



Envisioning Posthuman India: An Analysis of S.B Divya's *Machinehood*

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Abstract

The contemporary technological epoch is witnessing the growth of posthuman discourse in science fiction novels as they focus on studying the future existence of humans and nonhumans. However, these posthuman insights and studies are mostly confined to Western sci-fi novels. The present study argues that contemporary Indian English science fiction optimistically deals with posthumanist concepts and shows how a harmonious existence is possible. The idea is delineated through S.B Divya's debut novel *Machinehood* (2021), and it becomes a productive site to analyse posthuman India's future. The Borromean knot of human-machine-nature in the novel delineates how this harmonious existence is possible. The study employs close reading and interpretation by using the concepts of "critical posthumanism" by Rosi Braidotti and "philosophical posthumanism" by Francesca Ferrando. The paper attempts to show how Divya deals with themes like advanced capitalism, neo-religion and sustainable environment, moving away from the conventional notions of anthropocentrism and how she unravels the potentials of posthumanism through symbiotic living.

Keywords: Indian English sci-fi novels, Posthumanism, advanced capitalism, neo-religion, sustainable environment

Posthumanism challenges the traditional notion of humanism, which positions humans as the pinnacle of knowledge and the ultimate creation "with a unique essence and the goal of self-realisation" (Sim 337). Posthumanist thought has played a crucial role in shifting the focus away from the centrality of humans, highlighting the interconnectedness and interdependence of all matter and challenging established binaries such as man/machine, living/non-living, and nature/culture. Instead, it embarked on a new trajectory, emphasising the interconnectedness and importance of each element. This encompasses not only the various forms of animal life on Earth but also underscores the reciprocal relationship between humans and technology, emphasizing their co-evolutionary dynamics. Thus, the discourse of posthumanism emerged as a response to the Anthropocene era and the dualistic mindset prevalent in the West, which worked on the politics of hegemony and proclaimed the accommodation of multitudes and pluralities. It shattered the illusions of human superiority and claims about the interconnectivity of the "Other" to the "self." This paper is motivated by Rosi Braidotti's idea of critical posthumanism, which is based on a nature-culture continuum that can "free us from the provincialism of the mind, the sectarianism of ideologies, the dishonesty of grandiose posturing and the grip of fear" (11). The global conversation surrounding posthumanism has been approached from various perspectives and disciplines, but science fiction popularised this concept. But posthuman insights and studies are mostly confined to Western sci-fi novels and

movies. Even though Indian sci-fi authors like Samit Basu, Vandana Singh, S.B Divya, Gautam Bhatia and Anil Menon have come up with notable works, the attention of posthuman scholars and critics is focused on Western writers like Issac Asimov, William Burrough, Philip K Dick, Charles Stross, Octavia Butler, etc. Indian science fiction (SF) needs to break the shells of a marginalised genre as it creates a stage, tone and itinerary for its readers to envision the future of India. This study will contribute to the posthuman discourse as it opens up the neglected area of Indian posthumanism, and these discussions will bring into the limelight the new wave of Indian science fiction.

Donna Haraway's concept of "beyond human" or "hybrid human" is not new to India as it can be traced to the Indian mythological characters of half human and half animal like Nandi, Ganesha, Narasimha, Hanuman, etc., and it is essential to note that some of these characters peacefully lived among the humans. Similarly, technological embodiments have reshaped certain knowledge and power realms and have led to the convergence of sociocultural, political and environmental practices. S.B Divya's *Machinehood* picturises this complex convergence from an Indian perspective and tries to clarify how we are in the process of becoming. Drawing from her expertise in computational neuroscience and signal processing and two decades of experience as an electrical engineer, Divya has infused a heightened sense of realism into her work. Divya has created a familiar world as it tackles with issues of privacy, bodily autonomy, religious beliefs, economic inequality, etc., that we are already into. Through the characters of Welga Ramirez and Nitya Ramachandran, *Machinehood* draws the plight of humans who are entirely dependent on pills to compete with artificial intelligence, and they have become bot nannies. A group called "Machinehood" demands an end to pill production and fights for machine rights to attain equality with all other elements. The plot moves forward as Welga and Nitya try to solve these problems. The present study attempts to foreground an Indian perspective on posthumanism by analysing the novel *Machinehood*.

Machinehood shows how human life is becoming performative as swarms of cameras surround them, and people rate their performances and are tipped based on their performance. There is no question of privacy, "Privacy had gone the way of the dodo during Welga's childhood" (Divya 25), and data were available to the authorities as Welga explains how she "had permanent blood monitoring built into her body by the US military, with no chance of hiding anything" (73). This performative life, which welcomes appreciation and criticism, has a positive side as it creates a bond and network with the surrounding elements. Thus, Welga comments that she had a sense of security knowing that she could look out for her people, and they'd do the same (25). The characters in *Machinehood*, human or non-human, cannot be perceived as a single agent but as part of a multidimensional network and social associations (Latour 3).

