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“The Girl Who was a Bomb”: Existential Posthumanism, Bioengineering Ethics, and Radioactive (Anti)Heroism in “The Glow-in-the-Dark Girls”

This paper operationalizes existential posthumanism to investigate the ethical conundrums of bioengineering-based superheroism in Senaa Ahmad’s story “The Glow-in-the-Dark Girls”. I show that the story critiques the hypernationalist intermeshing of nuclear weapons in India with a militant femininity in service of the broadly patriarchal nation-state—exemplified in the naming of the Pokhran-II nuclear tests as “Operation Shakti” and the tested thermonuclear bombs themselves as Shakti (after the Hindu warrior goddess). This occurs through the story’s primary focus on a state-sponsored project to mutate female bodies into superheroic bodies through exposure to nuclear radiation, which turns them into human nuclear bombs capable of destroying cities while retaining their bodily integrity. Juxtaposing Margrit Shildrick’s idea of the posthumanist “monstrous body” and Gunther Anders’ concept of “promethean shame”, I will critically examine how the story, through its strategic use of the second person, centers the reader as one of such “glow-in-the-dark girls” attempting to envision a posthumanist ethics emerging from such a nuclear embodiment—where characters have their relationship to the world forcibly reduced to one only of mass destruction. Such an ethics, I will thus show, advances a posthumanist questioning of the rhetoric of empowerment at the heart of this hypernationalist meshing of nuclear weapons with militant divine femininity, revealing the unstable, precarious, mutating nature of the female body pressed into service of the nuclear state as a posthumanist subject.

Published in the second volume of *The Gollancz Book of South Asian Science Fiction*, Ahmad’s story features a dystopic Indian state that has carried out biotechnical experimentation on young girls, transforming the biochemical reactions in their bodies into unstable radioactive reactions, making them phoenix-like nuclear bombs capable of unleashing destruction and regenerating themselves (hence their name: “glow-in-the-dark-girls”, derived literally from the radioactive glow emitted by their bodies). They live ghettoised lives in spaces away from the civilian populace and are often subject to media scrutiny and sting operations, with public opinion throughout the story wildly oscillating between sympathizing with them, valorizing them as national heroes and demonizing them as superspreaders of radiation poisoning due to their radioactive bodies. Eventually, one of them chooses to terminate her existence by refusing to regenerate herself when attacked by a child suicide bomber; the rest all follow her lead in refusing their status as weapons for the state, voicing their status as posthuman descendants of the American “Radium Girls” who were, in the early twentieth century, similarly employed in the radioactively hazardous work of

painting watch dials with radium and whose agonizing deaths and radiation sickness was met by a state-led campaign of public denial (Moore 2017; Downing 2024).

Ahmad's story thus capitalizes on the posthumanist assertion that much like class-based or caste-based exclusions, gender-based exclusions have regulated the consignment of female bodies, female labour, and female agency to second-class human status, subservient to androcentric civilizational, social, and political models (Nayar 2013, Braidotti 2013). Aino-Kaisa Koistinen et al thus argue that "feminist posthumanities can be described as a re-negotiating of "the human" in a manner that questions humanist hierarchical conceptualisations of the term, while it also brings to the fore the materiality and vulnerability of human existence and ethics in terms of nonhuman existence." (para. 5). Part of these reconceptualizations drove what Donna Haraway was to eventually valorize as the Cyborg: "It's not just that god is dead; so is the 'goddess'. Or both are revived in the worlds charged with microelectronic and biotechnological politics." (162, emphasis added). However, this juxtaposition of technological innovation with restoration of agency arguably found an unlikely source of valorization of female agency: Hindu nationalists.

