro, presents the concept of monstering or othering happening within the society through its characters. The amphibian creature's character evidently presents the condition of othered creatures. It also highlights how certain sections of society are deemed as monsters just because of their difference. This is explored using Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's concept of Monster theory. The project titled 'Monstrosity, Othering and Hegemony; A Posthumanist Perspective of the Film *The Shape of Water*' uses monster theory to evaluate the film *The Shape of Water*, from a posthumanist standpoint. The project discusses the posthuman aspect and hegemony present in the film and it also analyses how othering is taken up as a strategy to marginalize and subjugate certain sections of society. The study clarifies how people marginalise and denigrate certain people, animals and other beings while labelling themselves as the standard. It also questions the human tendency to categorize other organisms as other and monsters.



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I hereby declare that this dissertation entitled "Monstrosity, Othering and Hegemony: A Posthumanist Perspective of the Film *The Shape of Water*" is a record of bona fide work done by me under the supervision of Dr. Priya K Nair, Assistant Professor, Department of English, and that no part of the dissertation has been presented earlier for the award of any degree, diploma or any other similar title of recognition.



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## CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that this project entitled "Monstrosity, Othering and Hegemony: A Posthumanist Perspective of the Film *The Shape of Water*" by Nandita M S is a record of bona fide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.



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## Introduction

The term 'monster' is quite familiar and is often used. They are creatures which reside in the depths of human imagination, where creatures of myth and legend roam. The term is mostly used to refer to a creature which provokes or causes a sense of horror by wickedness and cruelty. We call a person monstrous when he/she has done a very cruel and heinous act. It can be an animal which is larger in size, which combines animal and human features or having forms of various animals as a combination. They are mostly scary. Monsters are looked at with fear. The fear of the unknown and unpredictable is a potent force in our perception of scariness. At least three concepts have been proposed about monsters: Aristotle thinks a monster to be a "mistake of purpose" in nature; Noel Carroll thinks a monster to be a scientifically impossible being that arouses disgust and fear; Cynthia Freeland thinks a monster to be an evil being. Monsters are strong, resilient, creative and sly creatures. Their energy can be seen to disrupt and unsettle. They cater to our appetite for horror, but they also encourage us to feel empathy.

Monsters have appeared in fiction, including books, films, and short tales. Monsters appear in ancient mythology dating back thousands of years. Monstrosities can be found in myths, stories, and folklore of all cultures, from the sphinx of ancient Egypt—a hybrid creature with the body of a lion and human head—to Xiangliu, the nine-headed snake of Chinese mythology. With the publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in the 19th century, monster literature initially gained momentum. *Frankenstein* is considered as one of the best works. Horror and dread are common themes in Gothic literature, along with the helplessness of the victim against his oppressor or antagonist. Back in the silent era, there was one of the first full-length pictures with a "monster". Filmmakers started looking into ways to adapt traditional mythology for the big screen soon after motion pictures were invented. The first such attempt

was *Der Golem (The Golem: How He Came into the World)*, a silent German film released in 1920.

It is amazing to see how the presentation of monsters has evolved over years in literature and films. In the past, monsters were frequently shown as wicked, evil or fearful figures, much like in folklore and old stories. They have grown increasingly complicated over time, reflecting the worries and fears of society and sometimes even becoming sympathetic figures. Monsters continue to change, assuming new shapes and meanings in various cultural settings. Monsters have evolved over time, from the classics like *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* to more contemporary versions like *Godzilla* and the Xenomorph from *Alien*.

The *Shape of Water* is a 2017 American romantic fantasy film set in 1962 Baltimore, Maryland. It was directed by Guillermo del Toro and written by del Toro and Vanessa Taylor. The film is visually stunning and captivating. It is set against the backdrop of Cold War-era America. The film presents an amphibian humanoid creature as its central character. In this thesis the terms ‘amphibian human’ and ‘creature’ has been used to refer to this character. The creature has an appearance similar to that of a man but it is not fully a man. It can live on both land and water, but it needs water to survive. It is like a hybrid between a man and a fish. In the film it is mentioned that the officials caught it from the river muck in South America. The amphibian creature is treated differently by different people. The officials at the research facility call it an “asset”. For them it is “a thing, an affront”. But for the central character Elisa he is like a person, a male, a living individual. She addresses the creature with ‘him’.

The film cast includes Sally Hawkins as Elisa Esposito, Michael Shannon as Strickland, Octavia Spencer as Zelda D Fuller, Richard Jenkins as Giles, Doug Jones as Amphibian human, Michael Stuhlbarg as Mr. Robert Hoffstetler, Lauren Lee Smith as Elaine Strickland, Nick

Searcy as General Hoyt and David Hewlett as Fleming. The cinematography is done by Dan Lausten. Sidney Wolinsky has done the editing. Story, screenplay and direction by Guillermo Del Toro. The narrative revolves around a mute woman who works at a science facility in the 1960s. She encounters an aquatic creature that has been trapped and is being studied. After falling in love with this humanoid amphibian, she makes the decision to assist him in escaping death at the hands of a malevolent colonel.

The film was acclaimed by critics. The performances, writing, directing, images, production designs, cinematography, and musical score of the film were all highly praised. It was screened at the Venice International Film Festival in 2017 and was awarded the Golden Lion. It was also screened at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2017. It was selected as one the top ten films of 2017 by the American Film Institute. Elisa Esposito, the main character, was discovered as a baby abandoned by the side of a river. She is deaf, has scars on her neck, and uses sign language to communicate. Elisa worked in a covert government laboratory in Baltimore in 1962, during the height of the Cold War. She lived a normal life in a flat near a theater. Her only acquaintances were Zelda Fuller, her coworker; and her next-door neighbor Giles, a middle-aged advertising illustrator who was secretly gay. Colonel Richard Strickland captures a mysterious creature from a South American river. He takes the creature to Baltimore facility for further study. It is there that Elsa discovered it is a humanoid amphibian. She begins to visit him in secret and form a close connection with it.

Strickland convinces General Frank Hoyt to vivisect the amphibian human; in order to give the US an advantage in the Space Race. Scientist Dr. Robert Hoffstetler, a covert Russian spy named Dimitri Mosenkov, begs Strickland to keep him alive so that he might be studied more. Concurrently, he receives an order from his Soviet masters to kill the creature. The facility

officials also plan on killing the creature. Elisa overhears this and resolves to enlist Giles' assistance in order to save the amphibian human. Together with Dr. Hoffstetler, Zelda also offers assistance to her. Following this a series of scenes takes place which gives the audience more details about the amphibian human, his powers and the relationship between him and Elisa. The film closes with a lot of action and dramatic scenes as the amphibian human jumps into the river holding Elisa.



Fig. 1. The Amphibian human and Elisa. (*The Shape of Water* 1:56:40)

Considering the title of the film, *The Shape of Water*, the presence of water is evident throughout and is something very significant in this film. It is the central image and metaphor of the film. Starting from the title, its beginning and till the very end we see its presence. It pushes against boundaries and takes up the shape of anything in which it is contained. Water takes in anything. It is transgressive and fluid. A huge waterbody takes in anything irrespective of its size, shape or color; it is very receptive. In this film, water seems to be a consoling factor for Elisa, the protagonist. She had some unique connection with water. Starting from her childhood; “They found her by the river in the water” (*The Shape of Water* 00:27:19- 00:27:23). When Elisa first sees the amphibian creature she is drawn towards it. She later becomes close to it. Elisa seeks comfort in him and his habitat. She has always had a sense of belongingness and comfort

in water. The creature also views her as an individual. Among the humans, she at times feels a sense of incompleteness. Her colleagues and superiors other than her friends treat her as a dumb person. Within the film there are instances where she is addressed “dumb”. But while being in the water she feels more alive. Water is called the elixir of life. In the film, considerate characters like Elisa use water to heal and clean. Bad and abusive people like Strickland use water to trap the amphibian human in an aquarium; he shatters a glass of water intentionally to corner Elisa in his office, where he physically and sexually intimidates her. The car that Strickland buys has the color of water. Water in the film is a pivotal symbol. It is shapeless and free. Elisa is like water. Just like water she won't stay in a place. It indicates the freedom she desired and finally gained. The film begins by showing Elisa, the central character. She can hear but can't speak. She communicates with her body in various ways. She uses American Sign Language, dance, gestures and a variety of potent facial expressions to express herself. The film closes with Elisa being taken into the water by the creature. And they get to live a good life. It is an amazing film. It makes sense to think of it as an adult fairytale. Heroes and villains, victories and tragedies are depicted with big broad strokes.

