

Re-visioning the ‘Human’: Evolution of Transhuman Subject in Shafi Uddin Shafi's *Machineman* *

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Abstract

*Science and technology have revolutionized human existence and conventional perspectives of the universe. Today, science is not just an epistemological enquiry, but it is a vehicle for transforming human position by re-setting the traditional organizational hierarchies. There is an innate human desire to transcend human limitations and attain power. The notion of 'transhuman' is one of the recent cultural expressions of the same human aspiration. Transhumanism strives for human transformation by broadening the boundaries of human capabilities, blurring its predetermined perimeters, and metamorphosing the human into something greater than the original self. As visualized in many science fiction narratives, the altered humans may act like superhumans and be capable of amazing feats. However, such speculative conceptions simultaneously envision the rise of a dystopian society. The present paper aims to investigate the idea of transhuman as an unpredictable agency and its connection to the Darwinian theory of evolutionary change. It also looks into the speculative outcome of transhumanism as a form of technological domination in the imagined future. The paper undertakes the proposed study through an analysis of Shafi Uddin Shafi's *Machineman* and endeavors to examine the human-machine dialectic, located in the transhuman subject.*

Keywords: Transhumanism, Superhuman Motif, Evolution, Dystopia, Technological Domination

Understanding Transhumanism

Transhumanism is an “intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities” (Bostrom 4). Transhumanism, that has now become a world-wide accepted emerging theory, came into existence with Julian Huxley, who not only coined the term ‘transhumanism’ in his essay “Transhumanism,” included in the book *New Bottle for New Wine* (1957) but also supported the idea of human evolution through technological enhancement. His seminal work foresees an efficient, powerful, and technologically driven society concerned with the full development of human potential with the help of science and technology and, thereby, plods ahead to establishing a modified human entity. Huxley describes this “evolutionary humanism” as something trying to “transcend itself—not just sporadically ... but in its entirety, as humanity...man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing the possibilities of and for his human nature” (17). Nick Bostrom, one of the reputed transhumanist philosophers from Oxford University who has gained international recognition for

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his theoretical studies of existential risks and the moral implications of human enhancement, agrees with the transhumanists' goal of using both present-day and emerging technologies to drastically alter the human species beyond what is biological. According to him, given the speed at which science is developing, both ageing and death are seen as unwanted and unnecessary. His opinion about transhumanism, which he defines in his article "The Transhumanist FAQ" (2003), is that transhumanism is the "study of the ramifications, promises, and potential dangers of technologies that will enable us to overcome fundamental human limitations, and the related study of the ethical matters involved in developing and using such technologies" (4). Bostrom's other essay, "Transhumanism: The World's Most Dangerous Idea" (2004), also glorifies the idea of transhumanism and its goal to extend human boundaries through delimitation. Francis Fukuyama, a political scientist and a well-known critic of Nick Bostrom, opines that transhumanism seeks to liberate humanity from its biological constraints by attaching it to technological reforms. He, in a widely cited article on transhumanism in *Foreign Policy* (2009), describes transhumanism, like Nick Bostrom, as "The World's Most Dangerous Ideas" (42) to be emerged in recent times and also argues there that "humans must wrest their biological destiny from evolution's blind process of random variation and adaptation and move to the next stage as species" (42). Max More, who works as the main booster of enhancement and transhumanism, states that transhumanists do not view human nature as perfect, as an end in and of itself, or as having any claim to human loyalty. Instead, it is only a stage in the evolutionary process, and humans can change their nature to become what they find valuable and desirable (4). Rui Daniel Pereira Lopes, in "Dystopia and Transhumanism: The Case of *RoboCop*" (2022), defines it as, "Transhumanism, a relatively recent and highly diverse philosophical and intellectual movement, holds that human nature exists but it is imperfect and not fully actualized, that it can be improved and enhanced through scientific and technological means" (53).

Transhumanism: Aspiration for Human Enhancement

Transhumanism seeks to improve human position, advocating the proactive use of science and technology to "enhance" cognitive and emotional skills and physical and sensory abilities. The transhumanists argue that advances in genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, robotics, and nanotechnology may enable the sciences to expand intellectual faculties, conquer age-related diseases, eliminate unhappiness and anxiety, and prevent ageing and, possibly, death. They believe that by improving their current form, humans may create a new future in which humanity can achieve the unfulfilled desire of immortality, hitherto unattained owing to the limitations of the human body. Indeed, transhumanists radicalize the idea of human transcendence and transformation. Interestingly, the conception of transhumanism neither denies the biological and cultural history that has led to the contemporary form of humans, nor is it satisfied to stay inert in the face of biological and social influences defining the future of humans. Instead, it encourages the purposeful modification and improvement of the human species through emerging technologies like information technology, biotechnology, and nanotechnology, which will hasten the evolution of humanity. Its ultimate goal is to become posthuman, defined as a being whose inherent human qualities have been enhanced to such an extent that they significantly exceed our existing state and become something far more evolved. More explains it:

