

# Frankenstein's Avatars: Posthuman Monstrosity in *Enthiran/Robot*

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## Abstract

This paper engages with 'Frankenstein' as a narrative structure in Indian popular cinema, in the context of posthumanism. Scholarship pertaining to monsters/monstrosity in Indian films has generally been addressed within the horror genre. However, the present paper aspires to understand monstrosity/monsters as a repercussion of science and technology (S&T) through the cinematic depiction of Frankenstein-like characters, thus shifting the locus of examining monstrosity from the usual confines of horror to the domain of science fiction. The paper contends *Enthiran/Robot* (Shankar 2010 Tamil/Hindi) as an emblematic instance of posthuman monstrosity that employs a Frankenstein narrative. The paper hopes to bring out the significance of cinematic imagination concerning posthuman monstrosity, to engage with collective social fears and anxieties about various cutting-edge technologies as well as other socio-cultural concerns and desires at the interface of S&T, embodiment and the society/nation.

**Keywords:** Posthumanism, Monstrosity, Frankenstein, Indian popular cinema, Science Fiction, *Enthiran/Robot*

## The Frankenstein narrative and Posthuman Monstrosity

It has been argued that in contemporary techno-culture Science Fiction (hereafter SF) performs the role of "modern myth(s)" (Klein, 2010, p.137). In keeping with this idea regarding SF as modern mythology, the modern myth that has perhaps survived over any other contemporary myth, while having a structuring effect over the narrative of human-technology relationship, has been the story of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley's influential novel, written under tumultuous personal and social circumstances in 1818, which perhaps lent the novel with a dark and timeless profundity.<sup>1</sup> Brian Aldiss, in his historical account of the science fiction genre titled *Billion Year Spree* (1973), which was later revised and published as *Trillion Year Spree* (1986), made the contention that the novel *Frankenstein* marks the literary origin of science fiction (1986, p.21), thereby making Mary Shelley "the first writer of science fiction" (Aldiss, 1986, p.45). Parallel and coterminous with this argument about Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) as the originary moment of science fiction, one may also add the idea that the novel also marks the literary inception of posthuman monstrosity. Recent academic literature argues that the twenty-first century has ushered a culmination of monstrosity (or monstrous culture) such that it has now become "a necessary condition of our existence" (Levina and T. Bui, 2013, p.1-2). Simultaneously, posthumanism and posthumanity, through academia and popular culture, have also managed to carve out their own space over the years, so that one might think of 'posthuman monstrosity' instead of solitarily contemplating

about monstrosity. The age-old, and perhaps timeless, Frankenstein narrative may be summarised thus:

Victor Frankenstein assembles a body from various parts of fresh corpses and then endows it with life. He quickly rejects the new being, which disappears and becomes a threat to him and others. (Aldiss, 1986, p.47-48).

This basic Frankenstein narrative later inspired and got adapted into several films. However, it needs to be added that the cinematic and other adaptations of the novel quite often exclude the “political and philosophical observations” (Aldiss, 1986, p.48) by Mary Shelley, which lent the novel its length, depth and complexity. If one were to trace back the current escalation of academic/literary/cinematic works about posthumanism/posthumanity and monstrosity, there seems a good possibility that the retrospective projection would lead to Mary Shelley’s seminal idea about a monster whose origins lie in the application of scientific knowledge, coupled with societal abomination.

The paper chooses to draw attention towards films that employ figures/characters embodying technological monstrosity (such as robots, androids, cyborgs, human-animal mutants, etc.), with narratives that are fundamentally Frankensteinian – stories and plots where scientific knowledge and technologies go catastrophically haywire. These monstrous characters exhibit human-machine or human-animal hybrid embodiment, going beyond the ‘normal’, organic, conventional sense of possessing a body. These diegetic body modifications/transgressions are shown to occur through artificial intelligence, genetic engineering or other kinds of actual/imaginary technological mediations. By focussing on such films/characters, the paper demonstrates how representations of technologically-mediated monsters (or posthuman monstrosity) serve as a conduit to engage with collective fears and anxieties pertaining to the body as well as various cutting-edge technologies, and other socio-cultural concerns of our times. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part discusses how academia has engaged with changing depictions of monstrosity in Indian popular cinema, evolving from supernatural origins to becoming Frankenstein’s avatars – by embodying catastrophic results of techno-scientific research. The second section elaborates on what distinguishes posthuman monstrosity from conventional/supernatural monstrosity, the depiction of posthuman monstrosity in recent Indian popular films and summarises the minutiae involved in interpreting the posthuman imagination of a text. The last section does an in-depth analysis of *Enthiran/Robot* as an exemplar of monstrous posthumanism in Indian popular cinema, underscoring the pivotal character doublet of Chitti/Chitti 2.0, as a posthuman, Frankensteinian monster stemming from research in Artificial Intelligence and a passage through the “Oedipus complex” (Freud, 1916-1917; as cited in <http://www.freudfile.org>).

