Symbiogenesis, Biocapitalism, and Subversion in Tabish Khair's *The Body by the Shore*

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Abstract

Tabish Khair's *The Body by the Shore* explores the widening gulf between the Islamic and the non-Islamic world and the equation of the Muslims with a threatening germ in a futuristic setting. Symbiosis (be it mutualism, commensalism or even parasitism) subverts an essentialist concept of 'individuality'; interprets evolution of life forms as a collaborative process and foregrounds the idea of the Gaia as very much a living being. Khair's speculative post-pandemic novel narrative is a scathing attack on biocapitalism, xenophobia and the twin forces of profit and privatization. The technicalities of molecularization have reduced human life to a series of digital chromosomal codes facilitating innovative ways of commoditization of life and furthering biocapitalism. The dystopian vision articulated by Khair in the novel asks for an intervention from a different perspective. Stuart Murray's reconceptualization of Foucault's "open and dynamic" "self-self" relation would act as liberation from the reductionism of biotechnology and allow the human self to slough off the state of domination of biocapitalism and look forward to a zone of fluidity and creativity.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Xenophobia, Biocapitalism, Ethical care.

> […] technology remakes us, by organizing us in new ways. The history of technology is thus the history of new ways of human being and becoming, new ways of getting organized.
>
> Alva Noë, *The Entanglement: How Art and Philosophy Make us What we Are*, 20

> A new economic space has been delineated – the bioeconomy – and a new form of capital – biocapital.
>
> Nicholas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century*, 6

> Cloning is itself a form of epidemic, of metastasis of the species – of a species in the clutches of identical reproduction and infinite proliferation, beyond sex and death.
>
> Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, 196–7

Counter-enlightenment and South Asian Science Fiction

The anthropocentric world of the European Enlightenment put a premium on human reason as a panacea for all existential problems. The Enlightenment project, for example, looked up to reason to free mankind from the darkness of superstition, prejudice and slavish obedience to religious precepts and thus pave the way for progress. This blend of rationalism and scientism, that Habermas calls 'modernity', has been thoroughly debunked as the Enlightenment's millenarianism. An important advocate of the concept of the Counter-enlightenment, Isaiah Berlin consistently depicts the Enlightenment ideals as false, naïve, absolutist and dangerous. Berlin dismisses the Enlightenment as 'monist' because the Enlightenment thinkers strived to understand the world in terms of a systematic and coherent whole subject to a set of universal and eternal laws knowable by man. What he celebrates is value pluralism. In his essay "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West", Berlin enumerates J.G. Herder's contention that there could be no comprehensive, unified "science of man" and that values were not universal:

> every human society, every people, indeed every age and civilization, possesses its own unique ideals, standards, way of living and thought and action. There are no immutable, universal, eternal rules or criteria of judgment in terms of cultures and nations can be graded in some single order of excellence. (Berlin, "The Decline of Utopian Ideas")

Any monist attempt to impose a single set of norms on all societies and all individuals is profoundly dangerous. The belief in the possibility of an ultimate solution to all human problems is "responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals" (Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty"). Hence, Enlightenment monism ultimately resulted in oppression. Amitav Ghosh endeavors to revise the aspects of thought based on Cartesian dualism that "arrogates all intelligence and agency" (41) to the human being (a white human being) and marginalizes other forms of life.

