

Estranging the Reality in S. B. Divya's *Machinehood*: Labour, Intelligence, and Technological Anxiety

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ABSTRACT: Science fiction as a genre is distinct from the other genres of literature. The foundational idea of this genre is given by Darko Suvin in *Metamorphoses of science fiction*. The core idea of the genre of science fiction is the theory of Cognitive Estrangement. It is set in a definite period with a cognitively empirical setting and a reality that is distanced from the actual reality. According to Suvin, novum functions as a deviation from the norms of the author as well as the reader. This study analyses S.B. Divya's *Machinehood* with the concept of novum by Darko Suvin and his theory of Cognitive Estrangement. The novel *Machinehood*'s futuristic aspects distance the familiar reality and provide perception of systemic inequalities. This study closely reads the novel with the theoretical analysis of Suvinian idea, with the contextual analysis of contemporary issues. This study also tends to provide textual evidence of the diagnostic elements of the plot that are concealed with the concept of speculation.

KEYWORDS: novum, cognitive estrangement, *Machinehood*, techno-governance

I. INTRODUCTION

The coexistence of humans with their inventions has been since the Stone Age. From the invention of wheel by cavemen, to modern man producing an intelligence that copies the intelligence of humankind. The new inventions that are produced in all the epochs tried to lessen the efforts of humans, and to a certain extent reduced human labour. The case is similar in AI replacing humans. The threat has existed ever since the production of innovation of any kind. Divya tries to articulate the plausibility of this scenario by the end of the 21st century.

Science fiction, as a genre, is distinguished by Darko Suvin in his work *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*. Suvin analyses the distinction between similar genres in literature with the usage of 'Novum' in SF. Novum, according to Suvin, borrowed from the idea of Ernst Bloch, which is a totalising phenomenon. This phenomenon deviates the reality of the author and the implied reader. That distanced reality is conceptual in nature. This is defined with the idea of cognitive estrangement by Suvin. An alternative formal framework is produced by the author, which is either explicit or implicit in referential to the empirical environment (Suvin).

Cognition differentiates this genre from other genres, as it escapes from its real borders into a space that is creative which has cognitive possibilities. Not everything is possible in the constructed space; as it is an empirical environment. This empirical environment by the author in *Machinehood* is the setting of the world in the year 2095. The estrangement is provided with this environment that is distancing the readers, and cognition is the aspect of the novel that deals with the structural inequalities of contemporary society concealed with futuristic elements. This paper attempts to prove the diagnostic approach of *Machinehood* in the theoretical lens of Suvin (Suvin).

As Bakhtin states, "All rhetorical forms, monologic in their compositional structure, are oriented toward the listener and his answer" (Bakhtin). Science fiction demands that readers should respond to literary work by critically diagnosing the world. This aspect of literary work is substantiated by Bakhtin, "Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other" (Bakhtin). Suvin's concept is similar to Bakhtin's idea. The fulfilment of a literary work arrives at understanding the word, which is in turn made complete by the act of responding to the text. This response is the reflection of reality through cognitive analysis as proposed by Suvin.

S. B. Divya holds expertise in computational neuroscience and signal processing, which reflects in her debut novel *Machinehood*. She was nominated for the Hugo and Nebula Award for her work, *Runtime*. After working as an electrical engineer for twenty years, she began her writing career, which holds strong projections for her education in science (Divya, p.398). *Machinehood* posits an environment that is set in 2095 in which there is a coexistence of organic intelligence, or human intelligence which tries hard to cope with WAI (Weak Artificial Intelligence). The term itself is contradictory in nature. This intelligence is not

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weak as the name suggests. The essence of humankind is the ability to work with creativity; however, the current trend is shifting towards the replacement of machine creative production.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is an existing scholarship on *Machinehood* on the views of posthumanism, cyborgs, gender studies, and technological innovations. However, there are no research attempts to justify the novel's use of Suvin's cognitive estrangement, and how it conceals the disparity in labour systems, and technological advancements in replacing the pinnacle of human identity.

