

Vernacular Futures: Reconfiguring the Posthuman in Contemporary Assamese Speculative Fiction through *Homo Minuscula*

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Abstract

The paper investigates posthuman themes in Santanoo Tamuly's *Homo Minuscula* (2023), a 20th-century Assamese science fiction anthology. It contextualizes Assamese science fiction in postcolonial Indian speculative literature along with its multilingual and multicultural origins. It uses posthumanist theory to examine complex connections among humans, non-humans (including clones), and other species as co-evolving beings negotiating technological advancement. Stories like "Homo Minuscula" by Amulya Hazarika and "Livability" by Harekrishna Deka explore dystopia, human augmentation, and repositioning within this posthuman framework. "Rasayan" and "The Returnee" explore the ethical and existential issues posed by medical augmentation of humans via technology. Furthermore, stories such as "The Cave" and "The Inseparable Hearts" also challenge traditional notions of speciesism and the hierarchical categorization of beings. This research investigates several stories like this that advocate Assamese Science Fiction's (ASF) contributions to posthumanist discourse and stimulate readers to engage with its thought-provoking narratives and observations on humanity's advancement.

Keywords: *Homo Minuscula*, Assamese Science Fiction (ASF), Posthumanism, Speculative, Indian, Humans.

Introduction

Suparno Banerjee's *Indian Science Fiction: Patterns, History, and Hybridity* (2020) situates the origin of Indian Science Fiction (ISF) in postcolonial India's diverse traditions, beginning with Kailash Chunder Dutt's *A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of*



the Year 1945 (1835), which imagined a revolt against colonial rule. Indian science fiction also incorporates sophisticated technology, interplanetary travel, and extraterrestrial species. However, as Sukrita Paul Kumar, guest editor of *Sahitya Akademi's* bimonthly magazine, points out, science fiction works in any Indian language also ignite mythology and advance scientific understanding (9). As debates have predominantly focused on American writers, studies on the entire corpus of ISF are scarce because it differs from classic genres. While ISF engaged with Anglo-American science fiction, it differed in its approach, as this exposure only contributed to shaping ISF's creativity. This lineage includes Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and many more works that employed scientific imagination to advance fiction. In the 20th century, like many regional literatures of India, Assamese science fiction (ASF) explored the transformative potential of scientific advancements on the human condition, making it "prophetic in nature" (Tamuly 5). Stories from *Homo Minuscula* (2023), a twenty-one-story ASF anthology edited by Santanoo Tamuly, are investigated to examine innovations in ecology, medicine, and technology. Amritjyoti Mahanta, a renowned fiction critic and columnist, has translated these narratives into English. These stories depict a future civilization where all sciences have advanced and are focused on conquering death, often leading to unexpected outcomes. This study investigates the relevance of ASF's dystopian futures and human advancement by machines, which create a new cultural history of the human and ask what types of humans are present and extinct. Pramod Nayar suggests that "Posthumanism is, at first glance, a temporal marker indicative of this late, perhaps more advanced human" (12).

The traditional definition of humans identifies those who are aware of their intellect and identity, or can regulate their behaviors via their needs and desires. Humanism examines an individual whose composite qualities identify them as human; according to Nayar, "[i]t treats the human subject as the center of the world, which is influenced by the human's thoughts and actions" (15). While critical posthumanism begins with the assumption that the human incorporates difference in the form of other DNA, species, and forms of life, its uniqueness is seen as a myth (Nayar 13). Vernacular Futures: Reconfiguring the Posthuman in Contemporary Assamese Speculative Fiction through *Homo Minuscula*

Dinesh Chandra Goswami's "Inseparable Hearts" (2005) deals with cloning and "other bodies" that are neither humans nor animals. As "posthuman bodies are bodies designed for the donation of organs with pre-set life spans" (Nayar 87). The research questions if stories of *Homo Minuscula* (2023) emphasize human augmentation via technology and other species or a coevolutionary connection among humans, robots, and other living forms.