### **Monstrosities in Indian popular cinema: From Supernatural to Posthuman**

A significant aspect of posthumanist ethos has been the persistent concern with monstrosity, something that seems to have remained embedded within the posthuman ever since its origin with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). Braidotti (2011) has argued that machines and monsters are hybrids that dissolve the fundamental boundaries between “ontological categories — the human/the nonhuman, the organic other/the inorganic other, flesh/metal, the born/the manufactured” (p.56). Thus, any actual/imagined technological combination of the categories human, animal and machine can be regarded as monstrous. Moreover, the monsters depicted on screen have a crucial cultural instrumentality in that they “offer a space where society can safely

represent and address anxieties of its time” (Levina and Bui, 2013, p.1). It seems the narratives of films that portray technological/techno-scientific monsters bring out the repressed anxieties, fears and socio-cultural concerns regarding different kinds of technological systems and they try to negotiate the effects of such technologies on the human body/species as well as the wider social effects of certain kinds of techno-scientific knowledge and artefacts.

Academic interventions towards monsters or monstrosity in Indian popular cinema have largely been limited to films of horror genre, including B-grade films. More specifically, there have been works that engage with human-animal hybrid, monstrous forms in the horror genre. For instance, Dhusiya (2011) engages with “man-to-animal transformation horror films” (p.61) in Indian cinema to suggest that the male bodies in these horror films become the site of “crises of masculinities” (p.61) as well as markers of socio-political climate of the nation at the times when the films were released (p.61-62). He specifically does a close reading of two Indian popular films: *Jaani Dushman* (Raj Kumar Kohli 1979 Hindi; *Beloved Enemy*) and *Punnami Naagu* (A. Rajasekhar 1980 Telugu; *Full Moon Snake*). Dhusiya’s work in this paper reveals the potential of “animal transformation Indian horror films” (p.71) to comment upon the socio-political conditions – such as regional caste politics and nation-wide social restrictions placed upon the citizens during the Emergency era – as well as the “gendered subjectivities” (p.71) of the times when the films came out. Notably, the human-to-animal monstrosities engaged by Dhusiya’s paper arise in rural contexts and the monstrosities in these films arise due to supernatural causes such as characters being possessed by ghosts or some kind of curse. Science and technology do not become the vectors of monstrosity in these films, nor do they form a part of the resolution of the crises brought by these human-animal hybridities.

Moving away from the supernatural explanations of monsters, as discussed above, Valančiūnas (2011) suggests that monstrosity/monsters in Indian films may not necessarily be attributed to supernatural causes, which he shows through his analysis of the monster in *Bandh Darwaza* (Ramsay brothers 1990). Valančiūnas’ (2011) work points out the cultural reinvention of the ‘Dracula’ figure through the character of “Newla” that transforms into a bat. His work offers a “postcolonial reading” of *Bandh Darwaza*. The main argument here is that the film articulates the collective national anxiety about the forthcoming economic liberalization of India (p.48). The author’s analysis of *Bandh Darwaza*’s depiction of Newla’s “alien monstrosity” neither finds its explanation in Indian mythology (p.50) nor does it relate to posthumanising technologies or even technology in general. Rather, the author argues for “hybrid and foreign nature” (p.53) of Newla’s monstrosity, interpreting it as an anxiety about India’s further movement into advanced capitalism as well as the fear of exposing the country to “westernization” through adoption of “foreign goods” and “cable TV” (p.53), while also bringing out the narrative’s concern to protect the identity of Indian women with regard to sexuality. In a postcolonial context, Newla’s resurgent monstrosity is interpreted as the fear of the nation once again falling prey to colonization through the adoption of the western/alien strategy of economic liberalisation of its markets — what has been phrased as “a fear of neocolonialism” (p.53-54).

Mubarki’s (2015) work becomes an exception with regard to the films chosen by him to understand monstrosity, and somewhat connects to the notion of posthuman monstrosity. His paper engages with two films – *Chehre pe Chehra* (Tilak 1981) and *Dahshat* (Ramsay and Ramsay, 1981). The author chooses these films as they constitute what he terms as the “horror-inflected Hindi science-fiction genre” (p.248), considering that both the narratives depict the creation of their monsters through science. Mubarki’s main argument is that these narratives depict the triumph of “traditional/mythic order” over Science and Technology (S&T) and they can be located

within the “anti-science discourse of the 1980s” (p.251). Specifically, through this subversion of S&T at the hands of tradition, the films offer a critique of the Nehruvian state’s allegiance with science/modernity. The narratives of these films depict the problematic status of science in postcolonial India (p.249). Moreover, although Mubarki’s analysis is focussed on science/scientists trying to “[conquer] human nature and challenge the corporeal integrity of the human body” (p.254) he does not engage with science-driven-monstrosity through the lens of posthumanism.