The performance depends on the contribution of bodily implants like personal WAIs and assistants, as they connect the nodes of different realms. Por Que, Welga's WAI-based agent, which is a microscopic implant in her ears, becomes the best example to analyse the man-machine combo. The enhancements were like supplements that helped humans actively exist by allowing them to keep track of their health, daily happenings, data and providing information on everything they enquired. The human-machine relationship here becomes more friendly than a master-slave relationship, and Welga admits, "You know me so well. I think I'd call you a friend, maybe even one of my best friends" (Divya 507). Welga was not commanding but was asking for suggestions. As Peter Paul Verbeek remarks in "Cultivating Humanity: Towards a Non-Humanist Ethics of Technology", "the human needs the nonhuman to come into the mode of its own becoming ... The posthumanism I defend here . . . gives a central place to the idea that the human can only exist in its relation to the nonhuman" (261). Divya is successful in her portrayal of nonhuman entities as the alter-ego of posthuman beings.

The symbiotic relationship of flesh and machine in the cyber universe and the question of identities have an ideal space in *Machinehood*. Towards the end, Welga transforms into a 'Dakini', a hybrid of human, AI and bot coexisting in one body (Divya 320). When Dakini says, "to erase the boundaries between different intelligences, to let everyone fall on a spectrum rather than distinct categories (Divya 487)", *Machinehood* is rejecting the social construction of differences and projects the interconnection of all living and non-living things by creating a web of intricate inter-dependencies (Braidotti 40). Rosi Braidotti, in her seminal work, *The Posthuman*, criticises the Western dualistic attitude and speaks about the need for inaugurating posthumanism to empower the sexualised and racialised human 'others' to emancipate themselves from the dialectics of master-slave relations (66). Ao Tara, the neo-Buddhist leader comments, "The Western way of thinking embraces duality. Good and evil. Man and woman. Mind and body. Human and machine. We reject these false dichotomies. Science has shown that our universe works across a range of possibilities. It embraces the infinite" (Divya 546). Divya's deliberate choice to portray two female characters as protagonists, steering clear of conventional female traits, reflects her conscious endeavour to challenge traditional gender binaries.

Divya also criticises the politics of creating "others" through the character of Dakini as she says, "When humans owned each other as slaves, they found ways to justify their actions, to dehumanize other people" (530). But Dakini takes up the concept of "companion Species" (Haraway 47) and acknowledges post-duality negating hierarchical legacies. *Machinehood* is positive in delineating the human-tech relationship, "addressing technology as an external source which might guarantee humanity a place in post-biological futures" (Ferrando 88) and not as an Other that needs to be feared and rebelled against. The non-separateness between humans and techno realms is vital in understanding the posthuman. Ferrando's concept of "posthumanities" (229) addresses future developments of humankind when they proceed to other planets. This concept is visible in the lifestyle of 'Eko-Yi' (a space station) habitants, who are trying to create a utopian lifestyle. Haraway's cyborg vision of gender can also be traced to Dakini's "agender" ideologies. The term Dakini has been "used for outstanding female practitioners, consorts of great masters, and to denote the enlightened female principle of nonduality which transcends gender binaries" (Divya 545). Ao Tara defines gendering as a meaningless distinction and proclaims that they are "agender" but "deserve a chance to live and work with dignity, freedom, and equality" (361).

The representation of augmented humans, implants and AI-human Dakinis as networks of interdependencies clearly suit the phrase of Ira Livingston and Judith Halberstam – "zoo of posthumanities" (3). Divya gives ethical guidance on accepting and embracing these post-humanistic characteristics. Often, the story highlights the Zoe-centric view of Braidotti, where Zoe is the "dynamic, self-organising structure of life itself" (Braidotti 60), which decentres Bios which is more anthropocentric. *Machinehood* shows how celebrating differences by denying fixities makes life easier and utopic. It also points to the advanced form of capitalism that eclipses the brighter side of the posthuman world.

Advanced capitalism and posthuman capitalism are the new trends in defining the working class population (human and nonhuman) and production in the technological era. The fear of technology taking over human jobs persists in people's minds, and the issue is dealt by *Machinehood*. Even though in 2095, the world's workforce is seen as babysitting the bots, the author believes that specific jobs are still exclusive to people. Information capitalism and surveillance capitalism have turned knowledge, information, data, science and technology into new capitals. They are at the peak in the posthuman world, where consumers are forced to fall into the trap of "strongly recommended" products.