Postcolonial theory is skeptical of modernity for its imperialist incursions, reductionist rationality, stereotypical racism, and blind will to power. Conceived as objective, disinterested and truth-seeking, Western science ultimately turned out to be a tool of colonialism and of world domination. Stephen Jay Gould insists on the provisional nature of scientific truth and questions its very objectivity: "Theories are built upon the interpretation of numbers, and interpreters are often trapped by their own rhetoric" (cited in Schleifer 32). Science is thus perverted to support first racism and then colonialism. The anarchic Other, conceived as the negation of the progressive, rational Western Self, is consigned to the periphery, invisible to the Western gaze. This stereotyping of the other underpins colonialism in as much as it presumes "the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instrument" (Bhabha 70). While McLeod asserts that "Science fiction is essentially the literature of progress, the political philosophy of sf is essentially liberal" (231), Gaylard counterclaims that "problems of empire and power are central structuring concerns of much sf, just as they are in postcolonialism" (22). "In a sense," continues Roberts, science fiction serves as the "dark subconscious to the thinking mind of Imperialism" (66). Unsurprisingly, writers from the colonized part of the world have reappropriated the tool of science fiction genre to revert the gaze by dismantling the stereotypes that science fiction created by the First World has perpetuated. Works of Indian science fiction simultaneously interrogate and dismantle European literary norms and ideas and preserve the scientific temperament which Darko Suvin describes as "cognitive estrangement" (372). This blurring of the boundaries between "fiction" and the "real" within the literary text creates the effect of the uncanny. The perceiver's beliefs and assumptions about the world and the nature of 'reality' are challenged and the relationship between the perceiving subject and the object of perception is destabilized.

Tabish Khair's idea of Literature and *The Body by the Shore*

One index of Tabish Khair's radicality as an author is his relative refractoriness to contemporary literary theory. Combining as he does creative virtuosity with intellectual vibrancy, Khair overturns many a firmly established conception. Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger were the proponents of the linguistic turn in philosophy, albeit in different ways. This turn, from Saussure onwards, believes that since language is riven with configuration ─ a "mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms" (Nietzsche 46) ─ it cannot represent the world accurately. Words depend on other words for their meaning, not on any extra-linguistic entity. Since language is arbitrary, there is no privileged connection between it and reality and hence natural between words and the world. Therefore, there can be no meaningful 'real' world outside language, outside textuality, outside representation. Khair is somewhat ambivalent about the language-centered philosophy. Firstly, he rejects the one-to-one correspondence between language and reality, and aligns with "Saussure, Derrida and the post-modern perspectives" and their "complex and fraught engagement with language, reality and literature" (*Reading Literature Today* 145). Second though he concedes that the "notion of 'reality' is always constructed by language and so is partly 'fictional'", he firmly rejects the notion that "language is the *only* reality" (*Babu Fictions* 6). Admittedly "literature is written in language", he argues, but "about that which cannot and will not be confined to language" (*Reading Literature Today* 8). Contrary to post-structuralist position, Khair affirms literature's "the experience of 'reality'… which *also* exists outside language, as psychological, mental states, nature, relations, material facts, and so on, that can *only* be 'approached' or 'approximated' in language" (*Reading Literature Today* 8). Naturally he proposes a positive re-definition of literature. "Literature *qua* literature", in his view is "that which always presses against the limits of language: in that sense, to read literature is to read also the gaps, silences, obstacles and noise in its language, in its narrative." "The best writers", he concludes, "make

the most of not just what can be said but, above all, what cannot be said" (*Reading Literature Today* 10-11). Insisting on "a mutual commerce between 'reality' and 'language'", Khair finds "some postmodernist positions to be untenable, if only because they seem to simplify matters in the name of complicating them" (*Reading Literature Today* 150). Literature, as Khair conceives it, is not divorced from society; the material is not separate from the symbolic: "For, again and again, literature shows itself as engaged with and in the world, which is material, phenomenal, political, cultural, gendered, social, existential, and so on, of course" (*Reading Literature Today* 74). This explains his prescription for "Good literature" which "provides one of those rare spaces in which the invisible relations between language and reality, between the symbolic and the material, are condensed into the tension of art" (*Reading Literature Today* 27). Tabish Khair's futuristic, speculative post-pandemic novel *The Body by the Shore* is a scathing attack on biocapitalism, xenophobia and the twin forces of profit and privatization.

Migration and Xenophobia

Migration is not a freely-chosen emancipated decision, but a reaction to a specific concurrence of constraints, for example capitalist, gender-specific, ecological and/or (neo) colonial ones. The fear for their lives amidst environment disasters or the inability to earn a living in their home countries precipitates their decision to immigrate in spite of the fact they may not be accepted in foreign lands which would enhance their precariousness. The Europeans, who had transported people between continents on an almost unimaginable scale thereby changing the demographic profile of the entire planet, suddenly find that the entire trajectory of global movement of people has been reversed: The hostility that the natives (here Danish) feel against immigrants is articulated in *The Body by the Shore* through its unheroic protagonist Jens Erik's insensitive and conservative take on immigrants.