Note that in the works discussed above, the analysis of monstrosity in the films is largely attributed to supernatural, alien or mythological causes. Except for Mubarki’s (2015) paper, there is no mention of science and technology as vectors/agents of monstrosity – a gap this paper intends to further address and engage with. The above discussion of monstrosity in Indian popular cinema and its academic treatment reveals that SF monsters in Indian popular cinema have received less-than-scant academic attention. It is also interesting to note that with the rise of “intelligent machines” (Hayles, 1999, p.3) and “our growing integration with, and reliance upon, a technological environment” (Pepperell, 2003, p.2), SF monsters/monstrosities can very well be human-machine hybrids such as robots or cyborgs – cybernetic fusions of flesh and metal, as will become clear from the next section. However, this is not to imply that posthuman monstrosities cannot entail human-animal hybrid forms. The next section provides a brief overview of posthuman monstrosity in recent Indian SF films.

### **Posthuman Monstrosity in recent Indian science fiction films**

The previous discussion reveals the almost negligible attention being given to monstrosity in Indian SF cinema. Before moving further it becomes necessary to spare some thoughts to distinguish SF monsters from their counterparts of the horror genre. Like all other aspects of a science fictional world, monstrosity in SF also remains governed through the “sense of wonder” (Mendlesohn, 2003, p.3) predicated on a plausible explanation in a fictional (or actual) science and technology (S&T). The fictional “idea”, the “thought experiment”, the “what if” (p.4) that has its origins in S&T remains the pivotal element for the origin/creation and, perhaps, if shown, the annihilation of posthuman monstrosity. In their paper where they layout the strategies of a “posthumanist reading”<sup>iii</sup>, Herbrechter and Callus (2008) argue that science fiction genre has become one of the “privileged sites” (p.98) for posthumanist interpretations due to its persistent fixation with “the human form”; science fiction simultaneously challenges as well as restores confidence in the ‘essence of human’. The authors deem science fiction as a “crypto-humanist genre” where the narrative closures generally perpetuate and reinstate the “radical difference between human and non-human other” (Herbrechter and Callus, 2008, p.98). Hence, what becomes important in the posthumanist reading of texts that assert the persistence of the human is to determine “...the subversive potential of the foreclosed non-human other” in offering “non-humanist” ideas for the humans as well as non-humans (p.98). More specifically, the authors observe that posthumanist analyses have risen in the context of the cultural and material modifications effected by “fast technological change that threatens the integrity of the human as a (biological and moral) species” (p.96).

The posthuman other generally gets articulated through “figures and representations which tap into the long history of humanity’s excluded (the inhuman, the non-human, the less than human, the superhuman, the animal, the alien, the monster, the stranger, God...)” (p.97). These posthuman figures reveal to us the “practices, technologies and fantasies” that help to

explain the dynamics of the metamorphoses from human to posthuman (p.97). In the recent years, Indian SF cinema has registered a rise in the depiction/imagination of ‘the posthuman other’, imagined as arising from posthumanising technologies. In these films the narratives contain pivotal characters whose bodies may be shown as part human, part machine – what may be termed as machinic monsters. For instance, in *Enthiran/Robot* (Maran & Shankar, 2010), the narrative is predicated on the invention of an andro-humanoid robot, who acquires emotions and falls in love with a human female. In *Ra.One* (Khan & Sinha, 2011), the story revolves around a broken family that gets enmeshed in the unanticipated transcendence of artificially-intelligent virtual beings from cyberspace into the lived, physical world. In *3G – a killer connection* (Lulla & Anand and Chhiber, 2013), the human-machine hybridity takes the form of a specially programmed cell phone possessed by a vengeful ghost. *3G* can be regarded as a film that depicts a cybernetically-mediated ghost: a vengeful spirit resurrected by an intelligent machine. Thus, in films like *Robot*, *Ra.One* and *3G* with regard to body-machine assemblages the emphasis is on the blurring boundaries between machines and human beings leading to new kind of transcendental, maleficent beings.

Alternatively, posthuman monsters may also be depicted as part human, part animal – what has been termed as “humanimals” (Nayar, 2014, p.126-131), a neologism that signifies the dissolution of the hierarchical as well as material borders between human beings and animals, while doing away with the notion of uniqueness of the human species. Indeed, there are films predicated on human-animal fusion. For instance, *I* (Ravichandran & Shankar, 2015)’s narrative revolves around a medically-deformed body to suggest human-animal bestiality and show how modern/indigenous scientific knowledge can be (mis)used to re/shape our bodies. The deformed body also shows the significant influence of the notions of beauty/ugliness over our lives. Also, the narrative makes the bodies of various characters a site of execution for revenge by the protagonist. *Krrish 3* (Roshan & Roshan, 2013) depicts an evil, ambitious, physically-handicapped scientist who fuses genetic strains from various organisms such as frogs, salamanders, scorpions, etc. with the human gene to design human-animal genetic clones called ‘Maanvars’, which lack their own minds and are designed to obey his commands. One of these maanvars then goes on to acquire human emotions and rebel against the creator-scientist. Further, the physically-handicapped scientist who makes these clones is himself also the result of a cloning experiment gone askew. However, prior to *Krrish 3*, it was *Jaane Hoga Kya* (Shrivastava & Baretto and Mohla, 2006) that assimilated the contemporary anxiety of genetic cloning within the Frankenstein narrative, wherein the plot involves a scientist who clones himself. All of these films are predicated on what may be termed as posthuman monstrosity. However, not all of them are precisely Frankensteinian. *I* and *3G* are exceptions to the Frankenstein narrative. A summary of posthuman monstrosities in these recent films is also to underscore that the inception and the end/resolution of the monstrosities in these films is depicted in S&T as opposed to the traditional, supernatural origins and ends of monsters in the horror genre.