Even as the triumphalist rhetoric built around the 1998 Pokhran-II nuclear tests made it clear that it was seen in masculinist lenses (Bal Thackeray's infamous transphobic comment that 'we are no longer eunuchs') much of the dominant cultural messaging foregrounded the test as a manifestation of *Shakti*—quite literally, power, but in this case, also religiously symbolizing the Hindu war goddess Shakti. While the tests themselves were ceremonially named "Operation Shakti", the bomb itself was christened as "Shakti", and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) members reportedly planned to construct a "shaktipeeth" (a holy site dedicated to Shakti) at the test site (Subramaniam 2018). International Relations critics like Runa Das have commented that this reflected how nuclear weapons emerged for India as instruments through which a feminized national body, recovering from colonial violation, could be both defended and redeemed (n.p.). This was a remarkably flexible vision; while it seemingly encoded an ideological vision of feminist triumph, it also flowed neatly, for the Hindu nationalists, into what feminist scholarship has argued to be an "insist[ence] that women's strength is best served through their role in the family and the nation." (Subramaniam 184). In Ahmad's story, the glow-in-the-dark-girls—as manifestations of this imagined figure of the nuclear 'shakti'—voice their disenchantment with this project of bioengineered empowerment. At once, the narrator says, their bioengineered state traps them in a state of incredible flux (due to the radioactive instability inside their body) that engenders a psychological atmosphere of containment: "We are unstable, and we know it not because anyone says anything, but because of the ways in which we are constrained. The way our doctors and handlers look at us and don't look at us." (Ahmad 49). The instability inscribed into their bodies seems to parallel the nation's schizophrenic attitude to them—initially of public sympathy towards them as misled "babies" abused by the government and then eventually as "dragons under the bed" who not only destroy innocents but also spread radioactive contamination in their surroundings (Ahmad 53). For the glow-in-the-dark-girls, this is a moment of existential dread, as their identity slips from "a new generation of suicide bombers" to "just bombs", to the eventual question: "Are we even human?" (Ahmad 49). Carefully hidden away from the nation's ordinary citizenry by teams of handlers covered in hazmat suits and subject to public speculation and fantasies, their bodies therefore become *monstrous bodies*, subjects of fascination and repulsion, as Margrit Shildrick theorizes:

“...the monsters that most effectively complicate our preconceptions are those that are blatantly organic. At the very least, they destabilize the grand narratives of biology and evolution and signify other ways of being in the world.” (6). For the glow-in-the-dark-girls whose posthuman bodies have fundamentally changed *their* ways of being in the world, the “human” girls represent a different way of being in the world that remains inaccessible to them within the circle of hazmat suits.

However, this anxiety of monstrosity is presaged ironically by a moment early in the story where the narrator, one such glow-in-the-dark girl, asserts her agency: “We are still part of an *us* that is bigger than ourselves. This is the choice we make, our bodies for a way out of our lives. A chance at a future.” (Ahmad 47). The narrator makes evident her lack of conviction about the nationalist inflections of this sensibility: “We have not graduated high school and already we have toppled buildings, laid waste to city blocks, upheaved countries, immolated hundreds of militants and the people around them—what our handlers call the bad guys and their *peripherals*.” (Ahmad 48; emphasis added). The innocuous final word—“peripherals”—eventually implodes this self-assurance, as the narrator and her compatriots are forced to confront the ethical ramifications of their actions driven by their biotechnologically enhanced bodies in a section of the story that Ahmad chooses to write entirely in the second person.

Placed strategically midway through the story, this section dramatically shifts the narration from a confessional plural (‘we’) to an address to the reader (‘you’), pulling the audience into the shoes of one of the glow-in-the-dark girls tasked with incinerating a city. This section takes the reader through the psychological transformations such a glow-in-the-dark-girl faces as she suddenly meets a young girl who seem to mirror her lost childhood, a reminder to her of the costs of the technological enhancements she went through: “When you see the little girl, you think she is you... You are not yet 20, and sometimes you think yourself a child and sometimes you do not... How did you end up here, how did she end up there?” (Ahmad 51). The strategic use of the second person here opens up the narrative into a confrontation between the reader-as-the-glow-in-the-dark-girl and the innocent girl whom she is positioned to view as a “peripheral” to be eliminated. The mastery of destruction in such a bioengineered body ironically reduces the relationship of the body to the world as one of merely destruction: “You kneel in the sandy street, you reach out your arms and you hug the girl who is you, and then you do what you came to do. You become annihilation itself. You explode into fire and light and death.” (Ahmad 51). As the narrator had previously stated, her handlers have to wear hazmat suits around her, and they emit high-energy radiation that damages human bodies in proximity to them: “we didn’t think we were *so* unsafe. Or, no: we didn’t think we could be so unsafe without even knowing it.” (Ahmad 50).