Zygmunt Bauman advocated two strategies which society deployed in dealing with strangers or constructions of difference: "*anthropophagic*: annihilating the strangers by devouring them [… and] *anthropoemic*: vomiting the strangers, banishing them from the limits of the orderly world and barring all communications with those inside" (47-8). A proponent of racial insularity, if not racial superiority, Erik, ironically, is a follower of the Social Democrats. In contrast, his daughter Pernille is a contemporary liberal European who resists her father's racism. Erik preferred to categorize the non-Danish schoolboys as "second- generation immigrants"; Pernille, in contrast, considered them "First-generation Danes" (*BS* 47). Her perspective represents how anthropophagic strategies ended in "the total consumption of the stranger; the stranger merged with us and became one of us" (Khair, *The New Xenophobia*). Pernille's chance discovery of a photograph in a leftist newspaper which captured her father brutally clubbing a flailing Nørrebro teenager estranged Pernille from her father. Erik's rationale behind his cruel act that he was merely carrying out administrative orders and that he allowed the boy to escape could not convince his daughter. Her constant accusations that Erik was "hateful" made him confess to his own self that his act did not spring from hatred but out of fear: "I was not full of hate, I was full of fear and my own inadequacy. I was acutely aware of my mortality, and your mother's, then a university student, vulnerable in some other corner of this alien metropolis" (*BS* 25). The distinction between fear and anxiety is of some importance in the given context. Fear for Kierkegaard refers to "something definite" (42). A threat is detrimental by its very nature; the fear it inspires has its definitiveness rooted both in the character of the region from which the threat originates and in the entity marked out for harming. Furthermore, "the situation of inching closer without being within striking distance heightens the effect by a degree of uncertainty on the part of the frightened" (Heidegger 179-80). "That in the face of which one is anxious", believes Heidegger "is completely indefinite." As he goes on to explain:

> Not only does this indefiniteness leave factically undecided which entity within-the-world is threatening us, but it also tells us that entities within the world are not "relevant" at all. […] The world has the character of completely lacking in significance. In anxiety one does not encounter this thing or that thing which, as something threatening, must have an involvement. (*Being and Time*, 231)

Such nothing and nowhere, a phenomenon characterized by total indefiniteness, indicate, according to Heidegger, "that the world as such is that in the face of which one has anxiety" (*Being and Time*, 231). "To be in such a world", contends Ranajit Guha, "is not to be at home in one's environment" (41). The narrative catalogues numerous incidents of this element of "fear", "anxiety" and the consequent hatred culminating in xenophobia.

Tabish Khair's earlier novel *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* (2012) presents a world dominated by fear and distrust and attempts to unravel the constraints of stereotypical representation. In a futuristic setting, *The Body by the Shore* charts the widening gulf between the Islamic and the non-Islamic world and the equation of the Muslims with a threatening germ: "Muslims had been replaced by a virus as the global villain by then, though with similar effects" (37). Climate change in the form of global warming and environmental degradation escalates with the neocolonial exploitation of the earth's natural resources in impoverished regions of South Asia to heighten illegal infiltration and further intolerance. The hatred towards Muslims is matched by persecution against Christians in Delhi when a missionary is ordered to leave Delhi for posting videos of "starving aborigines on Cinememe" (*BS* 45), the latest version of TikTok. Erik's Turkish friend Aslan and the Bangladeshi Hanif were always the subjects of suspicion by their employers because of their identity as Muslims. The Caribbean girl Michelle is imprisoned and stifled in an oil-rig in the North Sea till she is rescued by Erik himself. Xenophobia, asserts Khair, "bestows on this

narrowly constructed social other (as the stranger or foreigner) a legibility ─ either as extreme negativity (which turns the other an erroneous anti-self) or as passing difference (which turns the other into just a retarded or delayed self-same) ─ which is by definition not possible in the self's encounter with the other" (*The New Xenophobia* 172). A newer form of xenophobia, as Khair calls it, does not assimilate the stranger and he/she is "not allowed to exhibit signs of his/her difference" (*The New Xenophobia* 36). This strangeness is constructed not in material terms but deduced in terms of an "abstract operation of capital as power — an operation that increasingly marginalizes producing and laboring bodies as well as money today — and the materiality and physicality of human existence" (*The New Xenophobia* 179).