The film starts in a shaky green underwater world, with a woman floating in what appears to be a building that has been drowned. In the opening voiceover by Giles; the main character Elisa is referred to as “the princess without voice” and Strickland, the man who opposes her, or the villain in the film, is referred to as “the man who tried to destroy it all”. It sounds like the beginning of a fairy tale. He makes it clear that it's a tale of love and loss.

Giles: If I spoke about it- If I did- what  
would I tell you; I wonder? Would I  
tell you about the time...? It

happened a long time ago- in the  
 last days of a fair Prince's  
 reign... Or would I tell you about  
 the place? A small city near the  
 coast but far from everything  
 else... Or would I tell you about  
 her? The princess without voice...  
 (beat)  
 Or perhaps I would just warn you of  
 the about the truth of these facts  
 and the tale of love and loss and  
 the monster that tried to destroy  
 it all... (*The Shape of Water* 00:01:48- 00:02:50)



Fig. 2. Drowned building or apartment. (*The Shape of Water* 00:02:11)

The camera then pushes and we see an entire apartment underwater. Objects and furniture float, gently suspended, defying gravity. Our central character Elisa is asleep on/above her bed - half floating, half weighed down. The film expresses its themes pretty directly. It is not at all

subtle. The film has views that are fundamentally liberal. It is concerned about the people who are marginalized and exploited. It criticizes those in positions of power who either abuse others or condone to such behavior by remaining silent. The film embraces diversity and equality.

The film is very versatile. Many view this as a beautiful love story in which the oppressed individuals find strength, power, courage and love. The film brilliantly handles myriad themes like othering and exploitation, humanity, gender, disability etc. All the themes are carefully interwoven to create a tapestry rich in meaning and emotion. The theme of being incomplete and unfulfilled recurs throughout the story, as many characters in this film feel that they are not complete or pure beings. Hawkins portrays a mute woman. Not only does her lack of speech leave her feeling somewhat empty within, but her existence seems to be lacking in purpose. Richard Jenkins, who plays her neighbor, is an artist who feels profoundly dissatisfied with life and is struggling to find his place in the world. Spencer is a stand-in for her friend and colleague, who lacks fulfillment in her marriage. Even Micheal Shannon, the villainous government officer who is torturing the creature in an effort to learn from it, doesn't believe he has quite attained the pinnacles of brilliance yet. Every character in this film feels as though they are missing something important or something they have always wanted. They all seem to have a void that needs to be filled. According to Hawkins her inner void could be filled by this unique creature.

Elisa and Zelda are employed as janitors in the research facility. Because of this, they are able to enter places that are typically off-limits to them and are only accessible to government personnel. Consequently, Hawkins comes in contact with the creature and starts to develop a relationship with it. The film is unique in its story, theme and visuals. Music and dance are added features. We see different sorts of songs being played within the film as seen by Elisa on

television. The film also has good songs of its own, which matches the film's unique story and style. Dance is another ritual that the film frames. We see Elisa enjoying different dance moves in films along with Giles. Over and over dance connects characters, it liberates them from their routine and oppression. Dance connects Elisa with Giles and the creature. There is a lovely and surreal dance fantasy between Elisa and the creature; which is about embracing and revealing the truths and not hiding them. According to del Toro dance sets us free; and he has carefully employed its use in the film.

Incorporating magical and fairytale themes into historical events and urban environments has been a recurring theme in Del Toro's artwork. He creates a fantastical realm before our eyes. But the magical aspects clash with the technological developments. The innocent opening sequence of the film, which features a narrator setting the scene for the "tale" that will unfold while the camera pans over a hallway covered with filthy, green water, is reminiscent of the magical realism found in many children's adventure books. Soft accordion melodies float around the landscape, giving Elisa's everyday chores and routine a comical regularity. She might even pass for a legendary princess from a fairy tale. All the characters in the film showcase top-notch works. Masterful visual work and superbly crafted direction, the film has gorgeous cinematography. It also presents a startling message.

Posthumanism or post-humanism means after humanism or beyond humanism. It is an idea which responds to the presence of anthropocentrism in the twenty-first century of thought. The discourse of "Posthumanism" deconstructs the essential concepts and barriers surrounding the category called 'human' and advocates an entanglement of all the strict dualities such as male/female, human/nonhuman, real/virtual. It destabilizes the idea of the human.



Monster Theory, also called Monster Studies, is the study of monsters—how they are conceptualized and what they symbolize to different cultures. Monster Theory is an interdisciplinary and global field of study. It integrates techniques and research from various fields of studies like art, literature, religion, philosophy, medicine, sociology, anthropology, and more. In his 1996 collection *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen talked about the concept of monster theory. Since then, the opening essay in this collection, "Monster Culture: Seven Theses", has been a core text in this field. Monster theory explores the domain of the monstrous. It dissects the meaning behind these fantastical beings and tries to uncover what they reveal about ourselves and society.

The project titled ‘Monstrosity, Othering and Hegemony: A Posthumanist Perspective of the Film *The Shape Of Water*’ uses the notion of the monster to evaluate the film *The Shape of Water*, from a posthumanist perspective. The study clarifies how people marginalize and denigrate animals and other beings while labeling themselves as the standard. The study asks questions on the human tendency to categorize other organisms as other and monsters. The project comprises five sections. The project as a whole is summarized in the Introduction chapter. It presents the film and the theoretical framework used to analyze it. Chapter one ‘The Notion of The Monster in Posthumanism’, outlines Monster theory, its evolution and main concepts. The theory focuses on how society deems certain people as the other or a monster. The power dynamics and hierarchy involved in it is also discussed. Chapter two ‘Categorization of Bodies in *The Shape of Water*’ analyzes the posthuman aspects within the film. The chapter also analyzes the hierarchy and power dynamics seen in the film. Chapter three ‘The Strategy of Othering’ discusses the monsterring and othering seen in the film. The chapter analyzes how certain people or creatures are labeled as monsters and others in the society. The Concluding

chapter gives an overall wrap-up to the project. It demonstrates the methods used in the film, in a way our society, to create monsters and label certain people as the other. It explains how callous the procedure is.

## Chapter 1

### The Notion of The Monster in Posthumanism

Posthumanism is an idea in the field of continental philosophy and critical theory.

Posthumanism or post-humanism means after humanism or beyond humanism. It is an idea which responds to the presence of anthropocentrism in the twenty-first century discourse.

Posthumanist discourse aims to expand the parameters of contemporary philosophical conceptions of being human. It deconstructs the essential concepts and barriers surrounding the category “human” and advocates an entanglement of all the strict dualities such as male/female, human/nonhuman, real/virtual. Posthumanism realizes postmodernism's interrogation of the human subject. The term posthuman was coined and defined by the postmodern theorist Ihab Hassan in an article entitled "Prometheus as Performer: Towards a Posthumanist Culture?"

Posthumanism is a multifaceted movement. It is separated into forms that are based on technology and the non-technological. Posthumanism emerged as a scholarly concept in the late 1970s, but some of the posthumanization processes it examines date back centuries. A partial 'de-anthropocentralisation' of human society is typically the result of both technological and non-technological post humanisation processes. Beyond postmodern studies, a number of cultural theorists have developed and applied posthumanism.

