

# Question the Limit of Human Identity and Science in Frankenstein and Professor Shonku: A Posthuman Study

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## Abstract

The field of science fiction in today's world is remarkable for its ongoing reflection of contemporary political and social trends. The origin and development of Western and Indian science fiction carry different histories. The earliest form of Western science fiction was more speculative in nature and gradually focused on technologies, discovery and space travel, which can be treated in the group of hard science fiction. Indian science fiction is unique in theme for its treatment of Indianness. It is the blending of myth and modern technology. The paper makes a comparative study of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Satyajit Roy's *Professor Shonku* using the theoretical framework of Posthumanism. The posthuman study of science fiction may be capable of bringing about a substantial change in society. This paper seeks to understand the human-machine relationship from an ethical perspective in both Western and Indian societies. It also identifies how both writers' different philosophical responses to the power of creation, the weight of responsibility, and the ethical limits of knowledge. Shelley's *Frankenstein* created the superhuman creature, which is no less a monster in its characteristics. Whereas Roy's professor Shonku, is a genius for scientific invention, which have indigenous ideas and is for the well-being of human beings. The paper will be critically analysed by Francesca Ferrando's idea of Philosophical Posthumanism.

**Keywords:** Science Fiction, Posthumanism, Ethics, Philosophical Posthumanism.

## Introduction

Science fiction is both a combination of fiction and science. And the writers of science fiction use their imagination power to find out something new in their fictional world with the help of science and technology. Science fiction, as a modern genre, portrays techno-social changes, the world of fantasy, discoveries, the land of dystopia, space travel, and even concerns environmental changes. Wikipedia defines science fiction as “a genre of speculative fiction that deals with imaginative, futuristic, and scientific concepts.” And on the other side, American writer and professor of biochemistry Isaac Asimov provided an appropriate literary definition of science fiction as “the branch of literature which deals with the reaction of human beings to changes in science and technology” (Ingersoll 68). There are different opinions among scholars

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and critics about the history and origins of science fiction. The French novelist Jules Verne is considered the father of science fiction, although there have been other famous science fiction novelists on the row, like Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, and H.G. Wells. And when we talk about Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), which can be counted as the first true science fiction in literature. With the growth of human civilization and scientific development, the popularity of science fiction rapidly increased in the first half of the 20th century. This popularity was not confined only to Western society or the Western world; gradually, it broke boundaries and found its place in Asian and Indian literature.

Though the evolution of science fiction in India was a very leisurely stroll. It faced hard batted with more well-known and popular Western science fiction. However, in recent years, “the exploration of contemporary socio-political issues with the blending of traditional Indian themes of science fiction shows an alternative vibe that finally emerged as a genre that has international attention and with the current situation where SF is trying to break free of American and British hegemony and welcoming new critics from across the World” (Meshramkar 51). However, Ambika Dutt was the first Indian science fiction writer who wrote *Aschary Vrittant* (The Strange Tale) in Hindi language during 1884-1888 in a magazine named *Peeyush Pravah* from Madhya Pradesh. The birth of real science fiction happened in the hands of Jagadish Chandra Bose by his Bengali SF *Palatak Toofan* (Absconded Tempest) in the year 1897. And now the present-day scenario is the bloom for Indian science fiction. There are too many prominent writers in English and vernacular languages, are Anupam Bhattacharya, Jayant Narikar, Satyajit Ray, Vandana Singh, Prayag Akbar, Samit Basu, Priya Chabria, and Amitav Ghosh.