Posthumanism, Symbiogenesis and Biocapitalism

"Critical posthumanism", asserts Nayar, is "a philosophical approach that involves a rethinking of the very idea of subjectivity because it sees human subjectivity as an assemblage, co-evolving with machines and animals" (138). It argues for a multispecies citizenship of humans, in which the human is a life form with trans-species dependency and affinity. Posthumanism heralds the radical decentering of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human. It therefore entails a more inclusive definition of life, a greater moral–ethical response and responsibility to non-human life forms "Posthumanism", continues Nayar, "interrogates the hierarchic ordering, exploitation and eradication of life forms. Normative subjectivity, which defined and categorized life forms into 'animal', 'plant' and 'human', is now under scrutiny for its exclusivism" (138). This recognition of and responsibility toward all forms of life calls for an overhauling of its ethics and politics. Posthumanism studies cultural representations, power relations and discourses that have historically situated the human *above* other life forms, and in control of them. A "philosophical, political and cultural approach" it "rejects the view

of the human as exceptional, separate from other life forms and usually dominant/dominating over these other forms"(Nayar 14) thereby interrogating his uniqueness. 'Life', far from being codified as the monopoly of one species, the human, over all others or of being sacralized as a pre-established given, is conceptualized as a process, interactive and open-ended. "This vitalist approach to living matter displaces the boundary between the portion of life – both organic and discursive – that has traditionally been reserved for *anthropos*, that is to say *bios*", contends Braidotti, and the "wider scope of animal and non-human life, also known as *zoe*. *Zoe* as the dynamic, self organizing structure of life itself"(60) stands for generative vitality. *Zoe*-centred egalitarianism is the core of the post-anthropocentric turn. Critical posthumanism thus refuses to consider the human as the centre of all things; rather the human is an instantiation of a network of connections, exchanges, linkages and crossings with all forms of life. Its roots, claims Nayar, "lie in disciplines and philosophies in which modes of describing/ascribing difference and categorizations (human/non-human, human/machine and human/inhuman) historically […] that create The Human as a category have been revealed to be exclusionary" (15).

Inextricably intertwined with his environment since his inception, the human is "fuzzy edged", "profoundly dependent into its surroundings" (Pepperell 10). The human's subjectivity is in-formed by lived (biological, embodied) experiences in an environment in a process of dynamical interaction. While "humanism posited a self-contained, exclusive and bounded human", as Nayar neatly distinguishes, "critical posthumanism recontextualizes the human into its setting (both organic and inorganic), and locates the human's structure, functions and form as the result of a co-evolution with other life forms" (Nayar 21). 'Life' in posthumanist discourse is discussed as a process of *becoming* through new connections and mergers between species, bodies, functions and technologies. These connections are not about transcendence but about embodiment in what Rosi Braidotti regards as a 'new materialist' notion of life. Human

life is about becoming, but a becoming-with other life forms; a non-anthropocentric conception of life in which human life has always been intertwined with multiple life forms and technologies. Posthumanism thus interrogates and subverts the structural boundaries which evoke an illusion of human exceptionalism. "Posthumanism", asserts Cary Wolfe, "isn't posthuman at all — in the sense of being 'after' our being has been transcended — but is only posthuman*ist*, in the sense that it opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy inherited from humanism itself" (xv).