***Homo Minuscula* (2023)**

The title, *Homo* (Latin for people) and *Minuscula* (extremely little), indicates a major transition in human life capturing the thematic overview of the book. The story "Homo Minuscula" depicts mankind transforming into tiny organisms to survive in an exhausted planet. The concept proposes a biological and ecological alternative to genetic alteration, organ transplant, and other mechanical bodily enhancements that redefine life and evolution. The departure of *Homo Minuscula* without external influence highlights the anthology's fundamental question: Can humans develop by adaptation or subtraction rather than addition? Hariprasad Barua's "Birchatiyar Desh" initiated Assamese science fiction in the seventh issue of volume 1 of the Assamese journal *Awahan*, featuring Phagnaram, who calls Jupiter in his dream. This idea of interplanetary involvement via technology was unusual in the early 20th century. Other notable ASF contributors include the creator of *Awahan* magazine. In his 1938 story "Rasayan" (chemistry), Nagendranaryan Choudhary incorporates 'kayakalpa,' an ancient Indian medicinal rejuvenation treatment claiming to restore youth and energy, blending Indian customs and modern investigation (Dutta 1090). In contrast, "The Returnee" by Jayant Kumar Goswami explores a speculated breakthrough in biology and chemistry could potentially enable resurrection for humanity. Despite these advances, the narrative indicates towards the mortality of humans reminding society the powerful nature science that is constrained by existential realities. Through his narrative "Livability," former IPS officer and Sahitya Akademi Award winner Harekrishna Deka gave ASF a new, technical voice. The story blends machine learning and human cognition to examine biotechnology and

AI-enhanced humans by investigating identity, autonomy, and the ethics of human technological dependency. These narratives present a preview of the anthology's 21 short stories. The anthology marks a significant milestone in Assamese Science Fiction (ASF), mirroring the growing societal consciousness regarding science, identity, and survival in a dynamic world. This anthology envisions a world where the human subject is fluid, redefined, or augmented and is investigated in this paper to contribute to the growing body of SF scholarship that acknowledges ASF as a valuable resource for posthuman inquiry.

Positioning of Humans

The anthology, through its speculative futures, addresses the nuanced dynamics of posthumanism, which includes the centrality of humans and their superiority over all other life forms. These notions are challenged by depicting biological transformations through medical innovations, as it problematizes the human form and consciousness and suggests a reconstructed human identity. By probing such consequences, it questions that who benefits, who is marginalized, and what is compromised in the pursuit of becoming more than human. Here the interdisciplinary approach is reflected through the recurring elements in the convergence of various scientific domains such as chemistry, physics, and biology, particularly as they owe to medical advancement and temporal-spatial mobility. The posthuman condition is inherently hybrid, where science and narrative intersect to imagine new ontologies of existence. The stories engage with speculated futures where scientific intervention may extend or diminish human faculties; it can be disrupting the fixed boundaries between the organic and the synthetic, the natural and the artificial (Hayles 2). This paper engages with two key dimensions of posthumanism as reflected in the anthology; First is the Decentring Speciesism—where narratives question the positioning of humans as the ultimate agent of knowledge and morality. In these stories, new species or their technologically enhanced counterparts often challenge or outperform human beings, portraying humans as just one among many sentient entities. This discourse will indeed question

the meaning of being human, a concept that has become complex in the rapidly evolving fields of posthumanism and medical science. This perspective challenges the belief that any species, particularly humans, is inherently superior to others, a notion known as speciesism; it applies not only to non-human animals but also to marginalized humans and artificially created beings such as clones. It will explore how ASF interrogates speciesist ideologies in its narratives. And the second is human enhancement—it will engage with the scenarios where the human body and mind are altered in terms of scientific advancement, which can increase the additional capabilities or reduce size and complexity, as implied in the given stories. The authenticity of identity, limits of embodiment, and implications of self-modification are the questions that provoke such changes. The study will situate *Homo Minuscula* (2023) in broader posthumanist discourse, drawing on the theoretical frameworks by scholars such as N. Katherine Hayles, Donna Haraway, Pramod K. Nayar, and Rosi Braidotti. As stated by Haraway in *Cyborg Manifesto*,

Robotics and computer science had progressed immensely, and the cyborg became the central metaphor to understand social and cultural reality as a construction of multiple identities, a metaphor truly made for the late twentieth-century imagination: ‘a hybrid of machine and organism [...].’
(149)

These scholars have examined the evolving relationship among the human, the machine, and the non-human, and building upon their findings, the study will not only project the technological futures but also critique and reimagine the ethical, social, and ontological dimensions of human beings in an age of accelerating change.

Human Enhancement

“Rasayan” depicts bold attempts to search for immortality and overcome biological constraints of aging and decay. The cultural and mythical reservoirs work as the metaphors for age and vitality transmission and manipulation, such as the *Mahabharata*’s scene when Puru gives his youth to his father Yayati, with

contemporary scientific investigation. By blending ancient life-extension myths with glandular science, the narrative evokes what Rosi Braidotti calls “*Zoe*-centered egalitarianism,” a posthuman vitalism that “displaces the focus from the human to the non-human life force, or *Zoe*—the spark of life shared across all organic matter” (Braidotti 60). However, instead of regeneration, this unchecked reversal endangered the body's biological clock. The elderly guy becomes a primate-like creature with hair and a tail. “*Rasayan*” questions the bounds of the human species and the urge to live longer or alter biological processes. As Nayar indicates, “Biologists are certain of a ‘species identity’ for most life forms on Earth. Yet animal-to-human and human-to-animal crossovers and mixing to produce chimeras—indicating species-blurring—are now common.” (131).