Posthumanism rejects the idea that humans are independent, fully realized beings and it also critiques the idea that humans are superior to other living forms. On the contrary, it views human beings as a collection of parts that are integrated with technology and the environment, co-evolving with other animal species. Posthumanism challenges traditional binaries and divisive classifications. Gothic and horror literature, as well as science fiction, are excellent examples of posthumanism. For millennia, the presence of monsters, cyborgs and aliens in fictional narratives

have raised the question of where humanity ends and the 'other' begins. Since this is a fundamental tenet of posthumanism, it provides rich terrain for posthuman studies.

Along with examining the interactions between humans and nonliving objects, posthumanism also looks at how animals and plants relate to one another. Posthumanism has been studied and defined by many critics and theorists; for Kurzweil, posthumanism describes a technological future of enhanced humanity; for Haraway, posthumanism is an ethical position that extends moral concern to things different from us, and in particular to other species and objects with which we share the world.

Posthumanism and the concept of monsters share a connection. The idea of monsters and posthumanism are related in that they both explore boundaries and definitions. Traditional notions of what it means to be human are challenged by posthumanism, which often blurs the distinctions between human and non-human. Monsters, on the other hand, often represent these liminal spaces, residing somewhere between normal and aberrant. Both ideas raise questions about identity, morality and the nature of existence.

Furthermore, the study of monsters within a posthumanist framework can shed light on how cultural perceptions of difference, alterity and hybridity influence how we perceive humanity and its place in the wider universe. By analysing how monsters are represented and understood in literature, film, and other cultural materials, posthumanist researchers may gain deeper insights into the evolving nature of human identity in an era of technological change.

Monster is an umbrella term which encompasses a wide range of creatures. From fantastic beasts to incorporeal spirits, monsters can take on myriad forms. Every culture has its own monsters. In *Religion and Its Monsters*, Timothy Beal talks about the etymology of the word “monster”. It is derived from the Latin word *monstrum*, related to the verbs *monstrare* (“show”

or “reveal”) and monere (“warn” or “portend”). Monsters are taken as signs or omens. They are at once a warning of what is to come and a revelation of what is already here; they point both beyond us and within us.

Monster Studies is the study of monsters—how they are conceptualized and what they symbolize to different cultures. Monster Theory is an interdisciplinary and global field of study. It integrates techniques and research from various fields of studies like art, literature, religion, philosophy, medicine, sociology, anthropology, and more. Forms and ways of life that are different from what is accepted as the norm, gets categorized as ‘monstrous’, and the differently formed/functional bodies as ‘monstrosities’. The idea of the monster allows the construction of difference. Monster studies depict the structures of exclusion through which some races and bodies were marginalized and demonized as beastly. These small cultural representations indicate how a form of life that was significantly different from the socially constructed norm, whose cultural practices were different, was excluded from the concept of human. Humanity survives by constructing modes of exclusion, and the monster's ontological liminality enables domination, persecution, incarceration/containment, exhibition/display, genocide, displacement and elimination of certain forms of life. Monster studies map these processes of categorization and exclusion.

Structures of exclusion and boundary marking were based on appearance or character. Cohen defines the monster thus: “This refusal to participate in the classificatory ‘order of things’ is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions” (Cohen 6). Thus, strange beasts – chimeras, for example, or Grendel in the Old English epic, *Beowulf* – are monstrous

because they do not fit into the classification of identifiable animals. But there are also humans whose physiognomies and bodies situate them outside the realm of the human. The ‘incoherent bodies’ (patched together from other bodies, as in the case of Frankenstein's creature; which doesn't die and decompose, as in Dracula; mixed, as in the case of the sphinx) constitute a humanoid monstrous.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen examines ideas of monstrosity in his book *Monster Theory - Reading Culture*. The contributors of *Monster Theory* view creatures such as beasts, devils, freaks, and fiends as emblematic representations of societal discomfort that permeate a community and influence its overall conduct. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Mary Baine Campbell, David L. Clark, Frank Grady, David A. Hedrich Hirsch, Lawrence D. Kritzman, Kathleen Perry Long, Stephen Pender, Allison Pingree, Anne Lake Prescott, John O'Neill, William Sayers, Michael Uebel, and Ruth Waterhouse and many others have contributed to *Monster theory*. In his 1996 collection *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen talked about the concept of monster theory. Since then, the opening essay in this collection, “Monster Culture: Seven Theses”, has been a core text in this field. *Monster Theory* presents significant assertions relevant to the study of culture. Cohen in his essay tries to offer seven theses toward understanding cultures through the monsters they bear. The term "monsters" refers to a collection of various species that were deemed odd for various reasons. These were the outward manifestations of societal fears.

Monsters can be seen as expressions of cultural anxieties about diverse life forms like the black races, particular animals, mutant babies/animals, the impaired and the insane. Strange animals, different physiognomies or skin color and different bodies were also regarded as

monsters because they seemed to be outside any category. The discourses of the monstrous in popular culture were concerned with Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's figures of 'ontological liminality'. Cohen claimed that monsters were created at the figurative crossroads. Their bodies captured a specific cultural moment of a location, emotion, or time. They combined fantasy, desire, and terror.

The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the monstrum is etymologically "that which reveals," "that which warns," a glyph that seeks a hierophant. Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again. (Cohen 4)

Cohen defines monsters as unsettling hybrids or a mixed category. They don't engage in the categorical "order of things." They belong to a heterogeneous group that defies simple binary opposition or classification based on hierarchy. They transgress every specific law established by science. They call for a "system" that tolerates resistance to integration, polyphony, and mixed responses (difference in sameness, repulsion in attraction).

Monsters function as the dialectical Other or third-term supplement. Monstrous differences tend to be cultural, political, racial, economic and sexual. Cultural difference is taken as monstrous. Monstrous representation on a micro level can be triggered by political or ideological differences just as much as cultural alteration in the macrocosm.

The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as dialectical Other or third-term supplement, the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond—of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within. Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual. The exaggeration of cultural difference into monstrous aberration is familiar enough. The most famous distortion occurs in the Bible, where the aboriginal inhabitants of Canaan are envisioned as menacing giants to justify the Hebrew colonization of the Promised Land. (Cohen 7)

The society has set certain norms and standards. Anyone who transgresses or diverts from this set standard are deemed as a monster or the other. Women in particular are subjected to this othering. The woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith ("dieerste Eva," "la mere obscure"), Bertha Mason, or Gorgon. "Deviant" sexual identity is similarly susceptible to monsterization. ( 9)

From the classical period into the twentieth century, race has been almost as powerful a catalyst to the creation of monsters as culture, gender, and sexuality. Africa early became the West's significant other, the sign of its ontological difference simply being skin color. (10)

Through all of these monsters the boundaries between personal and national bodies blur. To complicate this category confusion further, one kind of alterity is often written as another, so that national difference (for example) is transformed into sexual difference. (10)

The East becomes feminised (Said) and the soul of Africa grows dark. One kind of difference becomes another as the normative categories of gender, sexuality, national identity, and ethnicity slide together like the imbricated circles of a Venn diagram,



abjecting from the center that which becomes the monster. This violent foreclosure erects a self-validating, Hegelian master/slave dialectic that naturalizes the subjugation of one cultural body by another by writing the body excluded from personhood and agency as in every way different, monstrous. (Cohen 11)

According to Cohen, differences are modifiable rather than necessary, and monsters show that they are arbitrary and potentially free-floating. However, society sees monsters as lawbreakers, hypersexual, rebellious, and perverted; as a result, the monster and everything it represents have to be banished or exterminated. "The monster is continually linked to forbidden practices, in order to normalize and to enforce.... Through the body of the monster fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion are allowed safe expression in a clearly delimited and permanently liminal space" (16-17).