Although the concept of symbiogenesis — "the creation of new forms of life through the merging of different species" — is a very recent phenomenon, argues Capra, "as cultural myth the idea seems to be as old as humanity itself" (239). Religious epics and other cultural forms like myths, legends and fairy tales abound in "fantastic creatures" like "sphinxes, mermaids, griffons, centaurs" whose blending was both "novel and startling" (239). Human beings have always been aware of the fact that the emergence of symbiosis is a "new avenue for evolutionary activity" (237); the "the collective human unconscious seems to have known from ancient times that long-term symbioses are profoundly beneficial for all life" (239). Symbiosis (be it mutualism, commensalism or even parasitism) subverts an essentialist concept of 'individuality', interprets evolution of life forms as a collaborative process and foregrounds the idea of the Gaia as very much living being. The Gaia indeed "forms a physiological self-regulating system where different agencies and life- forms interact effectively to sustain the biosphere" (Karpouzou and Zampaki 17), it is an "interrelated dynamic life processes", and "an open thermodynamic system" where "energy flow across gradients generates organization and order" (Margulis 93). According to the Gaia hypothesis Gaia is "more an enormous set of nested communities that together form a single ecosystem than she is any single organism". (Margulis et al., *Chimeras and Consciousness. Evolution of the Sensory Self* 6). Claire Colebrook's concept of "sym-thanatosis" postulates the evolution of the human in the

Anthropocene "as 'man' – the animal that turns against the milieu and sustenance of his own life". Man "is neither accident nor exception", argues Colebrook, for 'life' as such […] *is* an anarchic, order- destroying tendency towards extinction" (203). Symbiosis as symbiogenesis (or sym- thanatosis) thus interrogates the idea of an essential humanity and emphasizes ecological multiplicity.

The Body by the Shore begins with the Russian biologist-botanist Konstantin Sergeyvich Merezhkovsky's discourse against the idea of essentialism, purity or oneness. His theory of symbiogenesis that all complex cells or eukaryotes generate from their symbiotic relationship from less complex ones, particularly microbes, though expostulated in 1919/1020, anticipate the findings of the microbiologists of the 20th century that "all multicellular organisms are neither pure, nor singular, nor exclusive; that finally all forms of life — even the minutest — are part of a complex whole, and have always been" (*BS* 16). What Merezhkovsky asserted through his scientific hypothesis was established in quasi-religious terms by an unknown old man in Africa to the Portuguese João Miguel that "the souls of other beings, living deep inside the earth, […] come to inhabit the human body and prolong its existence on the earth" (*BS* 49). The narrative explores the existence of life deep inside the lightless hydrothermal vaults on the seabed where water heated and bubbled at 400 degrees Celsius. What the anonymous African soothsayer expostulated in spiritual terms was explained by scientists like Sergei Winogradsky and Wilhelm Pfeffer as 'chemosynthesis' until the zoologist Colleen Cavanagh revealed that life could exist in the sunless depths of the ocean because of bacteria which created energy from the sulphides that the volcanic vaults liberated. These researches on the interdependency of living beings were not exclusively were a European phenomenon but were also explored by a young botany enthusiast named Lenin Ghosh in a remote region named Phansa in India. Lenin discovered a "fascinating cluster of trees" in Uttarakhand, some of which were at

least 200 years old, "intricately connected by root fungi" which provided life to trees which had been torn down by storms a century ago (*BS* 81). Interestingly, Lenin was a distant descendant of Jagadish Chandra Bose who discovered that plants were sentient beings and had their own nervous systems. Bose not simply established the interconnectedness of life but also the interweaving of the different aspects of learning as such.

Bose's scientific credos which are documented in his anthology of life and speeches, the most fundamental of which is the distinction between the Western philosophy of science derived from the Enlightenment and its Eastern counterpart. The prevailing tendency of Western science is "to return upon the excessive sub-division of learning" (Bose 80). The result of this specialization will "accentuate the distinctiveness of the various sciences, so that for a while the great unity of all tends perhaps to be obscured" (Bose 80). But if followed too exclusively, it ends by "limiting the comprehensiveness of truth. The search is endless. Realisation evades us" (Bose 80). Contrarily, the Eastern pursuit of science believes in "the multiplicity of phenomena" and "their underlying unity" (Bose 80). The vital difference between Eastern and Western thinking is well formulated by Jung: "There is no conflict between religion and Science in the East, because no science is there based upon the passion for facts and no religion upon mere faith; there is religious cognition and cognitive religion" (Jung 485-486). Ashis Nandy quite aptly conceptualizes that the Indian imagination "uses non-dualist thought to impose order on diversities, contradictions, and oppositions, and a unified worldview on a fragmented society" (Nandy 62). Bose further champions the interconnectedness of all phenomena, arguing the interconnectedness of ecological concerns as well as affinities forged across all lines of investigation to suggest that, ultimately, "everything is connected with everything else" (O'Brien 182):