By thoughtfully, carefully, and yet boldly applying technology to ourselves, we can become something no longer accurately described as human – we can become posthuman. Becoming posthuman means exceeding the limitations that define the less desirable aspects of the "human condition." Posthuman beings would no longer suffer from disease, aging, and inevitable death (but they are likely to face other challenges). (4)

Transhumanism: Speculations and Dystopian Vision

Transhumanism that supports the modification of humans in the process of human enhancement welcomes all species, including 'human,' 'transhuman,' 'posthuman,' and 'humachine' beings. Posthumans, as Nick Bostrom points out, could be fully synthetic artificial intelligences, enhanced uploads, or the outcome of numerous minor but cumulatively significant augmentations to a biological person. On the other hand, "transhuman," the first appearance of a new evolutionary species, is a transitional form between humans and posthumans. Referring to F. M. Esfandiary, he says that signs of transhumanity include prostheses, plastic surgery, extensive use of telecommunications, a cosmopolitan outlook, and a globetrotting lifestyle, androgyny, mediated reproduction (such as in vitro fertilization), lack of religious beliefs, and rejection of traditional family values (Bostrom 5-7). 'Humachine' refers to one who results from the symbiosis of humans and machines in one body, which Donna Haraway terms as 'cyborg' in her work "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1991). Max More also believes in enhancing human intelligence, emotion, and biological properties for a higher level of satisfaction. However, there is one caveat that the opponents of this movement frequently use. They ask-- will the essential components of humans as organisms, manifested in how humans act, think, and express themselves, remain unchanged? There are many other associated queries, which raise humanity's concern about 'transhuman'. Will the elemental human personality or essential human beliefs be retained if a person improves into a transhuman? Will there be continuity between human, transhuman, and posthuman? Clark states that cultural and scientific advancement may create a perceptible change in human nature; the values, beliefs, and principles that humans have inherited from their ancestors might witness a drastic change. Andrew Pilsch identifies it as "evolutionary futurism," which he describes as a line of argumentation that "situates technology as exerting mutational, evolutionary pressures on the human organism" (3).

Alluding to Aldous Huxley's dystopian opus *Brave New World* (1932), Fukuyama argues that this change of thought may result in the loss of something (perhaps, the human soul), which he calls "Factor X" (Gerreau 160). He is concerned about "the attempt to modify on a large scale some basic characteristics of human behavior in ways that will make us scarcely recognizable" (Garreau 159). Fukuyama hints at the dystopian turn of transhumanism, predicting less gain and more loss. He mentioned that emotion, empathy, and intelligence are the three areas arising from evolution that may change the human enhancement process, as expressed in numerous dystopian visions. While discussing the terrifying possibilities of the future presented in *Brave New World*, he writes in *Our Posthuman Future* (2002):

...the people in *Brave New World* may be healthy and happy, but they have ceased to be human beings. They no longer struggle, aspire, love, feel pain, make difficult moral choices, have families, or do any of the things that we traditionally associate with being human. They no longer have the characteristics that give us human dignity. (Fukuyama 6)

In a nutshell, Fukuyama fears that human enhancement might dehumanize humanity by disrupting the very essence of human nature, which he defines as the fundamental value of humans that provides a stable continuity to human existence. He speculates that while humans improve themselves, they might become hollow shells of their former selves. William S. Haney II, a detractor of enhancement, shares the same line of thought, believing that this technological enhancement may negatively impact human consciousness. He, like Fukuyama, thinks that enhancement will result in an irreversible loss of humanity, causing humans to lose their fundamental identity, which may result in a dystopian cosmos marked by unjust domination, impotence, degradation, and devastation.