Based on the discussion of ideas regarding posthumanism, monstrosity, the Frankenstein narrative and posthumanist interpretation of texts, this paper shall do a close reading of *Enthiran/Robot*. Although the idea of the film’s pivotal robot character Chitti as a “Frankenstein-like figure” has been pointed out earlier (Kaur, 2013, p.294), an in-depth analysis of the depiction of monstrosity in the film foregrounds it as a posthumanist, Frankensteinian narrative. The film is also emblematic due to the emphasis of the narrative on the role/desire of the state and the heroic/patriotic scientific establishment of the nation in pursuing research in robotics as a route to facilitate national security. However, this research itself becomes the cause of monstrosity that acquires Frankensteinian dimensions. The paper combines a “representational” and “ontological”

approach towards technological/posthuman monstrosity (see Levina and T. Bui, 2013, p.4-8). The dynamics of ontology enunciated by the film's narrative depicts the conservation of humanism through the careful containment of posthuman monstrosity and reinstatement of humanist values and tendencies. Notably, posthumanity is not completely eliminated in the film. *Enthiran/Robot* chooses to defer posthumanity so that it can/may achieve a revival at a later point in the diegetic future. The posthuman monster in *Enthiran/Robot* may be interpreted as the repressed fears and anxieties in the public domain regarding the consequences of A.I.-based technologies, especially the use of robotic technologies for warfare. However, apart from negotiating with technophobia emanating from A.I., the narrative also brings out certain other socio-cultural repressions, insecurities and anxieties through the dynamics of the relationship between posthuman and human characters. It is the contention of this paper that the film humanises the posthuman, superhero/monster Chitti by over-coding or inscribing it with other humanist norms and characteristics such as making it a part of heteronormative family structure, investing it with human emotions, and other such humanist elements, as will become evident from the analysis that follows.

### **Martial Monstrosity and the deferral of Posthumanity in *Enthiran/Robot***

Maran and Shankar's *Enthiran/Robot* (2010 Tamil/Hindi) has a Frankenstein narrative that adopts a social constructivist approach towards technology.<sup>iii</sup> The narrative presents Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) as a "posthumanising technology" (Herbrechter and Callus, 2008, p.97) – a technology that has the potential to lead human beings towards the "posthuman condition" characterised by the non-discernible "convergence of biology and technology" (Pepperell, 2003, iv). However, within the film's diegesis the term 'posthuman' may be simply understood as "a world co-inhabited by [andro-humanoid beings]" (Pepperell, 2003, p.4). The film's central plot broadly obeys the outline of the Frankensteinian narrative provided in the introductory section of the paper.

The film's exposition takes the audience through the final phase of the ten-year long research and development process entailed in the creation of an intelligent robot Chitti, that is made to be an almost-exact replica of its creator-scientist Dr. Vaseekaran, whose intention is to use A.I. to preserve/assist humanity. Accompanied by the song "*O naye Insaan, dharti pe aa..*" ((Maran & Shankar, 2010); *Oh new Human, descend upon this planet...* In English), the exposition emphasises the artificial nature of the robot's body as the scientist and his assistants attach the limbs to the metallic torso and put a mask, which resembles Dr. Vaseekaran's visage, over the robot's metallic face. As the narrative proceeds, the robot's embodiment and subjectivity begin to increasingly emulate that of human beings. This increasing degree of likeliness between the posthuman and the human – through the humanisation of Chitti – becomes the central conflict of the plot. Through a contest between two different epistemes of science (Dr. Bora's malevolent science as the bureaucratic superior and the rival to Dr. Vaseekaran's patriotic science), the narrative casts a dystopic light over A.I. and posthumanism, emphasizing the question whether human beings are ready to usher in and co-habit with posthuman, "post-biological" (Pepperell, 2003, iv) life forms created using A.I. However, before delving into the differences between the posthuman and human ontology as posited by the film's narrative, it is necessary to understand closely the relationship between the human characters and the posthuman robot. This will also enable the reader to visualise the film's narrative as a Frankenstein narrative, which becomes an effective template of depicting the posthuman condition as a potential dystopia.