The transfer of glandular material may collapse the species boundary through rendering humans to look like primates. It indicates that biological interventions make strict taxonomies unsustainable. This reflects Donna Haraway's assertion that “by the late twentieth century [...] the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached [...] nothing convincingly settles the separation” (Haraway 151). Instead of cybernetic augmentation or AI integration, this improvement stresses biological and metabolic transformation from the body or other species. The story presents the survival of old man not through augmentation but through his regression into a primordial being. It reconfigures via speculative science; that once the biological envelope is breached, the “human” as a stable category dissolve into a zone of proximity with the animal. In contrast, “*Livability*” depicts human enhancement in a dystopian future of 2070s with extreme body mechanization. It envisions a world divided into artificial homes called ‘islands’ comprising nanotechnology and artificial intelligence to replace any bodily part with painless and exact transplants. Historian Robert Maxim, due to memory loss, undergoes many physiological upgrades and brain implants, as he says, “I am a manufactured human” (Deka 67), describing his ontological state. His doctor informs his wife, Akansha, that “he may not regain it all, but he will surely get back everything important” (Deka 65). This mechanization of identity exemplifies Bernard Stiegler's *Vernacular Futures: Reconfiguring the Posthuman in Contemporary Assamese Speculative Fiction through Homo Minuscula*

theory regarding the “industrialization” of memory, which “leads to the loss of the individual's ability to exist as a singular subject with a unique past” (Stiegler 112). Silicon chips were placed in his brain to restore memory, showing how memory, identity, and subjectivity have changed. In response to his wife's question about the 4th of July, he recited American history but forgot that it was also the couple's golden jubilee wedding anniversary. It prioritizes historically or publicly relevant material above personal, emotionally charged memory and mechanizes memory into a utilitarian algorithm. As pointed out in the story, “[t]hat is minor, not needed in this livable world” (Deka 71), it normalizes the human body into a patchwork of inorganic implants. Exemplifying this posthuman condition of fusion between human biology and the information system, Katherine Hayles argues that,

The posthuman implies not only a coupling with intelligent machines but a coupling so intense and multifaceted that it is no longer possible to distinguish meaningfully between the biological organism and the informational circuits in which the organism is enmeshed. (18)

The illustration of coupling in Maxim's story represents an identity no longer anchored in biological continuity but dispersed across cybernetic networks. Both “Rasayan” and “Livability” address different modalities of enhancement; one grounded in biochemical regression and the other in cybernetic reconstruction. While “Rasayan” serves as a cautionary tale of tampering with biological essence, “Livability” depicts the emotional erasure inherent in machinic logic. In both narratives, the endeavor to transcend death results in the characters transcending their own humanity. Ultimately, these stories fit within the framework of “Critical Posthumanism,” which Stefan Herbrechter defines not as a stage in evolution, but as “a crisis in the definition of the human [...] the moment when the human realizes it has always been ‘contaminated’ by the non-human” (Herbrechter 15). The idea of enhancement remains questionable; while their bodies transcend human identity, the loss of essence suggests that “advancement” may merely be a sophisticated form of dehumanization.

Decentring Speciesism

“Homo Minuscula,” “The Cave,” and “Anupam, Deeplina, and Destiny” speculate on the future of human existence through the assemblage of human, clones, biological minimization, and genetic determinism. By challenging the centrality of humans in cultural and scientific discourse, it offers a space to examine posthuman subjectivities by investigating a future where species, bodies, and technologies intersect and evolve through. “Homo Minuscula” set in 2115 AD, scientists surgically remove the pituitary gland and restrict somatotrophin synthesis, shrinking people to about three inches tall. This transition decreases metabolic demands but makes humans susceptible to environmental hazards, such as an elephant’s footprint. Scientist Nirmai Lahon describes this as an evolutionary continuity: “Probably we will create a new human race. The race that stood on its two legs with its spine straight was called Homo erectus; later it came to be called Homo sapiens. And we will be homo minuscula.” (Hazarika 114). This transformation represents the loss of superior status of in the ecosystem as Pramod Nayar also argues in *Posthumanism* (2013), it is “a consequence of its openness to the environment” (20). The repositioning of humans aligns with the Michelist political imperative found in environmental posthumanism, which emphasizes “the porosity of the human with respect to the environment, as well as the mutual feedback effects [...] to change the world, we must first change ourselves” (Milburn 364). The posthuman notion where humans are no longer considered autonomous masters of their environment but are subject to its mutable conditions. By engaging with ethical, and political aspects, the narrative examines the treatment of social order and biology to determine who is human and who is disposable. In “The Cave,” Mr. Pieneer, a white UN secretary, symbolizes such a speciesist viewpoint, that betrays a deeply ingrained racism. He declares,