During a political discussion, James Stuart Mill used the term “Dystopia” to describe the growing skepticism of Enlightenment ideas, particularly the importance of reason and science in potential development and human perfection. Furthermore, Stock feels that the epithet ‘dys-topian’ denotes an unthinkable or unsustainable ambition and a “misplaced desire to implement eu-topia” (116). The late 20th and the first half of the 21st century engaged with this dystopian vision more due to the invention and creation of technology-driven entities and human over-dependence on technology. E. M. Forster also presented this idea in the story “The Machine Stops” (1909), in which excessive technological dependence affects humans physically and psychologically and leads to complete control of the eponymous machines over society. The story accurately predicts the 21st-century reality by indicating how technological advancement has outpaced humanity’s ability to keep up, ultimately resulting in technology controlling humankind rather than the other way around. Forster’s work explores the issue of scientific and technical advancement, along with totalitarian state restrictions and tyranny, which are central to the dystopian genre. Vieira writes:

Two ideas, which are intimately connected, have fed dystopian discourse: on the one hand, the idea of totalitarianism; on the other hand, the idea of scientific and technological progress, which, instead of impelling humanity to prosper, has sometimes been instrumental in the establishment of dictatorships. (18)

The same dystopian feature is found in the speculative visualization of technologically advanced transhumanism and its ultimate institutionalization in state power, raising concerns about the interplay of these two concepts: authoritarianism and scientific and technological growth.

***Machineman*: A Narrative of Transhuman Entity**

The movie, *Machineman*, screened in 2007 and directed by Shafi Uddin Shafi, is a Bangladeshi rendition of Robocop, Terminator vs. Evil Robocop T-1000, and narrates the life of Bobby, a police officer. During his anti-terrorist mission, Bobby killed the antagonist Dani’s brother and foiled his terrorist plan. Hence, in an act of vengeance, Dani kills Bobby’s family and leaves him half-dead. A scientist’s daughter finds Bobby lying on the beach and brings him to the lab. Her scientist father, who has been experimenting for years to create a ‘Machineman’ by upgrading human qualities, treats Bobby and transforms him into a robotized human entity. Later, the same scientist creates another upgraded version of Machineman, that is Bionic Man, which, instead of helping humanity, starts to dominate humans using his enormous power. Therefore, the movie delineates the conflict between the Machineman and the Bionic Man, and presents both the positive and negative aspects of human enhancement.

Delineation of Desensitized Human Sensibilities in the Machine Man

The movie, through its apt illustration, comprehends the ramifications predicted in terms of transhuman as an evolutionary entity. Though at the beginning, the treatment of transhumanization of Bobby’s body faces partial failure, as he has lost his memory, later he is metamorphosed into an unpredictable transhuman entity. Despite surpassing human corporeality, the artificial incorporation of human consciousness causes complex outcomes. Therein lies the limit of science and technology. Though current technology can fix the human body, it fails to inculcate fundamental human qualities, portending experimental hazards such as dehumanizing a human subject. Bobby’s cyborg body loses its soul, expressing the speculative apprehensions allied to the process of transhumanism. Many scholars believe that in the process of robotic mechanization of human subjects using AI, humans may lose consciousness, the fundamental source of human sensitivity. It forebodes how the transhuman subject may turn into a strange and unpredictable being. The movie captures the same fear as part of the film narrative. The Machineman loses his

human sensibilities and finds himself devoid of human emotion and feelings with a neutralized sense of conscience.

Nevertheless, the scientist's daughter, a psychologist, attempts to rekindle the human conscience in *Machineman* by reminding him about his past and prompting his interaction with people needing help. However, Bobby's brain seems to be infused with an artificial sensibility that appears to be insensitive, ruthless, hard, and dangerous. The screen narrative evinces how the emotional sensibility inherent in humans as an organism does not relate to the machines. It may be lost in the transhumanist experimentation to transcend the limitations of the human body. According to Max More, emotional enhancement primarily involves eradicating or reducing negative dispositions such as wrath, hatred, melancholy, and despair. However, as observed in many cognitive experiments with human consciousness, some experts are of the opinion that changing or manipulating these emotional characteristics will cause irreparable degeneration of human psychic constitution. Fukuyama also contends that sorrow and rage are catalysts that actually help form human nature, but when these emotions are artificially removed or inserted in a mechanized body, it may result in violence and death. The same danger is foregrounded in the screen narrative of *Machineman* (2007). The movie shows that the Machineman becomes insensitive and almost neutralized to emotions. He does not feel sorry for killing people. Moreover, exercising his brutalized force, he rips away the opponents' body parts without remorse. The loss of emotional sensibility exhibits the loss of 'humanhood' as a part of the transhumanist process. As a transhuman, Bobby's aggression becomes disturbingly intense. The extremely violent way in which he amputates Dani instills fear in the spectators. The sci-fi movie portends an unforeseen threat embedded in human experimentation with transhumanism and artificial hybrid entities. The film narrative draws attention to the dystopian reality involved in the ambitious transhumanist enterprise and persuades us to sincerely contemplate over the human trust with transhumanism in its multi-layered rational and ethical ramifications.