Ahmad’s story thus complicates fantasies of bioengineering female bodies to *cyborgize* them, building invulnerability and resistance towards assault. In doing so, it echoes the anxiety that posthumanist thinker N. Katherine Hayles had expressed about posthumanism reduplicating the Cartesian mind-body duality by prioritizing technological prosthesis to such an extent that the body becomes merely a substrate, thereby creating an expectation that bioengineering can proceed independently of any changes to the understanding of self: “What is lethal is not the posthuman as such but the grafting of the posthuman onto a liberal humanist view of the self.” (286-287). For Hayles, such a view remains dangerous because it draws a veil of technological prosthesis over the grim reality of

social dysfunction, patriarchal objectification and socio-political failure to provide meaningful gender education. The implication of Hayles' argument seems to be that pursuing only technological empowerment while social realities remain unaddressed helps build better *machines*, not better societies. Such models of 'empowerment', therefore, sidestep addressing crucial questions like that of "Promethean shame" proposed by Gunther Anders regarding technological progress and the mutation of the "human", especially after inventing nuclear weapons that can extinguish the human race itself. For Anders, it was significant that the shame that was felt was for having invented technologies that could dwarf human physical potential in every way, but not an *ethical* shame for having pursued such technological goals in the first place. Instead, humanity, much like the glow-in-the-dark-girls, aspired to *become* like these very powerful machines they had invented: "Humans now acknowledge the superiority of things, bring themselves into line with them, and welcome their own reification." (86). What, therefore, results is a curious obsolescence not only of humanity at large, but also, as seen in the story, in the posthumans; the glow-in-the-dark girls remain frustrated, trapped in a reductive relationship with the world where their sense of agency can only lie in destruction.

Ahmad's story carefully builds this sense of obsolescence throughout the narrative, showing the cumulative effects of ethical erosion and spiritual bankruptcy that accompany their biotechnologically enhanced bodies as the narrator confides to the reader that "We, too, are sick with ourselves." (Ahmad 55). The story develops this sense of shame at their moral bankruptcy and obsolescence into a climactic moment of suicide. The section written in second person is duplicated in a third-person view where a glow-in-the-dark-girl, Yaya, makes a radically different choice: faced with a little girl who is a suicide bomber, she chooses to forego her powers of self-regeneration, and "does not struggle, does not fight... Yaya just sinks into the girl's embrace and waits for what's been coming to her this entire life." (Ahmad 54). Such a suicidal choice is cast by the story as a moment of Yaya's atonement in the veins of what posthuman thinker Francesca Ferrando has argued to be the ethical dimension of existential posthumanism, which does not see technology as salvation but proposes an ethics that respects shared dignity and vulnerability across human and nonhuman forms of life.

Following this, the narrator records that they retreat from the state's demand of continuing to be living nuclear weapons; they rather retreat together into a space where they wait to die, wasting away due to radiation poisoning, their bodies turning inside out, their bones decomposing. The visceral descriptions culminate in a lament, remarking on how things have remained unchanged since the plight of the radium girls in early-twentieth-century United States. The strategic choice not to provide a miraculous technological/social solution at the end manifests in the story's unflinching attention to capturing the horror of the slow violence unleashed by the state's project of empowering young girls by crafting them into radiant superheroes. The narrator's voicing of solidarity with the American 'Radium Girls' presses home this point, articulating the deceptively horrific nature of the glow with which they are associated throughout the story. Across centuries and states, the destabilizing and disintegrating nature of radiological contamination and mutations is thus linked together in Senaa Ahmad's "The-Glow-in-the-Dark-Girls" to complicate the vision of radiation-enabled posthuman ascension.

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