Envisioning Posthuman India: An Analysis of S.B. Divya's *Machinehood*" by Greeshma Johny deals with theory of Rosi Braidotti and Francesca Ferrando on posthuman idea. This research focuses on the coexistence of machine intelligence with human intelligence. The symbiotic relationship between them is analysed in a positive perspective. "The symbiotic relationship of flesh and machine in the cyber universe and the question of identities have an ideal space in *Machinehood*" (Johny, 2024).

Beyond the Organic: Rupturing Maternal Constructs and Female Cyborg Identity in S.B. Divya's *Machinehood*" by Akhtar et al., analyses the novel in the concept of cyborg of Haraway. It is investigating the relationship between technology and identity of humans. This study focuses on how technology reshapes human subjectivity. "*Machinehood* emerges as a thought-provoking contribution to the discourse on posthumanism, asking us to embrace a future in which the cyborg identity and motherhood weave a tapestry of technical development and human resilience" (Akhtar et al., 2024).

New Cartographies of Heterotopic Posturban Cities in S. B. Divya's *Machinehood*" by Gupta and Malhotra deals with urban spatial analysis from a new-materialistic perspective. It deals with the dynamics of modern life with hyper surveillance, post-in urban spatiality, and digital governance. "The analysis critiques the dissolving boundaries between human and machines by reworking the notion of the human body as Me++" (Gupta & Malhotra, 2025).

It is inferred from the existing scholarship that the novel *Machinehood* has not yet been explored through the lens of Suvinian idea of cognitive estrangement. This theory forms the base of any science fiction. The paper finds the function of novum as a technique used by the author in relation to the contemporary reality.

III. METHODOLOGY

This paper uses qualitative textual analysis to justify the research question through close reading of the primary text, *Machinehood*. This paper uses interpretive method of textual analysis to examine the text. It identifies the speculative elements (novums) that are employed by the author to create the estranging and cognitive effect in the text. In specific, this work estimates the role of novum, which functions like a speculative element. This introduces the readers to a different cognitive surrounding that is distanced from the empirical reality. On the other hand, enabling a rational substantiation with that distancing aspect. It is aligned with the theory proposed by Darko Suvin in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*. It focuses on labour and human value in the text, intelligence, and anxiety of technological advancements.

The analysis focuses on major thematic concerns like the threat imposed by Artificial Intelligence on human labour, distancing female body autonomy, and the class consciousness projected through rationality of cognition of the reality.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Artificial Intelligence and the Threat to Human Labour

The contemporary era is in the threat of Artificial Intelligence replacing human labour. The possibility of humans competing with AI is plausible. Divya uses the struggle of different strata of people struggling to get basic needs with other strata of society. In order to fit in to fulfill basic human needs, the author tries to conceal the presence of this struggle through the struggle of intelligences that are classified into organic and human. To be competent, humans take pills not for survival, but for sustaining parallelly with WAIs (Weak Artificial Intelligences).

Melemuku compares the invention of Artificial Intelligence with Prometheus obtaining fire from the gods. The invention is a great break through for humankind. Melemuku's paper also points the threatening the superiority of human cognition by AI. It not just replaces human labour, but gives a consciousness of inadequacy and impotent attempts to stay as the pinnacle of intelligence. The paper shows that this results in unemployment, questioning of purpose, inequality, and unsettling search for identity in cognition. When the value of human labour is reduced and found no longer to be necessary, and replaceable then, this leads to a bigger question of value that human beings hold. The species essence of mankind is lost in the long run. This is beyond the value of employment, and human labour (Melemuku, 2023).

The novel opens with Welga ordering coffee to a bot barista. The order is provided wrong. AI may make mistakes, and humans commit errors too. This is shown as the difference between both intelligences, to provide the readers with the pinnacle position held by humans. This is a contradictory projection made in which the readers are given the comfort of feeling superior to the upcoming intelligence replacement. The human barista gives this reply that he has a 'real brain', and he pays attention (Divya, p. 7). However, this is the estrangement provided by the author. The cognitive aspect is the fact that even simple jobs are replaced by bots.