Portrayal of Techno-colonization through the Bionic Man

The screen narrative of *Machineman* comprises both the rational and ethical dimensions of the transhumanist dilemma. The screen representation of the dehumanized human subject in the form of a technologically evolved organism, the 'Machineman', arouses a dreary feeling. The sense of dread is further heightened in the movie by the scientist's next evolutionary creation, the Bionic Man. Collins Dictionary defines Bionic Man as "someone who has special powers, such as being exceptionally strong or having exceptionally good sight, because parts of their body have been replaced by electronic machinery... having certain physiological functions augmented or replaced by electronic equipment...[and is] exceptionally strong, skillful, energetic, etc" ("bionic"). The scientist, who created the 'Bionic Man' in the film, describes it as: "*Machineman ar unnata sanskaran hochche bionic man. Bionic man hobe machineman ar theke panchgun shaktishali. Tar sharire kono astra ba guli dara aghat korle, oi aghat anti-virus bacterial ar tairi ultra-viva ray ar madhyame sathe sathe sei aghat purno kore debe abong bionic man abar purno shakti niye kaj korte perbe*" (Original in Bengali) [The improved version of machine man is bionic man. Bionic man will be five times stronger than machine man. If his body is hit by any weapon or bullet, that hit will be instantly repaired by the ultra viva ray made by anti-virus bacterial. And bionic man will be able to work with full strength again. Translation mine] (*Machineman* 01:19:10-01:20:45). Therefore, with such superhuman abilities offered, Dani's associates force the scientist to metamorphose Dani's body into 'Bionic Man'. After the successful transition, Dani - the Bionic Man- kills both the scientist and his son. The development in the plot suggests the attainment of

uncontrollable power vested in transhumanist enhancement, and at the same time, it arouses concern about its abuse. The plot addresses ‘pragmatism’ vested in the application of such power. The Bionic Man destroys the scientist’s dream to use technology for civilizational advancement. Instead, it creates an autocratic agency aspiring for totalitarian control over human subjects, repeating the ‘imperfect’ human history with more dreadful transhuman prospects. The progression of screen narrative formulates a discourse around the central conception of human enterprise of transhumanism and how it may reinforce totalitarian tendencies in new forms with more perilous implications.

What the movie suggests is that the basic human desire to dominate does not subside with transhumanism. Instead, it re-emerges with multifold force and greater destructive outcome. The movie raises questions about the destructive potential of transhuman agency that may surpass both human rationality and robotic codes. The screen narrative of *Machineman* replaces the imperial form of colonization with techno-colonization. Techno colonization, which is exercised by the transhuman subject ‘humachine’ over humans, becomes a speculative trope with huge discursiveness embedded therein. The mighty transhuman subject, in the re-envisioned techno-colonized society, attempts to maintain autocratic rule in a more appalling way. Since a transhuman entity is neither ‘human’ nor ‘machine’, it may be bound by neither human ethics nor Asimov’s *Three Laws of Robotics*, which ensure ethical machines. Such dystopian visualization calls into question the progress of science and technology and its conceptualization of transhumanism as a form of human enhancement.

Transhuman Subject and Human-Machine Dichotomy

The speculative projection of fear that transhumanism may mark the end of the human era comes alive in the cinematic portrayal of the ‘more than human’ subject in *Machineman*. The screen narrative insinuates the ongoing process of transhumanization, transforming ‘man’ to ‘machine man,’ further to ‘bionic man’. The presented iconography of transhumanism indicates that the human subject itself has become an object, an experimental site for technological innovations. Moreover, the consequential transition of humans from a ‘subject’ to an ‘object’ generates new critical epistemes to redefine what is ‘human’ in relation to both ‘trans-’ and ‘post-’ human. The audience may critically speculate: Does the transhuman subject displace the human and claim the agency vested therein to appropriate future posthuman space? Or is it just a link between the conventional ‘human’ of the past and the speculative ‘post-human’ of the future? What will constitute the new subject in the era of post-humanism? Will it be ‘human’, ‘machine’, intelligent ‘humachine’, or something unanticipated, hitherto unseen?

Besides evoking the sense of existential crisis and questions about the loss of agency by the human subject, the movie re-introduces human-machine dialectics, not as separate entities but as a juxtaposed complex. Contrary to the conventional idea of ‘human’ and ‘machine’ as two clearly defined entities with distinct epistemological statuses, the transhuman subject is undefined, hybrid, unstable, and suspended. It neither suggests a clear demarcation between an organism and an artificial entity nor appears permanent in the evolutionary process. Being a link between ‘human’ and ‘posthuman’, it seems only a part of the process instead of the final product to reaffirm its own status in the new organizational hierarchy.