The monster is the abjected fragment that enables the formation of all kinds of identities—personal, national, cultural, economic, sexual, psychological, universal, particular (even if that "particular" identity is an embrace of the power/status/knowledge of abjection itself); as such it reveals their partiality, their contiguity. A product of a multitude of morphogeneses (ranging from somatic to ethnic) that align themselves to imbue meaning to the Us and Them behind every cultural mode of seeing, the monster of abjection resides in that marginal geography of the Exterior, beyond the limits of the Thinkable, a place that is doubly dangerous: simultaneously "exorbitant" and "quite close." (19-20)

However, monstrosity was also the morally different or disobedient character of humans. Humans functioning on the level of sheer animality, as in Stevenson's Mr Hyde are morally monstrous. Racial classifications were based on morality. Corruption of any kind, moral,

psychological, physical, was deemed monstrous. Hence madness was monstrous, according to medieval medical theories – but even well into the twentieth century – because it was the corruption of the processes of thought. Ideas regarding corruption were gendered and women were deemed mere ‘matter’ as opposed to the male ‘mind’ who were resistant to corruption. Questions of reproduction, of species, individuals and families usually revolved around the ‘corruption’ of women's bodies like in numerous sci-fi films and popular fiction such as the 1968 film *Rosemary's Baby* or Doris Lessing's novel *The Fifth Child*, in which what the woman gives birth to is a key thematic.

Studies of monsters and the grotesque shed light on the ways in which species borders are constructed and the ways in which classificatory regimes aim to isolate and supplant the "non-human." According to monster research, humans get anxious about other species because they are tasked with figuring out where each species' boundaries lie. The development of genesis myths by various cultures and races also defines the boundaries of species. The core components of ethnic, racial, and species identities are origins—geographical, genetic, and cultural. The mutant baby crisis is a perfect example of this concept. In medieval Europe, children born to parents of various races were considered monstrous.

Unnatural births’ highlights the monstrous, and creatures such as Victor Frankenstein's invention, born inside a laboratory, falls into the category of monstrous due to the process of his birth. The monsters of sci-fi are either from ‘outside’ the Earth or occupy spaces that are unknown. Creatures at a temporal distance, i.e., from the past – such as the Loch Ness monster or the yeti, but also revenants and ghosts – are also monstrous too for they do not belong to ‘our time’. The spatial and temporal distancing of species is also infused with a different politics: that of ethnic identity.

The monster's capacity for experiencing "human" emotions is typically portrayed as a positive trait. There is a belief that certain types of emotions are unique to humans. This is a product of culture. When monsters exhibit these kinds of feelings, it raises the possibility that they could become "humanised" by developing moral principles. In other instances, a human being becomes monstrous when they reject their "fundamental" humanity and start acting more like animals or automata.

Thus, monster theory demonstrates how fictitious species borders are. It demonstrates how diverse standards have been used to draw lines dividing various life forms, designating some as monstrous while deeming others to be normal.

Monster theory attributes to the speciousness of species borders, the cultural construction of difference and the essentializing of identity in representations of hybrid creatures, deformed bodies and 'deviant' beings. It's contribution to critical posthumanism is to point to the problematic of species identity by showing how various criteria have been invoked to relegate particular forms of life to the realm of the monstrous, thereby ensuring a clear boundary for the human. It reveals the constructed nature of species boundaries.

According to Cohen monsters are present within all of us. Monsters bring us wider knowledge. The idea about monsters and monsterring changes our perception about the world.

Monsters are our children. They can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return. And when they come back, they bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but they bear self-knowledge, human knowledge—and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the Outside. These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have

misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward an expression. They ask us why we have created them. (Cohen 20)

## Chapter 2

### Categorization Of Bodies in *The Shape of Water*

*The Shape of Water* is a film which can be analyzed through different lenses.

Posthumanism is an idea which can be strongly applied in this film. Posthumanism decenters the placement of humans above other life forms. The film is centered around the relation between a human and an amphibian creature. The central characters are a mute woman, named Elisa Esposito and an amphibian humanoid creature.

Many elements within the film resonate with posthumanist themes. The relation between Elisa and the amphibian creature blurs the line between human and non-human. Their relationship challenges the traditional notions of humanity and otherness. The film also explores the idea of empathy and communication beyond language barriers. The film critiques many aspects like the hierarchical structures of power, marginalization and exploitation of certain sections of the society. The film advocates inclusion and compassion.

The creature presented in the film has an appearance similar to that of a man but it is not fully a man. It can live on both land and water, but it needs water to survive. It is like a hybrid between a man and a fish. The amphibian creature is treated differently by different people. In the film it is mentioned that the officials caught it from the river muck in South America. They call it an “asset”. The officials at the facility treat it inhumanly. They are keeping it at the facility secretly to study. Their main aim is to find its uniqueness and to make use of it. The officials are only concerned about the benefit that they would get from it. They are not bothered about its life or survival. A living creature is treated as a thing. It is tortured and tormented. They don’t even bother killing it. The creature was living freely in its natural habitat in South America. From there it is being forcefully dragged out. There were people who worshiped it. But here the same

creature is captured and kept like a slave or as someone's possession. People like Elisa, Giles, Zelda and Hoffstetler aim to do good for the creature. But they are suppressed by the higher officials.



Fig. 3. The Amphibian human. (*The Shape of Water* 00:25:22)

The creature here can be considered as a posthuman. It is an amphibian humanoid creature. It stands on two legs and has an appearance close to that of humans. It also resembles aquatic creatures. It is capable of understanding and communicating. It comprehends things based on its surroundings. At the facility it was unfriendly to the facility officials, but on the other hand Elisa and the creature got friendly very soon. The creature also forms a positive connection with Zelda and Giles. The creature exhibits both human and amphibian traits. The creature has incredible powers, like healing powers. It heals Giles's wound. The creature touches Giles's head which was bald and his hair starts growing. He heals himself and Elisa at the climax when Strickland tries to kill them. The creature possesses human traits of understanding. He understands Elisa's actions correctly and repeats them. They communicate with each other through sounds, glances and actions. The creature quickly picks up Elisa's hand gestures. He

closely watches her moves and internalizes it. It is through these actions that they mainly communicate. He eats boiled eggs prepared by Elisa. He enjoys music. In the first half of the film, Elisa once takes a stereo to the facility. She plays music. That is when the creature listens to music for the first time. He enjoys it and asks her not to stop playing it. Later we see them enjoying music together. So, music becomes a medium of communication between them, and they enjoy it as well. They also dance to the beat. The amphibian human's encounter with Giles's cat brings out the wild traits within him. He attacks the cat and devours it. This reaction was quite unexpected. When Giles tries to stop him, he gets startled and slashes Giles's arm and rushes out of the apartment. But later he felt sorry for his actions. He realizes his mistakes and even tries to make up for what he did. He felt guilty. This shows the goodness within him. He also has the ability to judge good and bad people. He can survive on land as well. A creature with all these qualities and abilities is very alien. Anything which is beyond human is considered as posthuman. So, the creature here is a posthuman.

Human beings consider themselves as superior beings. They consider themselves as the norm and set standards and limitations for others. Even within humans they create a hierarchy. Any creature that is more powerful and capable than humans are dangerous to mankind. They fear losing their power and being subordinated. So, they try to control everything around them. This is what we see in this film as well. According to the research facility officials the amphibian is a mysterious, out of the world being. It possesses many unique qualities and powers. Thus, it may take control over them. But the facility officials are trying to control it firsthand. They capture it and try to utilize it for their own good.