The capitalist world has allowed tints of racism and differentiation in their robotic products, and it can be understood when the aluminium vendor-bot mistook Welga as an Indian and the

human vendor says, “That bot sees your brown skin and dark hair and thinks you’re from Chennai” (Divya 9). The human vendor had looked into the cultural symbols and recognised Welga as an Indian who lives outside India. In her work *Posthuman Capitalism*, Yasmin Ibrahim criticises the data and tech empires for framing equality hallucination where the erosion of race and space pops up. This disguise has deepened social and economic differences and made human lives vulnerable to a particular lifestyle. The capitalist world tries to recreate the binaries of human and non-human by spreading the ideology that human life is more valuable and that they need to outsmart machines. Therefore, all the characters are seen taking pills and juvers to boost their power and strength as they increase neuromuscular speeds, heal wounds and internal bleeding. The working-class people in the novel were also seen taking pills as a routine since they struggled to keep their jobs safe, which depended on their strength and power through pill taking. The pill designers and pill industry swore that there would not be any adverse effects which was their marketing technique and a huge lie, as the pills could even edit DNA and RNA. Welga knew this was a mirage as she knew the real cause of her mother's death was the use of pills, and she herself was suffering from muscle spasms post-pill usage. “These businesses have short-cut the testing process, flouted the spirit of bioethical regulations, and knowingly put people in harm’s way for no reason other than profit motive” (Divya 331). The way in which wealthy pill funders like Briella Jackson use “haemorrhage of biotech terms” for their drug marketing shows how the pill funders and the people with personal data become the bourgeois in the future. The posthuman economy is about the mechanisms and processes which surveil, monitor, and observe interlocking human tendencies with digital architectures converting humans into data assemblages and its residues released as data shadows and footprints (Ibrahim 2).

The capitalists in the posthuman era highlight the need to send bots to the war field as human blood is valued more. The opportunistic political economy of bio-genetic capitalism turns *Life/zoe* into a commodity for trade and profit (Braidotti 60). The only focus of the capitalist world is to accrue power and design a different power structure where exploitation is the result. “They have done this by dividing human labour into two classes: designers and gigsters. The former are exploited for their cognitive power, while the latter rely on low-skilled, transient forms of work for hire” (Divya 20). The condition where “the funders rich, the designers employed, and the gigsters scrambling for work” (3) led the machinehood group to raise the slogan “Power to the proletariat” (32). Funders and the government-initiated fear in people's minds, pointing to the millions of dead people during the pandemic, and they used this fear as a weapon to extract personal data and sell their products. Clemens, one of the residents of Eko-Yi, speaks about her fear of the future capitalist condition, “I’m more worried about a future where the richest people on Earth divide and conquer humanity from machines. They’re playing you all for fools, using your fear to keep you from realising your full potential” (Divya 488). Thus, the powerful and greedy authorities shackle and exploit the working population and consumers. S.B Divya clearly expounds this as the reason for the unhappy and unhealthy life on the planet, and the coming together of the man-machine-nature combo has nothing to do with the destruction.

The commodification of genes, cells, and body parts has led the capitalist society to reap profits, and this has become a significant characteristic of advanced capitalism in the posthuman world. In the process of commodification, advanced capitalism can infuse economic differences among the population. Technology is used to create distinctions and divisions where the technological divide will be generated intentionally, and the rich and the powerful have more highly advanced technologies than economically weaker sections. The relevance of materialism fades, and dematerialism through virtual things enters the posthuman epoch and the notion of multiple functionalities for a substance is entertained. Therefore, readers can sometimes see how materials take different forms in the novel. For instance, Connor and Welga

“reprogrammed the room’s smart-metal bed frame into a cabinet, a table, and three chairs” (Divya 16) and this reprogramming depends on the context. This virtual materialism differs according to the economic status, and the difference is transparent in the lifestyle of Welga, Nitya, Welga’s father, etc.

The metamorphosis of body, technology and every element in the cosmos is attributed to the posthuman world, which advocates celebrating life. This celebration is only possible when the power structure does not draw boundaries and restrict the movements. The capitalist and tech empires’ control of the posthuman world may lead to the apocalypse. *Machinehood* tries to avoid this destruction by advising to embrace “comforts with the plurality of voices” (Khan 209).

