

Original Article

Genetic Enhancement from the Perspective of Transhumanism in *the Beast with Nine Billion Feet*

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Abstract

Anil Menon's *The Beast with The Nine Billion Feet* (2009) situates the promises and perils of transhumanism within the futuristic set in Pune, India in 2040. The novel foregrounds genetic enhancement, bio-modification and algorithmic surveillance as forces that reshape not only bodies but also identities, families and social hierarchies. It is a blend of young adult fiction with speculative science. The novel can be analyzed through a transhumanistic lens, exploring the themes of genetic engineering, technological advancement and their impact on humanity. It is set in future where technology including virtual reality and artificial intelligence, play a vital role in daily life. The novel showcases the impact of advanced technology on society, featuring elements like liquid computers, emotional cars, illusion pods and synthetic life. The novel examines the complex interplay, that is the concept of being human in a near future India. It raises the concerns about potential social stratification and the exacerbation of inequality. The novel offers a rich exploration of the ethical and societal implications of this emerging philosophy. This paper aims to illuminate the anxieties, complexities and potential future trajectories of the human race. The novel presents a trans humanistic vision, where biotechnology and genetic engineering redefine the meaning of human life and erase the boundary between the natural and the artificial.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Genetic Enhancement, Posthumanism, Transhumanism

Introduction

In the post modern era, Humans should improve themselves by using technology to strengthen their cognitive functions, physical abilities and emotional well-being. The young adult fiction *The Beast With Nine Billion Feet* emphasizes the dual nature of genetic enhancement through the characters Tarak Advani, Tara, Adi and so on. Anil Menon is a writer of speculative fiction and writings on evolutionary algorithms who published his debut novel *The Beast with Nine Billion Feet* (2009) which was shortlisted for the Vodafone Crossword Book Award and Parallax Prize in 2010. This fiction can be explored by applying the theory of Transhumanism, a philosophical and cultural movement that examines the use of technology to enhance human physical and intellectual capabilities to extend the lifespan and overcome perceived limitations of human nature. This includes technology such as Biotechnology, Artificial Intelligence and Nanotechnology which come under the term called 'Posthuman', where people transcend their limitations such as aging, diseases, and death to increase their lifespans significantly where species move beyond the current situation. The umbrella term *Transhumanism* was introduced by the Biologist and English Philosopher Sir Julian Sorell Huxley in his essay 'Transhumanism' that appeared in the book *New Bottles for New Wine* (1957). He is known as 'Father of Transhumanism' and 'shorthand' for evolutionary humanism. The movement exacerbates existing social and economic divides creating a gap between the enhanced and unenhanced which is the pursuit of becoming more than human. Menon insert those elements that create the conflict between Family and Social, Private and Public relationship, Enhanced and Unenhanced dilemma of the Advani's Family and The Lotus government in the futuristic society of Pune 2040. Further this paper examines the genetic enhancement through the lens of Transhumanism.



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Genetic enhancement is a improvisation of human in the aspect of physical, cognitive, health and appearance but not just curing illness. It enhances the capacity of human beyond the normal health and the functioning of stronger muscles, faster healing, high memory power and intelligence, the skin colour and others. Unlike other works, Menon through an impressive narrative investigates the conflicts and consequences of genetic enhancement in the futuristic lens in *The Beast with Nine Billion Feet*.

Clash between Family and Identity

Menon explores the deep conflict between the familial bond and the search for individual identity in *Tarak* of the Advani family. Tarak Advani is the head of a family who has two children, Tara and Adi. He is a brilliant radical scientist branded as a criminal who openly supports the 'Free Life movement' in the futuristic society. He rejects the socially controlled genetic enhancement and fights for scientific movements that never access the state controlled legal activities. Menon presents him as a defiant force who has a scientific visionary but positioning him as both rebel and outcaste. Meanwhile Tara recognizes the ethical danger behind her father's work and how social control limits their choice. Tara suffers more by the unethical activities "a name was a burden; it carried more weight than a body could bear" (Menon 48). Tara does not like Tarak's unethical behaviour and afraid of chaos that may happen. She is warned about the restless young generation caught between admiration and consequences of science technology. For Tara, identity is shaped by skepticism and caution who could not imagine the future obstacles. On the other hand, Adi feels suffocated by government restrictions that leads to underground enhancement as he joins the Gene-Hacker posse, group of people practicing illegal genetical modifications without government approvals. It is the reflection of DIY (*Do-it-yourself*) but strain familial trust, causing fear and disillusionment at home. Unlike Tara, Adi embraces Tarak's vision and represents radical young generation who is willing to challenge the state controlled government by his hidden criminal behaviour. Menon presents the clash between Tara's caution and Adi's rebellion and how they navigate to pit the family values against individual freedom. Tarak's activities rupture the family as well as social government.