Elisa, the female protagonist of the film, is very unique. She can hear but can't speak. So being mute she communicates with her body in various ways. She uses American Sign

Language, gestures, dance, and potent facial expressions to express herself. Her only friends were Giles, her neighbor; and Zelda, her coworker. She watches old films with Giles by day and at night she works alongside Zelda at the research facility. Elisa was an orphan. She was found near a waterbody. So, from childhood Elisa had a connection with water. That may be the reason why she befriends the amphibian very soon. Elisa is always adapted to water. During the moments with the amphibian, she fills her entire bathroom with water. In the climax we see that Elisa is taken into water. All this shows that she belonged to the water or she was meant to be in water. The creature became a vehicle for the same. Elisa had a set of good friends. It is because of these friends that she led her life peacefully, but still she felt some kind of voidness and meaninglessness in her life. Water provided her some comfort or solace. Elisa's adaptiveness to water is a unique trait. The scar on her neck is another vital thing. It seems like gills once it is cut. This makes us question whether she was supposed to belong to the waterbody and was she stuck in human society for all this time? In spite of being a human she gets attached to an amphibian creature and that too romantically. All these add to the idea of posthumanity. So here we can consider both the amphibian creature and Elisa as posthuman creatures. One is dragged out of its natural habitat into the human world forcefully and the other has been surviving in an alien land for long and is later introduced into the land where it should actually belong.

The relation between Elisa and the creature blurs the division or boundary between human and non-human. Their relationship challenges the traditional notions of humanity and otherness. Being born as a mute makes her different from others to some extent. She felt aloof from society. There was some kind of voidness and meaninglessness in it. The repetitive pre-work routine which she followed before encountering the creature emphasizes how alone and lifeless she felt. It was the amphibian that brought in some color to her life. Through the creature



she gained joy, meaning, love and spontaneity in her life. She was very empathetic to the creature. The bond between Elisa and the creature was very strong and true. Her conversation with Giles through gestures proves it.

Elisa: "And what am I? I move my mouth -

like him- and I make no sound- like

him. What does that make me?

"All that I am, all that I've been

ever- brought me here- to him."

(beat)

Giles: "Him??" What are you talking about?

That thing? It's a "him" now?

(She pushes him and re-signs, violently) Elisa: "HIM"

GILES (CONT'D)

Hey! Watch it!

(beat)

"The way he looks at me. He doesn't

know what I lack... Or how I am

incomplete. He just sees me for

what I am. As I am. And he is happy

to see me, every time. Every day."

(beat)

"And now I can either save him now

or let him die. Never see his eyes,

see me again. I will not let that

Go...” (*The Shape of Water* 00:45:50-00:47:26)

Any living society or setting has a particular hierarchy and power dynamics within it. In *The Shape of Water*, we see a society which is strictly laden by such power structures. We see different ways in which people are grouped and subjected. Different aspects like gender, race, class, nationality etc. could influence the way in which people are treated.

Women in any society or group are subjected. Because of their gender they are mostly treated as second fiddle. In *The Shape of Water*, we see two major women characters: Elisa and Zelda. They work as janitors in the science facility. Being women and low-grade workers at the facility, they are at the lower strata. In addition to that both of them have their own differences. Elisa is a white mute woman. Her being disabled is a factor which is used to undermine her. Zelda is a South African black woman. She is treated very poorly. Being black puts her in a more disadvantaged position. According to Strickland both Elisa and Zelda are lower than him. Usually, women are at a disadvantage at work places. There are instances where superior officers try to use their subordinates to satisfy their needs. Here Elisa is lower to him as a woman, as a disabled and as a lower-level employee. Being a mute and a low-level employee; she is in a position which is more challenging and menacing. He tries to sexually molest her. His dialogue and his way of looking at her proves it. He intentionally spills water on the floor and calls her to clean it. During this time, he makes a move on her.

Strickland: You know...? I can't figure it out  
myself- you're not much to look at,  
but- go figure- I keep thinking  
about you. (beat)

And I've seen you looking at me?

When you say you are mute...Are you

entirely silent? Or do you squawk a

little? Some mutes squawk. Not

pretty, but-

You should know this: I don't mind

the scars. Don't mind that you

can't speak, either.

(Uses his fingernail to scrape a small piece of candy from his gum) (beat)

When you come right down to it - I like it. A lot. Kind of gets me going...

I bet I can make you squawk a little. (*The Shape of Water* 00:57:56-00:58:50)



Fig. 4. Strickland intimidating Elisa (*The Shape of Water* 00:58:26)

Zelda is a woman, a lower-level employee and most particularly she is a black woman. Her being a black is enough to point fingers at her; even if she doesn't do anything wrong. Strickland demeans her. He mocks her race when she says she has no siblings. Africans usually have many children. He also mocks her name saying it's the name of a betrayer in the Bible.

Strickland: No siblings, Zelda?

Zelda: No, Sir...

Strickland: That's not common, is it? For you people?

Zelda: Momma died after me- After I was born.

Strickland: What does the "D" stand for?

Elisa and Zelda sit in front of him, like girls at the principal's office.

Zelda: My "D"? Delilah, Sir- on account of the bible.

Strickland: Dee-Li-lah. . .

Zelda: Beg your pardon?

(Strickland takes a HARD GREEN CANDY from a plastic bag. Sucks on it.)

Strickland: Delilah- she betrays Samson- Lulls

him to sleep, cuts his hair-

Philistines torture him, humiliate

him- burn his eyes out. Turned him

into a thing-

Zelda: Guess my momma didn't read the good

book close enough.... (*The Shape of Water* 00:26:33- 00:27:10)

According to Strickland the creature is not a human; it is an "asset, a thing, an affront".

"The thing we keep in there is an affront" (00:28:21-00:28:24).

He even calls it a filthy creature. For him the creature is important just because of its specialties.

He and the other officials plan to make use of the creature for their own benefit. Strickland does

not consider the creature as a human because according to him humans are created in the Lord's image. And for him God is more like him than Zelda or the creature.

Strickland: That's right- That's right- And I  
should know. (beat)

I've dragged that filthy thing- out  
of the river muck in South America  
and all the way here-(beat)

And along the way we didn't get to  
like each other much.

you may think that thing looks  
human- stands on two legs, but-  
we're created in the Lord's image.

And you don't think that's what the  
Lord looks like, do you?

Zelda: I wouldn't know, Sir. What the Lord  
looks like.

Strickland: Well, human, Zelda. He looks like a  
human. Just like me... Or even like you.

A little more like me, I guess.... (*The Shape of Water* 00:28:29-00:29:12)

Giles, the closeted gay man, is unemployed and is also at the lower level. He lost his job recently and is trying to get back to it. He is going behind his employer and trying to get back his job. As an advertising artist he is trying to gain his employers attention and interest somehow. Giles draws the picture of a family in which a girl holds a gelatin. He draws the picture as per the

demand and submits it. But the superior asks him to redraw it as they want the gelatin to be green, claiming that green is the future. He is drawing and redrawing pictures as per the demand. But it's as if he is being fooled by the employer. This also marks a clear hierarchy.

Bernie: Green. They want the gelatin to be green now.

Giles: But I was told red.

Bernie: New concept. All the new flavors are green: Celery, apple, Italian.

That's the future now. Green.

And they want them happier- the family.

Giles: Happier? The Father looks like he- just discovered the missionary position... And the kids look like they have electrodes up their- What are they happy about?

Bernie: Giles.

Giles: What are they happy about?

Bernie: The future, Giles.

Sorry, you know how it is. You do what they say, then they change everything. Too bad— this is nice work.

Giles: It is nice work, isn't it? One of my best. (*The Shape of Water* 00:22:56 -00:23:24)

As a gay man he is subjected to marginalization. He frequented a shop as he liked a man who worked there. But the response he received was also very worse. So, an unemployed man is treated very lowly in society. A gay person is not treated as a man. Homogenous or homosexual relations were even seen as blasphemous. Giles is thus in a doubly marginalized or oppressed position.