### **Science Fiction in Bangla and Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein**

Asimov's statement that “true science fiction could not really exist until people understood the rationalism of science and began to use it with respect in their stories.” Early 19th-century Bengali literature was mostly centered around Tagore. Still, the effects of the industrial revolution and urbanization may have led to a cause of showing interest in writing and reading SF in Bengali. The most enduring writing in this genre came from a single family, Sukumar Roy and his son Satyajit Roy. Satyajit Roy, following the success of the *Apu Trilogy*, developed an interest in science and technology. In 1965, *The Diary of Professor Shouunku* was published as a masterpiece of Indian science fiction. Roy’s unique style of presenting the character Professor Shouunku was a great challenge for the “primacy of imperial science” and “western hegemony” (Suporno 43). However, Roy was not denying the influence of modernisation and globalisation in his fiction, and subsequently, he was deeply influenced by the European Enlightenment, as Ashis Nandi explained, “a part of him was as deeply Indian as a part of him was Western” (43).

However, there are different opinions on the first work of SF in Bengali. It was *Sukra Bharaman* (journey to Venus) by Jagadananda Ray, mostly credited as the first Bengali science fiction. It has a description of the alien creatures that are seen in Uranus. Another view built by the critique that it was an Indian scientist and writer, Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose, whose works *Niruddesher Kahini* (The Story of the missing One), 1896, or *Palatak Tufan*, 1921 (The Ranway Cyclone) are known as the first true SF in the Bengali language. There are too many

names in the field of early Bengali science fiction. Writers include Hemlal Dutta, Upendra Kishore Ray Chaudhary, Rokey Begum Hussain, Sukumar Roy, Hemendra Kumar Roy, and Premendra Mitra. Atanu Bhattacharya, in his article *The Marginal Technopia: Early Bengali Science Fiction and the City* mentioned that “Bengali SF is representative of the entire gamut of science fiction that emerged in the languages of India in the nineteenth century” (8). And when we talk about the magazine *Digdarshan*, it was the first science magazine in Bengali, brought out in April 1818. *Sandesh* was the first science fiction magazine published in the year 1913 by Upendra Keshore Ray. Though the Bengali *Kalpabigyan* genre was boosted by the four periodicals *Ashchorjo*, *Kishor Gyan*, *Fantastic*, and *Vismoy*. So influenced by scientific invention and technological advancement, Bengali writers took interest in SF writing, such as Hemlal Datt's *Rahashya* (The Mysteries) published in 1882, Premendra Mitra's *Piprer Puran* (The Story of Ants), and Sukumar Ray's *Heshoram Hushearer Dairy*. And in 1965, Satyajit Roy appeared on the stage of SF with *Professor Shonku*.

When we talk about science fiction of the Western world, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) was the first true science fiction. *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, became a masterpiece for its artistic framework, which drew upon the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment in the fictional world. Here, Victor Frankenstein is not just a scientist, but he is a Greek God like Prometheus. Victor is the creator of new beings, possessing power akin to that of Prometheus. The creature created by Victor Frankenstein represents a transhuman identity. Its physical appearance was unlike a common human form. It looks like a horrific creature with a huge physical body. The best description has been given by its own creator:

“How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! — Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips.” (Shelley 35)

The creation of Victor Frankenstein is a physically enhanced human who is very strong but not beautiful. The creation goes wrong as it is ugly looking and, in the meantime, ugly in mind, very destructive in nature. The objective of the research is to explore Posthumanism in *Frankenstein* and to conduct a comparative study of Frankenstein's creation and Satyajit Ray's *Professor Shonku*. Satyajit Ray's world of adventure and science fiction series features Professor Trilokeshwar Shonku as the greatest scientist. He has also created such transhuman characters in the stories *Shonku and Frankenstein* and *Dr Danielli's Discovery*. In the present context of technological evolution, science fiction by Satyajit Ray can even challenge the Western world. His book *The Diary of the Space Traveller* introduced Professor Shonku's invention of a rocket and a robot named ‘Bidhu Shekhar’ for his journey to the red planet.