In addition to the epistemological discursiveness inherent in the said dialectics, the movie also introduces an unconventional presentation of conflictual iconography. The familiar hero-villain conflict comes in visual form with unfamiliar elements of subjecthood imparted to the key characters. The plot does not incorporate a human protagonist and a robot antagonist to drive

conflict-generated action. Instead, the new agents of screen-action are two ‘transhuman’ figures. They participate in the central action as ‘humachines’ characters. Neither of them represents pure human or exclusive machine, nor do these ‘pure’ or ‘exclusive’ attributes count anymore in the distinct conventional categorization of species. The human-machine dialectic loses its bipolar opposition hitherto understood with regard to an organism or an artificial entity. In fact, these ‘humachines’ as agents of the action prove a more dangerous ‘fused form’ of human ambition and the robotized-sophisticated-intelligent machines. They incarnate the new transhuman subject, who may play the role of both protagonist and antagonist in the future, displacing human agency altogether.

The movie predicts the fear of human extinction/subordination in the evolutionary chain with the emergence of more powerful transhuman subjects. In a world writ large with technological interventions and fast-paced modifications, the transhuman subject seems to possess the most desired attribute of ‘adaptability’ required for survival. Darwinian adaptability has multiple countenances as well as sources. He states:

It is very difficult to decide how far changed conditions, such as of climate, food, &c., have acted in a definite manner. There is reason to believe that in the course of time the effects have been greater than can be proved by clear evidence. But we may safely conclude that the innumerable complex co-adaptations of structure, which we see throughout nature between various organic beings, cannot be attributed simply to such action.” (Darwin 112)

In the posthuman era, the adaptation takes place not as ‘natural selection’ but as ‘upgradation’. The attribute of ‘adaptability’ is manifested in the form of technological modification. It appears, though speculatively, to be the most valid form of adaptation, especially in a technology-determined era where human agency has already been fused with the strong and intelligent machine. Rob Gonda also contemporizes the Darwinian principle in his online article “Adaptability is Key to Survival in the Age of Digital Darwinism,” stating:

While we’re a long way off from 1859, the idea is just as relevant as it ever was. We are a species whose habitat is now ruled by technology, and it is changing at a rapid pace. Connectivity, data analytics, artificial intelligence and the internet of things are rapidly changing our world and environment, and according to Moore’s Law, the pace of change will only grow. (Gonda)

The ongoing transformation of organisms and the environment envisions humans as transhuman in the evolutionary chain. However, the adaptation of humans is speculated not in the conventional Darwinian mode but as a technological ‘upgradation’ resulting in the construction of a ‘transhuman’ subject. The *Machineman* showcases the subordination of human agency to new transhuman subjects, who seem to be the new agents of action in the future world.

Conclusion

Transhumanism envisions to amplify “human intelligence, increase emotional well-being, improve our [humans’] capacity for steady commitment to life projects or a loved one and even multiply the range and richness of possible emotions” (Bostrom 5) so that “people become more able to shape themselves, their lives, and the ways they relate to others, in accordance with their own deepest values” (Bostrom 4). With the help of advanced technological means, it tries to overcome the boundary that limits human desire, providing humans the scope to plan, choose, and prolong their lives. However, as inherent power dynamics have always guided the human species, these modified humans might cause great harm to humanity through their demand for more power, and therefore may breed a situation in which the species’ survival could be at risk. Hence, before embracing transhumanization as a technological method for human enhancement, humanity needs to reconsider what is to change, for whom, and at what cost. If the notion of transhumanism

suggests the enhancement of human subjects to fix ‘imperfections’, then the idea of ‘perfection’ itself needs to be re-deliberated, re-defined, and re-evaluated in terms of rational and ethical codes. Whatever the speculative propositions woven around the dystopian future, the select screen narrative *Machineman* makes the audience acknowledge the speculative nature of future society and its probable change leading to a dystopian state of humanity in relation to ‘machinity,’ a term used to refer to the existence of all the machinic entities in various fields of human life. It suggests that the future of humanity awaits a human replacement by something far superior -something that roboticist Hans Moravec has enthusiastically predicted. The replacing entity, as conceived in transhumanist discourses, is incomparable to humanity as it exists today. Therefore, the movie brings up significant ethical and philosophical issues regarding transhumanism and the course of technologically driven human evolution.

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