Hierarchy and power structure is prevalent in any society. The ones at the higher or superior position, set the norms and standards. They ensure that the lower ones are kept in place and never climb up the ladder. In the facility as well, the officials and security forces have more power than the janitors and other basic staff. But above these officials are the government and its head people. Col. Richard Strickland acts as an authoritative power and controls others. He takes up a charging position. However, in front of General Frank Hoyt he himself becomes powerless. Strickland is forced to obey Hoyt's orders and get things done as per the demand. Failure in achieving this puts Strickland in a tough spot. Throughout the film we notice that the higher official gets their subordinates to do their duties properly through different means; it may be in the form of appreciation and rewards or by threatening them.

The creature's disappearance from the facility created chaos. Strickland was ordered to find it as soon as possible or else he was threatened that he would lose his job and in the worst case even his life. This same tactic is employed by Strickland; he threatens Hoffstetler regarding killing the creature. When the creature goes missing Strickland sets out to find it. He threatens both Hoffstetler and Zelda. It is Zelda's husband who tells him the truth. Even if he doesn't get full answers, he reaches Elisa. Hoffstetler is also threatened by the Russian officials.

Throughout the film we see Strickland as a figure taking control. He is the one who is presenting hierarchy and power structure to a greater extend in the film. He is an authoritative

official at the research facility. At home, he is the head of the family. He always tries to control those around him. He assumes himself to be the master. He believes the Lord to be a human like him. In a way we can say he assumes himself to be the Lord. He views himself to be a great figure who doesn't fail. Towards the end of the film, he says "I do not fail. I deliver" (*The Shape of Water* 1:54:10-1:54:16). He views himself as the man of the future as mentioned by the salesman at the car showroom. He felt very proud listening to the salesman's words, "You are the man of the future. You belong in this car" (00:54:20-00:54:26). And he bought the car. He behaves superior to Dr Hoffstetler. Once Hoffstetler entered Strickland's office asking to delay the procedure of killing the asset; Strickland asked him to follow the protocol and knock before entering his office. "Go back out, knock; then I'll let you in and we'll talk. That's the protocol. Follow the protocol" (01:00:00-01:00:07).

The higher people or people in power use different ways to keep their power and authority intact. It is them who get to decide what and who should be considered normal and what should be othered. According to them they are the norm or the standard; and anything outside or beyond that is the other. It is these powerful people who define healthy white and rich as the norm. Unhealthy or disabled, black, poor; are the other. Power structure and hierarchy rules the society. This is very much evident in the film.



## Chapter 3

### The Strategy of Othering

Monsters are creatures which are usually ugly and scary. One powerful factor that contributes to our perception of scariness is our fear of the unknown and the unpredictable. Monsters represent the liminal spaces residing somewhere between normal and aberrant. Monster theory or Monster studies is the study of monsters. The term "monstrous" refers to distinct human forms and lifestyles, while "monstrosities" are bodies with unique forms and functions. Thus, the notion of the monster creates distinctions. Monster studies thus investigates the system of exclusion that demonized and marginalized certain races and bodies. Monsters serve as a metaphor for the unknown and the marginalized. It challenges us to examine our own ideas on difference and alterity.

The film *The Shape of Water* can be analyzed using monster studies. The film redefines our perspective on monsters. The concept of “othering” is a central theme explored in the film. The amphibian creature is the first thing which is treated as a monster. It is an alien or unknown creature which creates a sense of intrigue and fear at the same time. The Amphibian human had an appearance similar to that of a man but it is not a complete man. He is like a hybrid between a man and a fish. It has both human and animal traits. According to the research facility official the amphibian is a mysterious, out of the world being. It possessed supernatural powers. Creature which poses all these qualities and abilities is very alien and is beyond human.

But we also find that a large number of other individuals are likewise thought of and treated as monsters. The film brilliantly presents all this through its different characters and their lives. The characters Elisa, Zelda, Giles and Hoffstetler present different lives and struggles. They are all marginalized and distanced from people with respect to different aspects. The term

"monsters" refers to a collection of various species that were deemed odd for various reasons. These were the outward manifestations of societal fears. Monsters are the manifestation of a society's anxieties and demonization of a wide spectrum of life forms, such as certain creatures, mutant children and animals, the insane, black people, and the disabled. So the people and creatures with unusual body, physiognomy or skin tones were also labeled as monsters.

The character Elisa is different from the 'normal' humans. She can hear but can't speak. So being a mute she communicates with her body in various ways. She is a disabled compared to other humans. This becomes a reason for her being labeled as other. The society and the powerful people in it set the norm. Being healthy is the norm. Disabled people were not considered healthy. At times it was even said that they were not even fit to be called humans. Disabled were always considered different. And anything different from the norm is monstrous.

Zelda is an African-American. She is Elisa's coworker and friend. She is a sisterly figure who takes care of Elisa. Zelda acts as a mouthpiece for Elisa. It is Zelda who helps her in rescuing the creature from the facility, even if she was not agreeing to it in the beginning. She is an ordinary woman who is being subordinated by patriarchy and the male society. We see her working along with Elisa as a janitor at the facility. They clear all the mess and dirt in the facility. At home she is a normal wife who takes care of her husband; cooks and cleans for him without receiving anything in return. She is undermined by her husband. He doesn't pay any value for what she does. He doesn't acknowledge the effort she puts in. Her job also doesn't provide her with much dignity. She is just a staff member who is supposed to clean everything and clear all the unwanted things. Race has been a powerful catalyst to the creation of monsters. Zelda is discriminated against both as a woman and as a black. It is clear from Strickland's conversation. He mocks her for her race. He points out the fact that blacks always have three to

four kids. He mocks her name by saying that the ‘D’ which stands for Delilah is a betrayer who cheated Samson by cutting his hair. Here he also mocks the black’s ignorance of the holy bible. Strickland also makes a claim that God is much more like him than that of her or the monster. Here also we see a kind of othering or marginalizing. Strickland treats Zelda and Elisa as mere objects to carry out their tasks. He doesn’t even treat them as equal human beings.



Fig. 5. Elisa and Zelda cleaning the men's bathroom. (*The Shape of Water* 00:16:05)

Elisa and Zelda represent characters who are doubly oppressed. Gender and disability stand as the hurdle for one while gender and race limits the other. Women are always subject to such treatments. The women who overstep the boundaries of their gender roles are deemed as monstrous. Elisa and Zelda are thus considered as monstrous due to their differences and because of their actions. They rescue the creature by fighting against the officials and government who tried to torture and kill it. This shows the empathy and loving attitude of women. But these women themselves are othered and subjected to discrimination.

Deviant sexual identity is similarly susceptible to monsterization. Giles, Elisa's friend and neighbor, is an advertising artist. He is a closeted gay man. He has been a good friend to Elisa.

He is like a fatherly figure who takes care of her. They share their thoughts and worries with each other. Elisa is the one who prepares food for him. Giles is currently unemployed and is trying to get back his job. In the film we see Elisa and Giles visiting a pie store. Giles likes a young man who is working there. That is why he is frequenting this shop. At first the pie guy smiles at him and chats with him casually. But during the next visit; the young man gets a hint of Giles's actual interest and responds badly. Giles shows the life of a lonely man; a gay whose life is lonely. Elisa is his only friend and she is more like his family. He helps Elisa in rescuing the creature from the facility. He stands along with her and protects the creature. Giles is a very understanding person. When the creature attacks his cat Giles remains calm. He is sad about his cat but still he understands the wild nature within the amphibian creature. He was also harmed by the creature. But he didn't care about that either. Giles felt a sense of similarity to the creature. At a point he identified himself with the creature. He was also lonely and leading a lonely life. He says "Sometimes I think I was either born too early or too late in my life. Maybe we're both relics" (1:13:36-45).