In 1818, Mary Shelley's *The Modern Prometheus* was the classic representation of transhumanism. Though at the time of Mary Shelley, the creation of Frankenstein was merely an imaginative science fiction, and now, apparently in the present age of AI, cloning, robots,

androids and plastic surgery, it is truly possible to create such things, but the question is, can this new creature be treated as human or posthuman? And how does the creation of Genetic Engineering have a relationship with human beings? What is their identity? What should be the ethical part of this posthuman creation? This paper will make a comparative analysis of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Satyajit Ray's *Professor Shounku*, applying Posthuman theory.

### **Posthumanism in Science Fiction**

Science fiction and Posthumanism are closely linked with each other, when science fiction portrays the world of technology, genetically modified humans, cyborgs, and AI, Posthumanism theory blurs the boundary between human and non-human. Posthumanism challenges the traditional human-centric view, and science fiction provides a platform to explore it. Posthumanism in science fiction is a very popular trend in the present time, as “posthumanism challenges traditional humanist perspective, which centers on the human experience as the pinnacle of existence and investigates the blurring boundaries between human and non-human entities, such as animals, machines, and even artificial intelligence” (Saranya 171). Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, being the first true science fiction in the English language, portrays the destructive characteristics of Victor's creation. The genre of science fiction provides a platform for posthumanism to address real-life social issues from an ethical and existential perspective in the context of unfavorable technological advancements. In connection with science fiction narrative, Donna Haraway, in her critical work *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) mentioned that, “the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion” (1). The main motto of science fiction is not only to explore possible technological inventions, but it also talks about how humans evolve with technology and the correlation of human society and science. The work of science fiction is to calculate and predict the impact of scientific advancement on the Earth and mankind. Similarly, posthumanism raises questions about the human-machine relationship or what it means to be human and whether humans should be the limit of our ethical observation. Science fiction writers most probably give their novels a dystopian setting, like Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) The novel speculates a near future where androids and advanced technology rule the lives of humans, and it reflects a gloomy future for the Earth, where humans and another species are on the brink of extinction. Although humans are controlling their own destinies and the environment with the help of technology and science, they often fail to understand themselves, and critical posthumanism helps to study the human condition in this age of technology. Science fiction, which tells us about the bad consequences of scientific invention on the Earth and human beings, Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is one of them. The situation is that the technology is out of control “The falcon cannot hear the falconer; Things fall apart.” What W.B. Yeats said in his poem *The Second Coming* about the anarchy of human civilisation, the same thing is happening in the human-machine relationship. The machine, like Robot, crosses its limits, disobeying the order of its creators, and becomes the theme of many science fiction writers. Indian science fiction writer Jayant Narlikar's short science fiction *The Return of Vaman* (2015) explores how technology in Vaman seeks to surpass human intellect. In modern times, science fiction writers consistently discuss the human-machine relationship, emphasising that not all problems can be solved by some scientific invention; instead, we need to understand how to use technology ethically and who should control it. This will decide the

present and future condition of the human world. Margaret Atwood's speculative fiction *Oryx and Crake* (2003) focuses on genetic experimentation and pharmaceutical engineering, which ultimately leads to an apocalyptic scenario. So, the major concern of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the moral and ethical responsibilities of science and scientists. The philosophical posthumanism strand examines the ethical implications of expanding the circle of moral concern and extending subjectivities beyond the human species. Francesca Ferrando, in her critical work *Philosophical Posthumanism*, mentioned that "the ways we are developing technology are not neutral, but have deeper consequences" (43–44).

### **Frankenstein and Professor Shonku: Posthuman Identity and Ethics**

In human culture, Identity is a vital concept. Identity means a human characteristic, self-perception of social class, religion, and ethnicity. And above all, nationality and social identity are based on the self and other concept. And in this postmodern era in the age of AI and technology, the most often asked question is Who am I? Here, transhumanism plays a pivotal role in future orientation. Science and technology are the main assets of interest for this transformation. Can the creation of Prof Shonku and Frankenstein be called human or posthuman transhuman?