It seems significant to mention right at the outset that the trauma faced by soldiers and citizens due to wars is a constant preoccupation with film's narrative and its characters. Sanaa's (Dr. Vaseekaran's love interest) initiative of 'Happy Home' for women whose husbands and sons were martyred in wars and Dr. Vasee's desire to donate his robot design to the Indian armed forces to enable the manufacture of a robot army are the major examples of the narrative's attempts to pre-empt or alleviate the harmful effects of war. Thus, in *Enthiran's* narrative the nation and the military-industrial complex become an important context for the research and development being done in the field of A.I. (Lakkad, 2014, p.173) as well as for the emergence of the posthuman condition, through the impetus and aegis provided by the state to the scientific community (represented in the narrative through the characters of Dr. Bora, Dr. Vasee and the fictional institution of AIRD: an acronym for "Artificial Intelligence Research & Development" (Maran & Shankar, 2010)).

Dr. Vaseekaran's ultimate aim is to make an army of robots like Chitti so that human soldiers do not have to sacrifice their lives while fighting wars for the nation. As Dr. Vaseekaran intended to design the robot to perform the tasks and functions of soldiers, who are required to exterminate other (human) soldiers in battles, the robot Chitti is shown not to obey Isaac Asimov's laws of robotics which includes the robotic principle of not harming a human being. In other words, if the commands are not nuanced enough, Chitti may end up killing an innocent human being erroneously. The possibility of this error lies at the core of the film's dystopic imagination of the posthuman condition. Dr. Bora intends to take ownership of Chitti and use him for anti-national purposes of carrying out terrorist operations. The narrative's posthuman predicament comes to the fore when Dr. Bora equips Chitti with a "red chip" (Maran & Shankar, 2010) that carries codes for destructive functionalities. Explaining about his programming to the assistants who help him rebuild the robot, Dr. Bora says that the resurrected Chitti is an *asura* – a term from Hindu mythology which means demons or monsters – with the destructive capacities of a hundred human beings; as opposed to Vaseekaran's programming to imbue Chitti with creative/benevolent capacities of a hundred humans. It is notable that Dr. Bora's personification of Chitti as an *asura* also resonates with Chitti's impending journey as a Frankensteinian monster. The robot's embodiment is not independent of what the narrative depicts as "the programming of the robot's neural schema" (Maran & Shankar, 2010) – a technical aspect that may be deemed as the equivalent of human subjectivity. The next section discusses the humanist programming of Chitti and its repercussions, as shown in the narrative.

### **Chitti as an Oedipal Machine**

With regard to gender and embodiment, a significant accomplishment of the narrative is that it presents the robot, Chitti, as a figure that collapses the gender boundaries between male and female. The point is not to suggest that the robot has queer sexual orientations; rather the combination of the absence of social gendering of the robot as a male and the programming of the robot as an all-knowing-entity allows him/it to do tasks that a superhero normally does not do in films. Thus, we get to see the superhero-robot as an action hero, as a chef who can cook all types of dishes; he/it can make mehndi in social functions and he also helps Sanaa with her professional/academic pursuit of medicine. The narrative depicts Chitti spending a significant amount of time with Sanaa, who is shown to initiate and familiarise the robot into the values and norms of Indian society, even before Dr. Vaseekaran decides to install software codes for human emotions into Chitti. It/he can be a midwife too as depicted by an elaborate sequence in the film where Chitti helps to deliver a baby in a hospital. This sequence, where Chitti helps in the birth of

a baby, is a prescient indicator of Chitti's own impending passage through the Oedipus complex, in its/his journey towards becoming more humane.

An interesting sequence in the early part of the narrative takes the viewers into a public demonstration of Chitti. During the public interaction, a member in the audience asks Chitti if he believes in God. When Chitti expresses his ignorance about God, the person replies that God is our (humans') creator. To this Chitti responds quickly by saying that his creator is Dr. Vaseekaran, hence for him Dr. Vaseekaran is 'God'. This sequence places Dr. Vaseekaran as a father-figure to Chitti,<sup>iv</sup> and by relation, Sanaa becomes a mother-ly figure for Chitti. Based on this, the love triangle between Vaseekaran/father, Sanaa/mother and Chitti/son can be read as an oedipal sub-plot where the son, desirous of seeking union with the mother, regards the father as a rival. In other words, the narrative chooses to humanise the robot only after imbuing it/him with oedipal tendencies.<sup>v</sup>