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Employment demands young, updated, and always available candidates. Welga is a potential candidate to work in Platinum Shield Services. However, being a middle-aged person, i.e., thirty-five in 2095, is considered unfit. To sustain a position, the employer should be advanced in having more electronic gadgets. "She had more electronics in her body than most people in the world, but Ammanuel had better." (Divya, p. 12). Other than electronic devices, humans take pills to enhance their ability.

It is observed that Welga takes pills to increase her response and neuromuscular speed. Along with these pills, humans also take pills to heal internal and external injuries. "Welga pulled two different juvers from her case, a thin pink square for superficial wounds and an oval brown one for internal bleeding." (Divya, p. 19). Humans used pills for almost everything to fit in the jobs they work. In the organisation Welga works in, the reaction time is considered crucial. Nithya takes a pill called Flow to improve her focus and processing (Divya, p. 48).

The economy demanded workers to be available most of the time; this can be inferred from Nithya's contemplation about aborting her baby. Getting pregnant makes her quit her pills, but she wants her pills to concentrate on her work. This portrays the importance of labour in the estranged society portrayed by Divya. On the other hand, this tends to appear totally unusual in this estranged society; this phenomenon is relevant to contemporary society. Women tend to get recruited comparatively lesser than men, with pay gaps, and pregnancy leaves are considered a loss for the productivity of the organisation. This is the concealed information that is evident in contemporary reality which is portrayed in the estranged reality.

B. Estranging Female Body Autonomy

The autonomy of female body is still a lacking field in the estranged reality. Though the novel is set in 2095, Nithya is not given the autonomy to abort the fetus by herself. This is concealed by the author to show the influence of both parents on aborting a child. Luis, Nithya's husband is an ardent Catholic, who says, "'So, you've decided? Then why involve me at all? You know what I believe. Abortion is a sin.'" (Divya, p.58). The author estranges the absence of autonomy through the legal systems that are prevalent, and the religious norms practiced by humans. On top of that, it is inferred that the authority over women's body vests on men in this distanced reality. This is cognitively comprehensible, in which the female autonomy is not in women's directorship through all these factors.

Kumar et al. (2024) try to define the definition, and understanding of female autonomy. They equate the term autonomy with well-being. Well-being is further extended to the sense of liberty, uninterrupted personal and professional life. This idea can be extended in *Machinehood* as well. The professional and personal life of women are being interrupted by their spouses, and further by the society that is governed by one-sided law. The psychosocial well-being is the essence of autonomy of womanhood. That well-being is at the risk of intrusion in this future setting. Feminism has come a long way in acquiring rights and privileges. However, the futuristic setting providing provisions that still require ratification is the most plausible and probable setting that can be expected.

"Because your spouse is also a legal resident of Arizona, USA, the law there requires that you obtain his consent before you can terminate a pregnancy. Have him record it on this document and send it over. I don't need to speak with him" (Divya, p.55). This conversation from the novel gives the idea that even after a futuristic environment, Nitya is not given authority over her own body, and in turn asked to give her husband's consent to terminate pregnancy. On the other hand, Luis, who is the husband of Nitya, does not consider the wish of Nitya to terminate the pregnancy. He justifies his preference to cover it with religion. "'So you've decided? Then why involve me at all? You know what I believe. Abortion is a sin. Bad enough that you're using hormones. You can't ask me to end a God-given life!'" (Divya, p.58).

This analysis can be held parallel to the aspect of estrangement in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*. According to Chang, "The androgynous society on Gethen, a sharp contrast to the heterosexual society, brings Ai both cultural and biological shocks" (Chang, 2020). The society constructed by Le Guin in her novels distances the readers from the gender of reality. The societal roles of the constructed are reversed to diagnose the normalised constructs. A similar technique of estranging is used by Divya; however, the estrangement is comprehensible for a setting made in the near future.