> This vast abode of nature is built in many wings, each with its own portal. The physicist, the chemist, and the biologist entering by different doors, each one his own department

> of knowledge, comes to think that this is his special domain, unconnected with that of any other. Hence has arisen our present rigid division of phenomena, into the worlds of the inorganic, vegetal, and sentient. But this attitude of mind is philosophical, may be denied. We must remember that all enquiries have as their goal the attainment of knowledge in its entirety. The partition walls between the cells in the great laboratory are only erected for a time to aid this search. Only at that point where all lines of investigation meet, can the whole truth be found. [Bose 82-83]

Bose's narrative anticipates not only the scientific concepts of surface tension and butterfly effect but also predates much of the concerns of the present theorists of climate change and the anthropocene. Science fiction has, perhaps predictably, risen to the forefront of conversations about literary representations of climate change and is indeed one of the primary genres of futuristic imagining.

The state of exception, asserts Agamben, has become "the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics" (2). He reads the emergence of exception in a Foucauldian sense, since he focuses his analysis on the "biopolitical significance" of exceptionalism as a widespread political device. The suspension of the law is pivotal because it directly affects people's lives, not as subjects of politics or citizens, but as human beings as such. The key of Agamben's thought, around which the theory of the state of exception revolves, is the indistinction, in the realm of politics, between the private life – which he calls *zoe* – and the public sphere, the one characterizing life as *bios*. The indistinct form of human being that is created in this process is called *homo sacer*. This figure has been reduced to what he defines as "bare life", meaning that the sovereign has complete authority over homo sacer, not only as a citizen of a state, but even to the point of acting upon his/her own natural life, depriving this individual of the right to live. For Foucault, biopower is the ‘‘right to make live

and to let die'' (Foucault 241). Foucault's notion of 'biopower' does not simply include the governance of people but also extends to cells, molecules, genomes, and genes. Analysing how biology, biomedicine and biotechnology alters the meaning and dimension of human life Nikolas Rose claims that "[T]he 'philosophical status' – indeed the very ontology – of human beings is being reshaped through the decisions of entrepreneurs as to where to invest their capital and which lines of biomedical research and development to pursue" (20). Genomic interventions have transformed human life in the second half of the 20th century, a phenomenon that Rose calls a "technical re-engineering of life at […] molecular scale" (14) as he catalogues the techniques themselves — "gene cutting and splicing, the polymerase chain reaction for creating multiple copies of precise segments of DNA outside living systems, the customized fabrication of DNA sequences to order, the manufacture of organisms with or without specific gene sequences" (14-15). The technicalities of molecularization have reduced human life to a series of digital chromosomal codes facilitating innovative ways of commoditization of life and furthering biocapitalism.

Set in a post-pandemic futuristic world of 2032, *The Body by the Shore* takes as its crux an international seminar titled "Mind, Body and Soul: The Cognitive Sciences and Religion" at Aarhus University, Denmark in 2012. It was a swansong for many of the scientists who attended the seminar; in fact, most of them died in mysterious circumstances after the event. The majority of the scientists had identified various forms of symbiosis between flora and fauna, insects and microbes, the human never occupied an elevated "zone of indiscernibility" (*BS* 149) in relation to the non-human and the idea of the microbiome was acknowledged: "the animal body — including the human body — was not the master of all it surveyed, […]; it was more like an ecosystem, with the immune system working as a thermostat rather than a silver bullet" (*BS* 149). The narrative also traces the scientific tenets of scientists like Ivan Emmanuel Wallin who though "ostracized by the scientific community" (*BS* 113) argued about the