**Figure 1: The oedipally saturated confrontation between Chitti, Dr. Vaseekaran and Sanaa. Courtesy: Sun Pictures**

After facing the initial failure during AIRD's testing/approval of the robot as a military prototype (owing partly to Dr. Bora's intervention), Dr. Vaseekaran decides to instil/install in the robot humanist values and emotions. This differs from the original novel, where the monster educates itself/himself in the ways of human life, after being shunned by his creator-scientist (Klein, 2010, p.139). From the perspective of the radical ontological difference between the human and the posthuman this is significant, as Chitti's evolution from humanoid to human begins only after acquiring human emotions and values, installed into the robot's "neural schema" (Maran & Shankar, 2010) as a set of codes and software that allow it to make *emotional* inferences. The humanist programming of the robot Chitti blurs the boundaries between the human and the posthuman, which ultimately leads to the oedipal subplot of the film. Like Mary Shelley's monster, Chitti too becomes desirous of a mate and he construes his mate in the mother-like Sanaa. Thus, Dr. Vaseekaran's humanist programming of Chitti inadvertently entails the error of an incestuous tendency. During Dr. Vaseekaran's attempt to get the robot approved by a jury from Indian defence forces, Chitti begins to recite a poetic couplet asking the jury officials to give up war and adopt love, while confessing its/his own amorous feelings for Sanaa. Enraged by Chitti's feelings for Sanaa and the damage to his reputation as a scientist during this approval, Dr. Vaseekaran dismembers and abandons Chitti.



Figure 2: Dr. Vaseekaran dimembers and abandons Chitti. Courtesy: Sun Pictures

It has been argued that the core of Mary Shelley’s novel laid not so much in its imagination of the “destructive power of science” over the human race as in its poignant foregrounding of “the necessity of parental responsibility and familial relations” for an individual’s life (Klein, 2010, p.139). This aspect also gets reflected in *Robot*, as Chitti becomes a greater threat to the society and/or the human race after he/it is forsaken by his creator-scientist Dr. Vaseekaran, owing to its/his oedipal excesses. Dr. Bora exploits this oedipal triangle between Dr. Vaseekaran, Chitti and Sanaa to acquire Chitti’s neural schema.

### Chitti as Frankenstein’s monster

After Dr. Bora resurrects Chitti with a destructively programmed red chip, the narrative offers a passage of Chitti (who is about to become Chitti 2.0) through the “mirror stage” (Lacan, 1949/2006, p.75). A continuous tracking shot, from Chitti’s point of view, allows the audience to align with and feel the motion of the robot towards the mirror. Once at the mirror, Chitti beholds his own image in the mirror, which operates for him as a “gestalt” (p.76). The moment where he beholds and assumes his image in the mirror has a “[trans]formative effect” (p.77) over Chitti, as he simultaneously identifies with his destructive capacity (owing to the red chip) as well as his unfulfilled, incestuous desires for Sanaa. Chitti’s mirror image *constitutes* him as Chitti 2.0, rather than simply being a reflection of his form.<sup>vi</sup> Further, this sequence also intimates the viewer that Chitti’s recognition of his coherence and uniqueness is different than that of an ordinary human being, in that Chitti recognizes himself as not only distinct from other human beings, but also superiorly divergent from the human species itself. His sense of superiority to the human species is made evident from his ominous, delightful laughter at his resurgence as he admires himself in the mirror.<sup>vii</sup> The rebooted robot has an identity and subjectivity different than that of the one designed by Dr. Vaseekaran. The resurrected version of the robot is aligned with Dr. Bora’s malicious subjectivity.



**Figure 3: Chitti's mirror stage after being equipped with the red chip by Dr. Bora (also reflected in the mirror), constituting him as Chitti 2.0. Courtesy: Sun Pictures**

With Dr. Bora's tampering of Chitti's neural schema, Chitti acquires a new identity Chitti 2.0,<sup>viii</sup> but even in his new monstrous avatar he still harbours his incestuous feelings for Sanaa. In other words, when Dr. Vaseekaran mutilates Chitti, the act only destroys the robot's hardware/body; the incestuous side of his humanist subjectivity/programming remains unaltered. Thus, the narrative seems to suggest an efficient Cartesian split between the mind/subjectivity/programming and the body/hardware in the case of posthuman embodiment such as that of Chitti. Combined with Dr. Bora's destructive programming, this incestuous tendency acquires catastrophic proportions in the form of Chitti 2.0. In a ravenous and monstrous moment of incest, the narrative likens Chitti 2.0 to the Hindu demon *Raavan*, when he kidnaps Sanaa from amidst the celebratory milieu of her on-going wedding with Dr. Vaseekaran. Chitti 2.0 hurls Dr. Vaseekaran mid-air (but does not kill him) – a quasi-castrating act – and departs with Sanaa. This domineering oedipal moment is shortly followed by the quintessential Frankensteinian moment when Chitti 2.0 kills Dr. Bora (who is the creator-scientist of Chitti 2.0) in his laboratory for interrupting the self-sustaining creation of a robot army. Having found out that Chitti 2.0 has initiated a “robotic chain reaction” (Lakkad, 2014, p.174), whereby robots are manufacturing new robots at an exponentially increasing rate, Dr. Vaseekaran and the state authorities soon develop a plan to infiltrate the AIRD premises which has now transformed into Chitti 2.0's fortress. The rescue mission carried out by Dr. Vaseekaran, along with the help of state authorities, takes the posthuman dystopia to its peak, bringing out the full posthuman martial monstrosity of Chitti 2.0 and his robot army which takes the form of several extended, networked and embodied “configurations” (Lakkad, 2014, p.174-175), an appalling nightmare for the human soldiers who are fighting against the posthuman robots.