During the climax scene we see the love and care Giles had for Elisa. When Strickland tries to kill Elisa and the monster, he was even ready to risk his life. He tries to resist Strickland and attacks him. Giles was always there to support Elisa as a friend and a father figure. Throughout the movie he was one character who formed a strong bond with Elisa and he also supported her in all her endeavors. He supported Elisa in her relationship with the amphibian, understanding the unique bond they shared. Giles also empathized with the creature's plight and cared it more than just a monster. In the climax when the creature jumps into the water along with Elisa, we see Giles and Zelda watching them with loving and prayerful eyes. Giles also acts like the narrator in this film. The film begins as if it's a story narrated by him.



Fig. 6. Giles and Elisa (*The Shape of Water* 1:32:27)

Hoffstetler is a scientist at the facility. He is the one who is undertaking the study of the creature. Hoffstetler is a Russian spy too. He is one person among the facility officials who is a little considerate about the creature. According to him the amphibian creature is a beautiful thing that has many unknown capabilities. When everyone at the facility views the creature as an asset, he is the only person who treated it as a living creature and showed care and concern. When the officials decided to kill the creature, he tried to save it. He says “I don't want an intricate, beautiful thing destroyed” (1:00:30-1:00:33). He helped Elisa to rescue the creature from the facility. Being a Russian spy, his life was always in danger. He lived under the constant threat of being caught and killed. The Russian officials actually used them to gain inside information. According to them he was a mere informer; who was only one among the many they had. They didn't mind killing them. So the officials plan to kill him. Strickland also sets out after him once he realizes that he is a Russian spy. From the film we understand that Hoffstetler received a very tragic end as he gets shot and is also tortured by Strickland.

All these above-mentioned characters represent different sections of the society that are marginalized. Elisa, Zelda, Giles, Hoffstetler are all treated like monsters. They are othered. It is their differences that make them other; and anything other is treated as monstrous. They become monsters just because of the fact that they do not conform to what is called normal. And the normal is the only acceptable. The upper strata people consider themselves as the norm and set the limit. They disregard the lower strata. This presents a grave situation.

The officials of the facility; especially Fleming, the manager of the facility; Strickland and General Hoyt are the ones who mainly represent the powerful or the upper strata in this film. Among them the most powerful one is General Hoyt. He is in an authoritative position where he can order Strickland and all others. Fleming was comparatively weaker. Being the manager of the facility; he just has the power to control the staff at the facility. He repeatedly chastises people for “blasphemy”. Strickland possessed power to some extent. He is the one who is exercising most power and control over others.

The character of Col. Richard Strickland, played by Michael Shannon, is a government agent who is given the charge of the creature. It is he who captured the creature. He is a racist, sexist and a highly prejudiced person. He doesn't believe that he has quite attained the pinnacles of success yet. He wishes to climb higher in the social ladder. He has a wife and two children. Strickland serves as the villainous character in the film. He is a religious person who believes that the Lord is a human like him. Strickland sees himself as a holy warrior who, in the end, identifies with Samson as a man tricked by a woman and entrusted with battling God's enemies. Thus, his religious viewpoint readily excuses the harm he does. He is like a photo-negative of the fishman protagonist. According to him the creature is just a means of securing his position. He tortures the creature very inhumanely. During the first appearance in the film, we see him

holding an electric cattle prod in his right hand. He uses it to electrocute the creature. He was trying to tame the creature. In one scene in the film, we see Strickland's first personal encounter with Elisa and Zelda; they were cleaning the gent's urinal and Strickland suddenly walks. He doesn't mind their presence at all and carries out his business. His conversation with them shows that he does not value women greatly. He undermines their conversation as "girl talk". His way of speaking also shows that he is very head strong. He takes very much pride in his manhood. His dialogue proves it. When Elisa offers him a towel to clean his hands after going to the urinal; he says that the time when a man washes his hands tells a lot about his character. A man who washes his hands both before and after his need has a weak character. He washes his hands before tending to his need. He claims himself to be a person with strong character.

Strickland: Man washes his hands before or

after tending to his needs. That

tells you a lot about that man.

(beat)

He does it both times? Points to a

weakness of character... (*The Shape of Water* 00:17:33-00:17:47)

As the film progress, we notice that he is not even bothered about anyone. He is ready to harm anyone for his cause. When Elisa rescues the creature from the facility, its disappearance created chaos. Strickland was ordered to find it as soon as possible or else he was threatened to lose his job and in the worst case even his life. He sets out to find it. He threatens both Hoffstetler and Zelda; and ultimately reaches Elisa and the creature. He tries to kill both of them but the creature using its powers heals himself and Elisa. The creature also kills Strickland. In the starting narration of the film, we see that the man who opposed "the princess without voice" is

called “the monster that tried to destroy it all”. We realize that Strickland is that monster. This also makes us redefine the definition of monsters. The different or deviant people are not the ones who should be actually called monsters. Based on the literal meaning of the word; the ones who perform bad and brutal deeds must be addressed so.

Strickland is a villainous person right from the beginning. He used to carry an electric cattle prod in his right hand. He used it to electrocute the creature. He was trying to tame the creature. As the film progressed his villainous traits kept on growing. He became more violent. In the beginning of the film, he mentions that he captured the creature and brought it to the facility. He also mentions that during this journey they both didn’t get to like each other much. The creature also bit him and cut off two of his fingers. The doctors tried to rejoin the fingers. But it gets rotten and Strickland pulls them off from his hands. Strickland pulling off his fingers shows his transformation to ultimate evilness. As the fingers were getting rotten, he was also rotting and turning evil inside. He was only bothered about his family's well-being. Strickland's reply when Hoffstetler once requested him to delay the process of killing the asset proves this.

Strickland: This thing dies...

You learn, I leave, out of here.

I settle down. My family settles down

Somewhere nice.

A real city. (*The Shape of Water* 1:00:36-1:00:49)

In this film, first it was the creature who was othered and marginalized. But now with further study we understand that even humans are labeled monsters and were othered. Thus, the world is hard for both humans and nonhumans. Othering or discrimination is a negative element which plagues our society, which must be eradicated fully. The powerful upper strata



marginalize and illtreat the weaker ones. Characters like Elisa, Zelda and Giles present the weaker sections within the film. They are the ones who are constantly sidelined and illtreated. They have no names or ranks; but after watching the film we realize that, they are the ones who are most kind and compassionate.

## Conclusion

In the ever-evolving landscape of our world, the concept of posthumanism marks a new era. With the growing advancements in technology the boundary between human and machine is becoming increasingly blurred. Posthumanism is increasingly relevant in today's modern world of technological breakthroughs and philosophical transformations. Within the framework of posthumanism, monster theory holds a significant place.

The discourse of "Posthumanism" deconstructs the essential concepts and barriers surrounding the category called 'human' and advocates an entanglement of all the strict dualities such as male/female, human/nonhuman, real/virtual. It destabilizes the idea of the human and aims to expand the contemporary philosophical conceptions of being human. Posthumanism rejects both the concepts of human superiority over other living forms and human independence. Being a multifaceted movement, it looks at how animals and plants relate to one another along with how humans engage with different objects living or nonliving. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of all forms of life. In our contemporary scenario, posthumanist perspectives provide vital insights regarding how we conceptualize ourselves, our technological interactions and the trajectory of humankind.

Posthumanism and the concept of monsters share a connection. They both explore boundaries and definitions. Posthumanism challenges the traditional notion of what it means to be human. It blurs the distinction between human and non-human. Monsters, on the other hand, often represent the liminal spaces; residing somewhere between normal and aberrant. Both ideas raise questions about identity, morality and the nature of existence.

Monster theory provides a valuable framework for examining and comprehending contemporary society. The idea of the monster allows the construction of difference. Monster is an umbrella term which encompasses a wide range of creatures; from fantastical beasts to incorporeal spirits. The term is mostly used to refer to a creature which provokes or causes a sense of horror by wickedness and cruelty. We call a person monstrous when he/she has done a very cruel and heinous act. Monsters are looked at with fear. They are scary. The fear of the unknown and unpredictable is a potent force in our perception of scariness.