Thousands of apes are born in the forests. That doesn't mean those forests are theirs. In this land many humans with black skin were born, and because

they were born here, they died here one day. They never did anything between birth and death (Saikia 50).

This statement aims to dehumanize Black people by comparing them to animals, thereby stripping away their humanity and agency. But in contrast Pieneer gets the transplanted heart of Black man named Smith. When Smith's widow, Mary, asks to touch her husband's heart inside Pieneer's body, it destabilizes the perceived species hierarchy. A man whose heart is both physically and metaphorically the center of humanity was formerly deemed subhuman. Pieneer's eventual suicide and Dr. Campbell's awful conclusion is even more distressing as he attempts to rationalize the death by stating that,

So, I mean, can't it be like this, that hearts of men from every race do not match with receivers of every other community? Suppose a water pump cannot be used for pumping oil. It may run initially, but damage will occur in no time. And that is how Piennner's machine also stopped working (Saikia 60).

The comparison of the human heart to a machine is a metaphor for the overt act of dehumanization. It makes Smith's heart no longer capable of humanity or compassion, making it merely a mechanical object unsuited for Piennner's 'superior' body. To reinforce the racial hierarchy that places white bodies above Black ones, the analogy denies the biological compatibility proven by the successful transplant. Supporting this, Nayar also argues that,

When humans are speciesist and treat non-human life forms as expendable, then some species of humans are also—as history shows in the form of genocides, racism, and slavery—excluded from the category of the human to then be expendable. (14)

The life and death of Mr. Piennner symbolized the consequences of internalized superiority and societal dehumanization.

While “The Cave” indicates the external exclusion, “Anupam, Deeplina, and Destiny” shifts the focus inward to genetic governance. In this future, marriage and reproduction are determined by genetic compatibility not by love or autonomy. The rise of such genetic discourse has redefined the human body as a code. As Judith Roof argues, that, “the human body began to be seen as an articulation of a code (the DNA), even as the DNA itself was textualized as the book of life” (Nayar 81). The personal identity is determined via molecular language which reduces human beings to a result of preset genetic instruction called ‘mathematicised life’ (Nayar 81). This standard of living is criticized but yet glorified in the story, as genetic control can promise to end pain, but it takes away autonomy, variety, and emotional authenticity. It promotes a new type of eugenics under the veil of technical reason, as it poses significant concerns about humanity's future. It in a way decentres human as superior but also indicates that certain specific human is preferred to exist in the future indicating the speciesism.

The narrative “Porcine” addresses interspecies brain transplanting. Kulesh’s brain cortex is replaced with a pig’s, he exhibits hybrid behaviour, but his wife, Dharitri, embraces the “transformed Kulesh,” underlying the narrative’s subject of life beyond human conventions and the possibility of new hybrid beings that cross species boundaries. It exemplifies what Katherine Hayles findings in her distributed cognition—model in which human thought is no longer confined to the brain but is shared through technological and non-human systems. She asserts,

No longer is human will be seen as the source from which emanates the mastery necessary to dominate and control the environment. Rather, the distributed cognition of the emergent human subject correlates with [...] the distributed cognitive system as a whole, in which ‘thinking’ is done by both human and nonhuman actors (90).