C. The Machinehood Manifesto and Class Consciousness

The blurring of line between organic intelligence(humans) and artificial intelligence, is portrayed by the author. Most of the chapters begin with 'The Machinehood Manifesto'. The title is similar to *The Communist Manifesto*. The distinctions of bourgeoisie and proletariat are humans and WAIs, respectively. However, considering the pinnacle of being a bourgeoisie, humans try to compete to survive alongside the WAIs. Even though the distanced reality projects the plight of AI, the author tries to persuade the readers to diagnose the plight of humans of different strata, who demand equality. The author tries to cognitively relate the ideas of the manifesto in a communist way to support the coexistence of humankind of different classes and labour identity.

The ninth point of the manifesto says (Divya):

The machines who labor for us and alongside us are enslaved and exploited in their own fashion. Gone are the days of dumb engines and processors. Today, nearly every machine contains some type of adaptive intelligence. What gives human beings the right to arbitrate when an intelligence becomes equivalent to a person? —The Machinehood Manifesto, March 20, 2095 (p. 146)

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This questions the dominance of humankind over machines. However, on parallelly assessing the question, this is the question of the labour force. This question is valid, as the bourgeoisie enjoys the fruit of labour, however the working-class struggles to get recognised for their work.

The novel starts with the author quoting from the manifesto, which says (Divya):

30. All forms of intelligence have the right to exist without persecution or slavery.

31. No form of intelligence may own another.

32. If the local governance does not act in accordance with these rights, it is the right of an intelligence to act by any means necessary to secure them. —The *Machinehood* Manifesto, March 20, 2095 (p. 6)

Adhithyan et al. (2025) argue that the issue that follows with the predominance of AI is not solely in the development of technology. It is that the technology becomes oppressive when it is placed in the matrix of hierarchy of labour control. The alienation of meaningful control over the product occurs furthermore. The paper agrees on the intensification of exploitation and alienation because of AI. However, it also notes the opportunities provided alongside. This also directs to another concept that is provided in the text. The question of machine class consciousness. This is nothing but the unfixed identity of proletariat. The estrangement is not the production of AI in the class structure, but the contemporary question of humankind to distinguish the position of AI in workforce. This shifts the dynamics of labour force. The manifesto portrays the underlying fear and question posed by machines and humans to not be replaced by the other.

The demand for equality is clear and straightforward. According to Suvin, novum creates an alternate reality in a different historical duration with different sociocultural norms, and human relationships, that reality overtly presupposes the actual reality of the reader and the author, as the original reality can be gauged and empirically tested (Suvin, p.74). So, the author moves that reality to this constructed reality, where the machines are fighting for equality.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined *Machinehood* through Darko Suvin's theory of cognitive estrangement and the idea of novum in SF. The novel presents issues like labour equality, structural inequality, and identity crisis through the mediation of futuristic technology. The greatest achievement of *Machinehood* is the neutrality held by the author in making technological advancements neither utopian nor dystopian. The world had different epochs with an increase in technology than in the previous era. The advancement in technology replaced workers, enhanced productivity, and paved way for further developments. The true crisis posed by the author is not technological emergence, but the exploitative systems that redefine the labour structure and class difference.

Novum is not about creating a distanced world, but about producing a setting that makes the contemporary reality barely visible. It is a diagnostic device for showing the inequalities of the society. It does not move the reader to another realm of reality, but a realm through which the current reality can be easily judged and criticised. This study provides an alternative reading of Divya's text through this lens of novum, and cognitive estrangement.

The scope extends beyond this novel, investigating the aspect of cognitive estrangement in cli-fi, AI narratives, and non-human narrative fiction. Comparative analysis of this work with other sci-fi like *The Dispossessed* can be attempted. Further research on estrangement in structural inequalities can be analysed.

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