Every culture has its own monsters. Monster studies depict the structures of exclusion through which some races and bodies were marginalized and demonized as beastly. These small cultural representations indicate how a form of life that was significantly different from the socially constructed norm, whose cultural practices were different, was excluded from the human realm. Humanity survives by constructing modes of exclusion, and the monster's ontological liminality enables domination, persecution, incarceration/containment, exhibition/display, genocide, displacement and elimination of certain forms of life. Monster studies map these processes of categorization and exclusion.

Monsters have appeared in fiction, including books, films, and short tales. Monsters appear in ancient mythology dating back thousands of years. Monstrosities can be found in myths, stories, and folklore of all cultures. It is amazing to see how the presentation of monsters has evolved over years in literature and films. In the past, monsters were frequently shown as wicked, evil or fearful figures, much like in folklore and old stories. They have grown increasingly complicated over time, reflecting the worries and fears of society and sometimes even becoming sympathetic figures. Monsters continue to change, assuming new shapes and meanings in various cultural settings. Monsters have evolved over time, from the classics like

*Frankenstein* and *Dracula* to more contemporary versions like *Godzilla* and the Xenomorph from *Alien*.

Monster Theory is an interdisciplinary and global field of study that integrates techniques and research from various fields of studies like art, literature, religion, philosophy, medicine, sociology, anthropology, and more. In his 1996 collection *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen talked about the concept of monster theory. The opening essay in this collection, *Monster Culture: Seven Theses*, has been a core text in this field. Forms and ways of life that are different gets categorized as ‘monstrous’, and the differently formed/functional bodies as ‘monstrosities’.

The study of monsters through a posthumanist lens sheds light on how cultural conceptions of difference, alterity and hybridity influence our understanding of humanity and its place in the wider universe. In essence, posthumanism and monster theory are intertwined. Through an analysis of how monsters are represented and understood in literature, film and other cultural materials; posthumanist researchers aim to gain a deeper understanding of the evolving nature of human identity in an era of technological change.

*The Shape of Water* is a 2017 American romantic fantasy film set in 1962 Baltimore, Maryland. The film was well acclaimed by the critics, it received appreciation for its acting, narrative, direction, cinematography, production designs and musical score. Set against the backdrop of Cold War-era America, the narrative revolves around a mute woman who works at a science facility in the 1960s. She encounters an aquatic creature that has been trapped and is being studied. After falling in love with this humanoid amphibian, she makes the decision to assist him in escaping death at the hands of a malevolent colonel. The project ‘Monstrosity, Othering and Hegemony: A Posthumanist Perspective of the film *The Shape of Water*’ analyzes

the film from different angles; particularly from a posthumanist perspective by applying the concept of monster theory.

The film is very versatile. Many view this film as a beautiful love story in which the oppressed individuals find strength, power, courage and love. The film brilliantly handles myriad themes like othering and exploitation, humanity, gender, disability, humanity etc. All the themes are carefully interwoven to create a tapestry rich in meaning and emotion. The theme of being incomplete and unfulfilled recurs throughout the story, as many characters in this film feel that they are not complete or pure beings. The film expresses its themes pretty directly. It is not at all subtle. The film has views that are fundamentally liberal. It is concerned about the people who are marginalized and exploited. It criticizes those in positions of power who either abuse others or condone to such behavior by remaining silent. The film embraces diversity and equality.

The amphibian humanoid creature is the central character in the film. In this thesis the terms ‘amphibian human’ and ‘creature’ have been used to refer to it. The creature has an appearance similar to that of a man but it is not fully a man. It can live on both land and water, but it needs water to survive. It is like a hybrid between a man and a fish. In the film it is mentioned that the officials caught it from the river muck in South America. The amphibian creature is treated differently by different people. The officials at the research facility call it an “asset”. It is “a thing, an affront”. But for the central character Elisa he is like a person, a male, a living individual. She addresses the creature with ‘him’.

The project titled ‘Monstrosity, Othering and Hegemony; A Posthumanist Perspective of the Film *The Shape of Water*’ uses monster theory to evaluate the 2017 film, *The Shape of Water*, from a posthumanist perspective. The study clarifies how humans marginalize and

denigrate some humans, animals and other beings while labeling themselves as the standard. The study asks questions on the human tendency to categorize certain beings as other and monsters. The first part of the project analyzed the posthuman aspects present in the film. The amphibian human and the central character Elisa are the ones which we can consider as posthuman. They have certain specialities compared to that of the humans who consider themselves as superior within the film. The amphibian human is like a mysterious creature. It has features which are unique and otherworldly. The creature exhibits both human and animal traits. He is like a hybrid.

Elisa, the central character of the film, also has posthuman features. Being born as a mute and an orphan, she always felt aloof from society. She was found near a waterbody, so she always had a connection with water. Elisa's adaptiveness to water is a unique feature. This sets her different from other people. The relation between Elisa and the amphibian human; a love relation that is most surprising or unseen greatly brings in the posthuman aspect.

The project next analyzed the hegemony and power structure within the society that is being presented in the film. The society which is presented in the film is strictly laden by hegemony. The upper class and the powerful people decide everything. They view themselves as the norm or the standard; and everything that stands outside this distinction is regarded as the other and the monster. The people at the upper strata marginalize those at the lower levels. The lower strata suffer greatly. They are subjected to discrimination in different ways. Discrimination is something which plagues our society. Whether based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality or any other characteristic; discrimination undermines the principles of equality and justice within the society. Discrimination at its core is a product of fear; fear of the difference and the unknown. It erodes the very foundation of our society. It is born out of ignorance and is perpetuated by prejudice.

The film presents many characters who are marginalized and othered. Characters like Elisa, Zelda, Giles, Hoffstetler are the ones who suffer greatly in this film. They are neglected and othered based on different grounds. It is their differences that make them the other; and anything other is monstrous. They become othered just because of the fact that they do not conform to what is called normal. They are dehumanized and are denied equal rights and opportunities. It is important to recognize the destructive consequences of monstering or othering.

The concept of othering is a central theme explored in the film. In the first part of the film the amphibian human was the only one who was marginalized. But with further study it became clear that even humans are othered and marginalized. They are discriminated against on the basis of race, class, gender, sexuality. The dominant ones are taken as the standard and the others are labeled as monsters. Thus, the world is hard for both humans and nonhumans. We can draw a comparison between their suffering. Indeed, both suffer to a great extent. The people who are deviant are labeled monsters and are tortured by those who claim themselves to be normal humans. It manifests in myriad forms, from individual acts of cruelty to institutionalized systems of oppression. They are illtreated, tortured and ostracized by the powerful ones. This is ironic. Humans should be humane. They should be considerate about all fellow beings.

Through his essay, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen talks about how certain sections of the society are othered and labeled monsters. He emphasizes on how monsters challenge the norms of the society and blur the boundaries. The idea of monster theory serves as a lens through which cultural anxieties and desires can be examined. Monster theory and posthumanism are intertwined. By exploring the significance of monsters and the transformative potential of posthumanism we can gain a deeper understanding of humans and the complexity of their

relationships. Presenting posthumanism and monstrosity in film helps to explore complex themes and societal issues. These narratives serve as allegories for real-world issues. It makes the audience aware of certain prejudices and practices within the society that limits its growth. It also helps the people to reflect on these problems and act judiciously. The film *The Shape of Water* depicts the stratification and hegemony within the society and the inhuman practices employed by those in power. The idea of posthumanism attempts to build a society which is free of injustices; where humans and other creatures coexist harmoniously. The film presents the idea that we must always strive to build a society which is inclusive and sustainable. All creatures should coexist and create a balanced society.



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