existence of bacteria behind the functioning of the mitochondria. The "eccentric Green philosopher" (*BS* 90) Professor Sue Evelyn Post theorized about "junk DNAs" which perform "more positive functions" (*BS* 90) like coding for RNA or regulating gene expression or preventing human DNA from getting damaged. One of the most enigmatic scientists who presented her paper at the seminar was the Polish Wislawa Ostrowski who delved into Oriental mysticism and talked about transmigration of souls couched in scientific terminology like interspecies DNA-transfer. Her research article, published in 2020 during the pandemic, was based on the idea of the "wired brain", a concept referring to "a direct link" between the human mind and its intricate workings and a digital machine (*BS* 214). This link, for Ostrowski, has the power to "use a thought to trigger events in material reality", the brains of many organisms are already "wired" which has been an "evolutionary necessity for microbes, which monopolized the earth for billions of years before the first multicellular organisms evolved" (*BS* 214). This phenomenon just gives concrete shape to Edward Yoxen's concept of 'life as a productive force' interweaving the Marxian dynamics of labour, capital and commodity, product-making and profit-seeking, summed up in the term 'biocapital': "not simply a way of using living things that can be traced back to the Neolithic origins of fermentation and agriculture", but also "a technology controlled by capital, […] a specific mode of the appropriation of living nature—literally capitalizing life" (112).

From a futuristic perspective, the year 2031 marked the 10th anniversary of the first vaccines against SARS-Cov-2, the microbe which killed millions in 2019-21. Ten years later the after-effects of the disease were largely confined to "the poor and the marginalized" (*BS* 65) parts of the world and sections of society. The decade after the pandemic saw the world divided sharply divided as never before. There were race riots in America, bread riots in India and Brazil, boatloads of refugees immersed in the seas, coastlines too were sinking, and political and communal unrests in Russia and Saudi Arabia. Contrarily, with the boom in

productivity since 2022, the financial markets prospered and billionaires prospered; in 2030, *Forbes* in an article titled "The Greatest Age of Prosperity Known to Mankind" declared that "there had never been as many millionaires and billionaires in the world" (*BS* 66). While it was the best of times for the rich, it was the worst for the poor: "the rise of various new vaccine technologies had assured the rich and the powerful that another pandemic was not just at least a century away, but would probably, like the last pandemic, cull mostly the poor, the aged, and the vulnerable" (*BS* 67). Capitalist and privatized institutions like Big Pharma propelled by Walmarts were on the rise to take advantage of biological weapons developed by terrorists or violent states: "They were everywhere, these gargantuan enterprises, all owned by the same handful of oligarchies" (*BS* 205). "Science and technology were shrewdly manipulated by the whites the race of the powerful and the privileged" (*BS* 117) to enjoy a "major revival as 'protectors' in the post-pandemic age" (*BS* 117). With an aim at life-furthering, billionaires who "want to live forever" (*BS* 172) exploited the tool of bio-science, especially the scientific study of the effect of microbes upon human intelligence, to stretch it beyond its limits, engaged in clandestine traffic of human organs. The international organ trade racket in the garb of a tourist agency called 'Magic Gates' had its seat in Europe itself, the supposed progenitor of all cultural values. Mercenary motives of big pharmaceutical companies controlled all instruments of government machinery and reduced all powers of state control into mere abstractions. Mikhailov, one of the prime masterminds of this new racket of organ trade stated in unambiguous terms that "Governments and corporations had been in bed for decades: now they were producing hybrid offspring. Mutants" (*BS* 238). His revelation clearly establishes the intricate workings of capital in underdeveloped countries taking full advantage of economic inequality: "Young immigrants and refugees were being smuggled in, and their organs removed for transplantation. It was […] big business, and grew bigger during and after the pandemic" (*BS* 241). Addiction to stimulants and drugs like 'Crobe' have altered the lifestyle of humans

as evidenced in the career of a fitness fanatic Kathy, a former clandestine Command Alpha mercenary activist. The extent to which bio-medicine can be used to furthering of life can be gauged with the elusive mysterious figure in a long flowery dress, most certainly the Polish Wislawa Ostrowski who existed as a "hologram-like being" (*BS* 262), a "strange woman" who "interrupts every dream" (BS 249), that "lovely, ethereal Lava" (BS 139), who could be viualized even on the wreck of the rig after the conflagration at the end. Not unsurprisingly, Sunder Rajan claims that in the days of genomics, "biology increasingly becomes an information science", which questions the location of value within the realm. In addition to the erasure of ethics one also witnesses the erasure of government agencies and their failure to intervene in bio-political situations. With the state "no longer expected to resolve society's need for health" (Rose 6) private pharmaceutical enterprises rule roost with their dehumanizing machinery.