As they are more advanced than common human beings in physical and intellectual abilities, they have been created only for the betterment of society and human beings. Frankenstein's monster has been created from different parts of dead bodies. It was created only to satisfy the creator's scientific genius. So, it can be identified as a tool only. Here, Frankenstein placed himself in the position of God: "a new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me" (4). Ray's Prof. Shonku is an internationally acknowledged Bengali scientist, famous for his indigenous scientific technique, "futuristic experiments, with techno-scientific and posthuman objects," (Das and Roy 131) who can even challenge the superiority of Western scientific discourse. Goutam Karmakar and Tanushree Ghosh, in their article *Identity, Indigeneity and "Mythologerm": Reading the Stories of Satyajit Ray's Professor Shonku as Postcolonial Science Fiction*, argue that "Satyajit Ray's Professor Shonku stories imagine utopian, postcolonial futures and create indigenous heroes who challenge Eurocentric scientific hegemony" (47). In *Shonku and Frankenstein*, we see that the experiment of Prof. Shonku is not to create a demon character; instead, this creation could be for the better in society. As Shonku said, "What if a human is replaced by a demon! I've no idea what will happen" (Ray 99). And Shonku's experiment with the character 'Rudel' became successful. Rudel is no longer his former self. He is not showing interest in the pro-Hitler group. His brain has been transplanted very successfully into Aaronson's brain. Now, "Rudel has transformed into a new person" (Ray 100). He is completely changed. His Identity changed. Aritra Basu, in his article *Beyond the Machine: Cyber-Humanism*, mentioned that "Hero Shonku was perilously aware of the human nature of his beings, and of the fact that there was something which could be broadly classified as the posthuman" (13). Posthumanism celebrates a non-catastrophic relationship between man and machine, which should be mutually beneficial for both.

Victor Frankenstein is presented here as a Posthuman creator. His creation is neither fully human nor completely non-human; rather, it looks like a Cyborg or genetically modified

being suffering from an existential crisis. And throughout the story, we see the ethical consequences of creating life beyond natural means. This creation becomes ferocious and fatal for its creator. This genetically modified creature is searching for identity. The creation disobeys all human ethics. It confronts Victor, and when he realizes that William belongs to the same family, he kills William. And after that, one by one, Victor's friend Henry Clerval, his newly married wife Elizabeth Lavenza, were killed by the creature. Here we mark that when the creature fails to achieve subjectivity, it transforms into a monster. As it said, "I am malicious because I am miserable" (7). On the contrary, "Shonku was perilously aware of the human nature of his being, and of the fact that there was something which could be broadly classified as the posthuman" (Aritra 13). His invention and creation were very closely connected with human beings and were very useful for society. Professor Shonku was a gifted scientist for the Indian society and economic system, as "his experiments were mostly low budget, his inventions were diverse, extraordinary, and effective" (Sharma 66). Though he had done the experiment in the same laboratories as Frankenstein, Shonku's transformed creature or being was a blessing for human beings. The newly transformed being finds his own identity. Here, Shonku was not his Godfather. On the other side, "the robot made by Shonku was capable of saving his creator's life out of a sense of gratitude" (Aritra 14). We saw that Frankenstein's creature has no such human-like feelings.

### **Conclusion**

When we talk about posthumanism, it is one of the emerging fields of study in the present-day world. The study rejects the idea of posthuman superiority and gives importance to every non-human living and non-living beings. Shreosi Roy Chaudhury, in her article, argue that while humanism sets humans apart from nature, projecting and promoting an anthropocentric perception as the reality, Posthumanism attempts to redo this totalitarian structure and suggests how humans exist not as the singular self at the centre of the universal but rather in a homogeneous blend with the other" (123). So, when we talk about genetically modified beings like the creation of Frankenstein and Professor Shonku, both of their creation was suffering from self and other identity. They are "creating life without any accountability and without considering the well-being of." (Upkul Patowary 122). Such a cyborg or transhuman creation raises concerns about the ethical implications of their innovations. Human civilization has to face the consequences.

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