Reconfigurations of agencies to “earth others” have also given equal space to ecology and environment in critical posthumanism. Braidotti discusses how this relocates the community’s well-being based on environmental interconnections (48). The posthuman world has realised that threats are common to the human and nonhuman world; therefore, the need for environmental protection should go hand in hand with technological developments. *Machinehood* brings into the limelight various possibilities for leading a sustainable life while co-living with technological matters. Eco-friendly or bioengineered buildings are the center of attraction, even though they are technologically sophisticated. People realise the soothing effect of nature in their busy schedules and try to be part of nature. “The turf floor gave her steps an extra spring. Jasmine and other flowers she couldn’t name trailed from hanging pots, their scents forming a heady perfume” (Divya 12). Most of the government buildings were floored with mosses, and the fragrance of plants permeated the air and Welga notices “grass flooring, solar lighting, and low-profile plants lining the inside walls” (Divya 230). The way Welga’s father preserved the apple tree in front of their house shows people’s attachment to nature and she says that factory productions could never match the richness of its flavour. Posthumans are aware of the destruction that can happen when the Borromean knot of man-machine-nature is disturbed, and the climate changes act as a warning. Therefore, posthumans promote the “Maximum nature, minimal privacy” (Divya 307) policy in the novel. The life in Eko-Yi picturises the benefits of a sustainable and nature-friendly lifestyle as they promote recycling, greenhouses, vegetable gardens, etc. and act as an example for future generations. Thus, S.B. Divya carefully discusses a quintessential issue with more possibilities and reasons that most sci-fi novels fail to address.

The anthropocentric world injects the fear of singularity by pointing to the things that can happen to the world when they reject God, love, kindness and good qualities that humans are “supposed” to possess. Sami Ahmed Khan, in his work *Star Warriors of Modern Raj*, describes the tendency of indigenous writers to incorporate mythology in science fiction. Still, *Machinehood* moves away from these conventional ways and addresses religion and belief in a different paradigm. Statues of Hindu deities are seen in some places, and people talk about sin and guilt, but they are not projected for more attention. The novel appreciates the efforts of religious and non-religious people in respecting each other’s views. Luis is portrayed as a Christian believer and is uncomfortable with his wife’s idea of aborting their child. On the other hand, his wife Nitya believed in the freedom of choice, and Luis valued her choice because of love and respect. Connor is interested in the concept of “neo-Buddhism” and embraced it as it was not about God or religion but of existence in peace (94). Neo-Buddhism concentrates on providing an enlightened and peaceful way of life by giving importance to equality to every single element in the cosmos. Thus, as Braidotti comments, posthumanism has taken a post-secular turn, which calls attention to universal human emancipation (31).

The analysis of S.B Divya’s *Machinehood* justifies the words of Bal Phondke, “The Indianness of the science fiction in this country [India] is not dependent on its geographical origin but rather on the cultural and social ambience which gives it its soul” (xviii). Indian family bonds,

cuisine, technological advancements, closeness to nature, belief in God, and respect for fellow beings have been practised from the Vedic times and are praised by the world. Divya through her novel, tells that it is not necessary that living in the posthuman world will destroy the warmth of these relationships. When everyone is too conscious about their performance before the camera, “local Indian culture preferred modesty and kept swarms out of the home” (Divya 12). Indians lend a hand to help the needy, negating the boundaries. So, despite facing economic hardships, Nitya managed to provide assistance to Zeli's family, who were grappling with the consequences of terrorism. Although advanced capitalism creates uncertainty in posthumanism, the traditional Indian culture is knitted and blended into the posthuman future to emphasise the importance of a symbiotic existence. The narrative reaches its climax as Welga envisions a world transformed for the better, and the story concludes with the poignant lines, “Like every image she'd seen of Earth, the land had no divisions. Neither did space. The haze of atmosphere faded into blackness with no clear boundary” (Divya 608). Hierarchies, human centrality and boundaries should be decentered, and the richness of plurality should be cherished. Nietzsche, in “On the Genealogy of Morals,” states the importance of plurality by saying that the concept of a thing becomes more complete when it is watched by more eyes and different eyes (555). Divya explores various facets of posthumanism, reframing our ethical and political ideas on posthumanism and extending these ideas into the realm of posthuman existence.

Hence, *Machinehood* is a piece of evidence that the Indian SF genre takes an optimistic stance in addressing posthuman life. In her conversation with Chriss Voss, S.B. Divya emphasises that her novel is not dystopian; instead, it strives to foster hope regarding human-technology relationships. The narrative delves into the dynamics of "collision, competition, and cooperation" between individuals and intelligent machines (03:54–03:59). The symbiotic interplay among humans, machines, and nature, as presented in the story, aims to counter dark scenarios like in the *Terminator* series. *Machinehood* emerges as a trailblazer in Indian SF and posthumanism, adopting an inclusive approach that integrates various elements instead of isolating them. In contrast to much of European science fiction, Indian SF successfully combines the complexities of posthumanism or envisions “multiple posthuman futures” (Braidotti 150). The narrative put forth by *Machinehood* advocates for sustainable posthuman futures without instilling the fear of a technological apocalypse. Importantly, the work underscores that posthumanism does not imply indifference but fosters a sense of community. In the backdrop of Indian culture and tradition, the realisation emerges that humans attain true worth when they acknowledge the cosmos as manifestations of the same energy in infinite forms.

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