The prime centre of this organization for human trafficking where the young men and women were transported to, "the operating theatre had to be in the North Sea" (*BS* 241). An abandoned oil rig, itself an embodiment of ruthless exploitation of workers, had been converted into a laboratory for experiments on the human body, more specifically bodies of immigrants from Third World countries. The brains behind this organ trade devised technology which was much beyond interpersonal mind transfer or "wired brains" and was based on schizophrenic split: "'We can cut the human mind in two. We can make the subject totally rational or entirely emotional. We can manipulate them to hallucinate, and kill others or commit suicide'" (*BS* 266). This negative use of biological sciences would be put to effective use by manipulating politicians garnering votes, governments to suppress dissent amongst the masses, profit making corporations and armies that want soldiers to fight with intense heroism. Evoking the Darwinian gospel of the survival of the fittest, Mikhailov's ambitions had sinister forebodings for human civilization. In polar opposition to this negative deployment of science lies the

novel's positive thesis articulated by "The Scientist Sage" Vijay Nair: "science is not individualistic, no matter what they say; it is communal" (*BS* 196). Humans can benefit from the blessings of science and technology only when "'every one of them has an equal share in the good'" (*BS* 187). The narrative's apocalyptic statement is certainly no superfluous: "Nature, it appears, does not create junk. In that, we, *Homo junkiens*, are unnatural" (*BS* 311, italics original). Human being's pride as "the only beings capable of communicating, and especially communicating across species" is subverted with the awakening of the fundamental truth that "trees, shrubs, mushrooms, fungi, microbes" are "far better at communicating than we are, and that they communicate between species too" (*BS* 311).

Towards a Concept of Ethical Care:

The dystopian vision articulated by Tabish Khair in *The Body by the Shore* asks for an intervention from a different perspective. "Medical discourse […] informs one manner in which the self or subject is constituted", asserts Stuart Murray, "and silently comes effectively to constitute itself as a subject" (2). Medicine thus operates as a 'technology of the self', in Foucault's terms, which permits "individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" ("Technologies of the Self", 3). Biotechnology and bioinformatics corrode the idea of the self as a sovereign entity. The need of the hour argues Murray, is to conceive of a subject who would strive for the meaningful application of biotechnology to life, "a subject who might enter the discourse of its own subjectivation" (3). With the understanding of the human self replaced by a codification of the DNA and geneticisation of the body, the "self understands itself and its moral agency in terms of a genetic

self, a self whose bedrock of truth lies in its genes, its DNA" (Murray 10). Murray evokes Foucault's work on the 'care of the self' towards the conceptualization of an ethical self that successfully negotiates the theories of subjectivity and genomics of biomedicine and biotechnology. As a completely different discourse on subjectivity, 'care of the self'

> should be seen as a social and political project that does not condemn new genomic technologies out of hand; instead, it would be a critical project that returns us to the question of the self and the question of care in the pursuit of the good life. In other words, it would vitalize the questioning relation that the self has with itself, and it will look beyond, to question the kinds of subjects that emergent biotechnologies will inaugurate. (Murray 13-4).

This "open and dynamic" "self-self" (14) relation would act as liberation from the reductionism of biotechnology and inaugurate a self that "strives to open up a plurality of relations, a multiplicity of possibilities within which that self might relate caringly not only to itself, but to those others in its care" (14-15). This would allow the human self to slough off the state of domination of biocapitalism and look forward to a zone of fluidity and creativity. An ethical care will strive for new dimensions and new terms "by which we might once again ask the question of the good life" (14).

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