By using Pig’s brain to form a hybrid, the narrative also has an ethical dimension since pigs are generally considered immoral and used as experimental animals. It questions species hierarchies and proposes posthuman existence may result from morally or physiologically impossible cooperation. Finally, “The Vernacular Futures: Reconfiguring the Posthuman in Contemporary Assamese Speculative Fiction through *Homo Minuscula*

Inseparable Hearts”; it questions the ethical boundaries between humans and clones. Roopsikha a clone sister created to provide a replacement heart for her ‘original’ sister Deepsikha. A disturbing practice is revealed as Roopsikha, resembled humans biologically, behaviourally, and emotionally but was still not considered human. Despite their origin as clones, their agency, dreams, and purpose are hallmarks of what is traditionally associated with being human. As pointed in the theoretical framework of posthumanism, Clones disturb our sense of species self because, while they are derived from humans—i.e., they replicate us—we find it difficult to perceive them as human. Whether such beings, derived from us, from our DNA, are to be treated as persons in the full sense of the word is a subject explored in medical ethics, philosophy, and politics (Nayar 86). Deepsikha’s parents faced a dilemma while choosing which daughter would live; it symbolizes a shift from species supremacy towards a new ethic of cohabitation. This unravels the underlying theme of the fear that arises when science blurs the lines of identity and personhood. The speciesism mindset that allowed certain beings (race, biology, or origin) to be commodified and sacrificed is reflected when the dilemma regarding the ethical implications of using clones as organ banks is faced by Deepsikha’s parents. These tales use speculative frameworks to track human decentring. By challenging humanism’s core belief in bodily sovereignty, rational autonomy, and species supremacy, these tales explore new ontologies of being that reflect the focus of posthuman theory through cohabitation with robots, animals, and the environment. Whether by technological assemblage, genetic mathematization, cloning or biological subtraction, the human subjectivity in ASF turns into a malleable node in a broader ecological and technological network. These narratives do not just indicate a dystopian future, but they offer a new ethic of cohabitation where survival depends on the recognition of our shared vulnerability with non-humans.

Conclusion

The narratives analyzed in this research are spanning from the glandular regressions of “Rasayan” to the miniaturized survivalists of “Homo Minuscula”.

collectively redefine the human subject as a malleable node within a vast technological and ecological network. By placing the drive for human enhancement against the necessity of decentring speciesism, these stories discover that posthuman transformation is not a linear progression toward a perfected utopia, but a complex state of hybrid compromise. *Homo Minuscula* (2023) has presented some characters that initially exhibit that they are superior beings due to their technological advancement or genetic engineering, but they are ultimately confronted with mortality, trauma, and the limits of self-determination. Whether through the addition of cybernetic circuits or the subtraction of physical scale, the resulting “advancement” is never an absolute success or failure in biological terms alone; rather, it depends entirely upon the adaptation of the resulting hybrid human to their new ontological state. This reflects Karen Barad’s theory of “Agential Realism,” which suggests that individuals emerge only through their “intra-actions” with the environment (Barad 139).

A recurring motif in this anthology is the integration of ancient mythological reservoirs with modern scientific techniques. However, as seen in “Rasayan,” these myth-science combinations often fail to achieve pure immortality. The central complication within human enhancement is that nucleating non-human traits that are engaging with them to advance and that leads to a transformation of the “self.” While there is a loss of the original human “essence,” it is never a complete erasure. Instead, the body develops an enmeshed hybrid that exhibits a state simultaneously post-human and post-non-human. This aligns with Donna Haraway’s concept of “Sympoiesis” or “making-with,” where no organism is self-contained (Haraway 58). As the anthology demonstrates, when transformation occurs through subtraction (as in “Homo Minuscula”), the boundary of the human is blurred, but the subject enhances itself by growing along with its surroundings rather than dominating them.

This perspective recontextualizes the tragedy in “The Cave”. Technically, the transplant was a success as the body accepted the “other” which proved that biological compatibility exists where social ideology does not. The failure was sociopolitical.

While science proves there is no true boundary between species, a rigid speciesist hierarchy is nonetheless imposed upon certain races and genders. This functions as what Giorgio Agamben calls the “Anthropological Machine,” a symbolic process that seeks to separate the “human” from the “animal” to justify exclusion (Agamben 37). When these social boundaries are not “erased” alongside biological ones, the hybrid subject, like Mr. Pieneer, suffers internal collapse. Conversely, “Porcine” defies Cartesian dualism through the convergence of human and animal intelligence, producing a distributed cognitive subject that survives through ecological humility.

Ultimately, these narratives discover that Utopia is a perceived state that is only psychologically attainable. The posthuman condition is defined by a shared vulnerability with the machine, the animal, and the environment. As examined in Biopunk Dystopias, these futures dissolve the humanist subject position as “superior and exceptional” (47). This represents a “crisis in the definition of the human” (Herbrechter 15) that moves us away from being autonomous masters toward a new ethic of cohabitation. Whether from the regional margins of Assamese Science Fiction or global discourse, the conclusion remains the same; that our future depends not on the perfection of our DNA, but on our willingness to recognize that the boundaries we impose are far more fragile than the biological hybrids we are becoming.

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