### **Human Monstrosity in a Posthuman Future**

In the end Chitti 2.0's monstrosity/incest is 'exorcised' by the scientist-creator-father Vaseekaran. In his final configuration, Chitti 2.0 uses the electromagnetic capacities of his robotic army to transform himself into a towering, anthropomorphic posthuman giant monster — the giant reinforces the morphology of the human. The climax is a chase sequence between this giant monster and Dr. Vaseekaran, accompanied by Sanaa, lodged in a vehicle that is covertly a

command post to neutralise and take control of the monstrous robotic army, by nullifying the effects of the various commands being transmitted by Chitti 2.0 to his army. In a series of quick manoeuvres, Dr. Vaseekaran is able to demagnetise the anthropomorphic, posthuman monster. However, Chitti 2.0 manages to subvert this move. In a final climactic twist, shot in the claustrophobic interiors of the mobile command centre, Vaseekaran ‘hypnotises’/neutralises Chitti with a powerful electromagnet in the vehicle. In most of the shots in this sequence, Chitti is depicted to be yelling and resisting the ‘exorcising’ acts of Dr. Vaseekaran. Devitalised by the power of the electromagnet, Vaseekaran uses a control panel in Chitti’s torso to “destroy” all the robots that swathe around the vehicle in order to infiltrate it. In the last move, Vaseekaran removes the red chip from Chitti 2.0’s body putting an end to the robot’s martial-oedipal chaos and resistance. The malicious code of the red chip and incestuous tendencies are curbed.



**Figure 4: Chitti 2.0 and his robotic army transform into an anthropomorphic giant. Courtesy: Sun Pictures**

The narrative closure depicts that the robot is decommissioned by the Judiciary/State and kept in an A.I. museum and it decrees a death sentence for Dr. Vaseekaran. These diegetic moments suggest a social constructivist approach towards scientific knowledge and the scientific community (Lakkad, 2014, p.176-177). Freed from his martial and oedipal fixations, Chitti’s posthuman capacity of digital memory becomes crucial to reveal Dr. Bora’s criminal psyche through his insertion of the red chip into Chitti, which absolves Dr. Vaseekaran from the conviction and guilt of catastrophic acts done by Chitti 2.0. The film’s narrative defers the onset of the posthuman condition for some other time in the future, recognising its potential threats to humanity in the present. This is also corroborated by the detail that Chitti’s neural schema and his dismantled body parts are kept confined in the A.I. museum in the year 2030.



**Figure 5: Chitti in the A.I. museum in the year 2030. Courtesy: Sun Pictures**

But it seems worth noting that the robot and the artificial intelligence that drives it acquire cataclysmic and warlike proportions only after Dr. Bora’s abuse of his knowledge and stature. Thus, the red chip becomes a metaphor for the “potentially destructive nature” (Klein, 2010, p.138) of human beings rather than simply raising a caution for posthumanising technologies. The decommissioning of Chitti also presents a critique of human morality (“human beings can lie to protect themselves” (Maran & Shankar, 2010)). As Chitti disassembles his body

parts, he presents his observations regarding human beings. He says that human beings carry ‘red chips’ in their hearts which creates emotions like hatred, lies and dishonesty. The robot’s ontology permits it to erase such emotions by a simple removal of a chip from its (artificial) body; but human beings struggle to eliminate such vulnerabilities from their minds and heart. Chitti expresses his relief for not being a human. In effect, this sequence carries out the ontological separation of the posthuman from the human emphasizing the subjective aspects of humans such as feelings, prejudices and emotions while also undermining being human. Further, in the final sequence of the film Chitti reveals to the audience the reason for it/him being dismantled — because he had “begun to *think*” (Maran and Shankar, 2010; emphasis mine), reiterating the Cartesian quality of ‘thinking’ as the hallmark of being human, creating a hierarchy between the human and the non-human/posthuman. Thus, the curbing of the posthuman condition entails a significant critique of the nature of human species while at the same time reinstating the human essence.

Overall, *Enthiran*’s narrative conserves humanity while it delimits posthumanity. However, posthumanity is not completely abolished; it is only curtailed owing to its monstrous potential — in the wrong hands. Considering the narrative’s emphasis on defence forces and the military-industrial complex, it seems fair to surmise that the monstrous potential of Chitti 2.0 is a hyperbolic metaphor of the human tendency to wage wars. The narrative posits wars between nations as a manifestation of human monstrosity. At the explicit level, the curbing of the SF monster Chitti 2.0 represents the repression of the human tendency to wage wars, while at an implicit level the narrative curbs the oedipal excesses of Chitti’s human nature. Through the Frankensteinian monster Chitti 2.0, the film engages with this very human anxiety of wars and its consequences, as well as the anxieties pertaining to the repercussions of implementing A.I. and robotics on a wider, social level.