Tension Between Freedom and Authoritarianism:

Menon chooses Pune 2040 as the dystopian fiction setting because India is imagined as a global reach of biotechnology Genetic modification with strict governmental oversights. Government expects people to follow the restrictions with absolute obedience. Genetic modification is not a free domain to access; instead it is a rigidly regulated system which monitors public through the surveillance of drones, scanners and biometric tracing when the government dictates how, why and to what people has to follow to upgrade them. The Lotus government transforms genetic engineering into a political tool, when it benefits for the state and allows people to enhance themselves by boosting immunity, improving the productivity to increase the workforce efficiency and increasing the lifespan. It has its merits but creativity is rejected. Thus bio-technology becomes as authoritarian tool to control rather than individual enhancement. However the strict regulations create underground networking, and Tarak Advani is branded as a criminal scientist rebelling against state government. Tarak is worried about his son's activities against the state authorities. As Adi involves in unethical bio modifications. The conflict between state government and rebellions exposes the major tension in the fiction where one side biotechnology ensures order, productivity and control for the state government on the other hand, biotechnology is a source of resistance, identity and freedom for the individual. Here Menon critiques the authoritarianism which suppresses the autonomy force and the progressive society which start losing individual identity.

Cost of Individuality

The futuristic vision of Menon questions not only technological process but the cost of individuality and creativity where he incorporates minor characters to explore the lived experience of the ordinary citizens in Pune 2040. Visapla is not just a supportive character but plays a significant role to express the lives of ordinary citizens in future times. She comes from Nurth, an artificial island or the state. She befriends Tara, who is alienated from the society due to her modified artificial limbs by the state government PSST who is semi authoritarian. She lost her individual freedom to refuse them. Visapla symbolises the agent trying to convince or influence the state government for the approval of genetic engineering. She brings hope and clear understanding of freedom and authoritarianism to Tara. While Tara wants to enhance her dark skin but she is stuck between the confusion of personal identity and dilemma. In the end Visapla is the human cost of authoritarianism who never concerns human values. Her mechanical appearance recalls the ancient rigvedic character Visapla, a warrior woman fixed with an artificial leg, making a link between myth, technology and modern identity. Tara encounters the siblings in the thought of "The twins' bodies look "almost too symmetrical," suggesting illegal precision enhancement" (Menon 2009). The twin siblings Ria and Francis, an ordinary teenagers deal with the strict government in Pune. Ria is the emotional support of Tara in school, who feels the government pressure and yet provides balance to Tara's rebellious curiosity with groundedness. Meanwhile Francis in contrast, joins with Adi in illegal modification who are considered as a active experimenters in younger generation. Furthermore, one of the most striking image in the novel is genetically modified children do not have belly buttons, since they were not born from the natural processes which is a symbol of socially alienation, government control and unnatural creation of future world.

The Dystopian Pune

Menon classifies the unimaginable changes in dystopian landscape Pune 2040 between people and state in *The Beast with Nine Billion Feet*. There are rapid advances in biotechnology but it becomes a battleground of modern philosophies, raising questions about science, ethics, and human freedom. The ruling Lotus Government perceives genetic enhancement as a tool of social hierarchy and surveillance. As Menon says, “something vital in exchange.” (Menon 2009) the changes and transformation of human beings with biotechnology is acceptable and improvement of future world. Biotechnology is no longer simply medical progress but is used to regulate, monitor and control citizens. In the story, normal people are forced to deal with genetic modifications, which makes personal freedom almost impossible. The government acts like a tyrant, the villain. The novel focuses on conflicts like freedom versus control, natural humans versus genetically enhanced ones, science versus ethics, and young people rebelling against traditional authority. The city of Pune is shown as a dystopian place, not just a city but a symbol where humanity and individuality are under pressure and constantly questioned.

Conclusion

Menon’s novel *The Beast with Nine Billion Feet* (2009) warns the ethical progress without ethical responsibility. The story presents the struggles to balance the both ethical dilemmas and human relationships in the Advani’s family. The novel is not just a critique authoritarianism but invites readers to focus on current advancements of biotechnology, genetic enhancement and surveillance. By mentioning futuristic India as a global hub of genetic engineering, Menon questions science, human evolution and at what cost. Menon dramatizes the lived experience of ordinary people under the restricted control of the state through the central figures such as Tarak, Tara and Adi and though seeming minor characters Visapla, Ria and Francis. The story concludes with a open discussion for the readers and furthermore it stresses the significant freedom, creativity, autonomy of individual and self identity.

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