## Conclusion

Under the rubric of posthuman monstrosity, this paper has attempted to engage with imaginations of monstrous embodiment arising out of human-machine hybridity, which is rationalised in the diegesis as consequences of certain actual/fictional technologies. However, it must be added that human-animal monstrosity is also an equally important manifestation of posthuman monstrosity. The paper takes up *Enthiran/Robot* as an emblematic instance of posthuman, Frankensteinian monstrosity in Indian popular cinema. The analysis of the film brings out different dynamics of the narrative with regard to the emergence and sustenance of posthumanity vis-à-vis humanity, within the diegesis. The paper has argued that *Enthiran*’s narrative chooses to defer the onset of the posthuman condition, leaving open the possibility of reviving it/Chitti at a later point in the diegesis. This becomes especially relevant with the forthcoming release of 2.0 as a sequel to this film. *Enthiran* imagines India as an emerging posthuman territory where technologically-mediated posthuman monstrosity offers insights into various socio-cultural tensions and anxieties, apart from the technophobic/technophilic preoccupations of the nation. In general, one may suggest that the depiction of posthuman monstrosity in popular films connects with themes about collective social fears and anxieties about the consequences of certain posthumanising technologies like genetic engineering, robotics, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, cloning among others. The Frankenstein narrative/myth provides a compelling, everlasting template to depict the human anxieties about posthumanising technologies; however this does not imply that such a way of organising the narrative is the only way to contemplate/depict the posthuman condition cinematically.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> For a detailed account of the social, personal, literary and scientific influences that informed Mary Shelley's writing of *Frankenstein*, as well as her other works; please see the first chapter titled *On the Origin of Species: Mary Shelley* in Aldiss (1986).

<sup>ii</sup> A key feature of a "posthumanist reading" is also that it could bring out the "cultural politics" concealed by posthuman representations in texts and "the processes of ongoing posthumanisation" (Herbrechter and Callus, 2008, p.97). Apart from this, deciphering the anxieties and repressions that inform the text can aid to understand the text's "pre-inscribed" radical imagination of the human in its "posthuman forms" as well as in the implied subsistence of human(ism) (or humanist values) within the "posthumanising process" (p.97-98). For a stimulating methodological discussion on interpreting posthumanism, through several examples in popular cinema, please see (Herbrechter and Callus, 2008).

<sup>iii</sup> The film was released with the title *Enthiran* in Tamil, while it was released simultaneously in Hindi as *Robot*. This paper uses the Hindi dubbed version of the film to make its interpretations.

<sup>iv</sup> This is also corroborated by the lyrics of a line that goes: "*Hindi hai meri pitrabhasha*" (Maran & Shankar, 2010; 'Hindi is my father-tongue' in English), in the song that accompanies the film's exposition sequence.

<sup>v</sup> Freud's (1930/2010) embryonic conception of the Oedipus complex can be found in his seminal work *The Interpretation of Dreams* wherein he invokes the plot of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. Combining the analyses of dreams experienced by children and adults with this Greek legend (p.266-278), he surmised that children begin to feel "a sexual preference" at an early age wherein children construe the parent of the same sex as a "rival in love" (p.274). The following quote elucidates the Oedipal tendencies in a human male child:

While he is still a small child, a son will already begin to develop a special affection for his mother, whom he regards as belonging to him; he begins to feel his father as a rival who disputes his sole possession. (Freud, 1916-1917; as cited in <http://www.freudfile.org>).

<sup>vi</sup> According to Lacan (1949/2006), the reflected image of a "human child" experiencing its mirror stage, is not merely a form or a shape of the body, but a "gestalt" that has a constitutive power over the infant's psyche, rather than simply being an image formed by the reflecting nature of the mirror (p.76). The reflected image or the *gestalt* has "formative effects" (p.77) over the human child (or any other organism) such that the act of assuming the image leads to a "transformation" in the infant wherein it begins to identify itself as *I*, or "the agency known as the ego" (76). This is the preliminary form of the *I* that can be considered to be synchronized across a particular species (76).

<sup>vii</sup> Interestingly, later in the narrative Chitti 2.0 also comes up with an idea to create a new advanced species, through the fusion of humans and intelligent machines, called "Robo-sapiens" (Maran & Shankar, 2010) by impregnating Sanaa artificially. This reinforces the idea that his self-identification, during the mirror stage, is that of an individual/organism superior to the human species.

<sup>viii</sup> Incidentally, 2.0 is the name of an upcoming Indian movie, starring Rajnikanth and Akshay Kumar, being helmed by Shankar. It is a direct sequel to *Enthiran/Robot*.

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