Extending the Self: AI, Authorship, and Existential Becoming in Appupen's Dream Machine

Abstract

If the collective milieu of this century could be defined by a single adjective, few would capture it better than "data-driven." In an algorithmic culture where "hallucinations" no longer pertain only to human consciousness, where the very notion of consciousness is debated, and where language and storytelling are starting to be co-authored by more-than-human entities, our understanding of individual, collective, and planetary existence has become profoundly unstable. The rise of artificial intelligence and its deep integration into our quotidian life has opened new terrains of ethical and ontological inquiry. Donna Haraway talks about how "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (67). It thus becomes crucial to examine how cultural texts negotiate these boundaries.

The paper will study Appupen and Daudet's *Dream Machine: AI and the Real World*, a graphic text that experiments with AI-generated storytelling, through the lens of Indian philosophical thought. For this purpose, A.K. Ramanujan's essay "Is there an Indian Way of Thinking?", which posits the Indian self is inherently plural, inconsistent and context-dependent, will be used as a methodological framework of study. By juxtaposing the figures of SuperHugo, Hugo, and the AI he creates, and by analysing the narratological continuities and ruptures between human- and AI-generated segments of the text, this paper explores how Indian posthumanism foregrounds multiplicity, contradiction, and relationality as central to being. It argues that the text invites an existential reflection on co-creation and control and on what it means to make self and make world in an age defined by data and intelligent machines.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Indian Posthumanism, Ramanujan, *Dream Machine,* subjectivity.

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence has come a long way since its inception, from carrying out simple binary-coded tasks to increasingly complex capabilities. However, its entry into the domain of natural language processing (NLP) has been nothing short of a monumental feat. AI's capabilities, extending AI's ability to incorporate human language and use into its interface and use it to

interact with humans, are highly remarkable, heralding a new technological era full of possibilities. No other non-human entity has previously been able to develop such complex language systems as Homo Sapiens have, which has greatly contributed to its evolution into human beings and its subsequent "superiority" (Harari, *Sapiens* 3). The current techno-cultural environment of the globe thereby requires a staunch philosophical provocation, which is what Appupen and Daudet's *Dream Machine: AI and the Real World* does as a graphic narrative experiment. By building on A.K. Ramanujan's account of the plural self, this paper aims to open a conversation about using such Indian philosophical interventions in emerging areas of study like posthumanism and artificial intelligence. This paper will therefore look into Dream Machine as a posthumanist text that highlights distributed selfhood and how it can be read through the lens of plurality and context-sensitiveness that Ramanujan espouses.

The graphic novel is divided into ten chapters and follows the life of Hugo, the founder of an AI start-up, and the narratorial voice oscillates between him and his alter ego SuperHugo, who lives in his futuristic dreamscape. Hugo is in an ethical dilemma as he must decide whether to sell out KLAI to a major AI corporation or not, and what that future would mean for him and the world in general. It engages with the major contemporary debates, as the novel was created when ChatGPT was newly released at the NeurIPS 2022 Conference, which was attended by the real-life Hugo on whom the character is based (Appupen and Daudet 157).

This paper argues that the text is an exploration of the physical manifestation of the multiplicity of selves that includes cyborg bodies and AI companions. It does that through the characters of Hugo, SuperHugo and AiDA(the AI bot Hugo creates). The paper also looks at the form of the novel and extends the questions of selfhood towards authorship as well, since the last chapter of the novel is AI-generated based on data and prompts provided by the authors. Its interweaving of human-drawn and AI-generated imagery creates a layered text that asks not merely what stories machines can tell, but what forms of subjectivity emerge when human creators collaborate with artificial intelligence.

The Plurality of Self and Posthuman Subjectivity
The predominant Western humanistic discourse had previously centralised anthropocentric narratives where subjectivity was confined to the human body, but with the usherance of critical posthumanist epistemologies, subjectivity becomes a question of relationality and is understood in terms of a rhizomatic interconnection (Deleuze and Guattari 7; Braidotti 49).

Katherine Hayles talks about the dispersion of subjectivity throughout the cybernetic circuit (27). Talking about VR simulations, Hayles contextualises Stone's proposal that subjectivity can no longer be confined by the body in the face of such technologies, and we think of it as a "multiple warranted by the body rather than contained within it"(qtd. in Hayles 27). Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari discuss the concept of "Body Without Organs", which is essentially a non-organised and non-hierarchical conception of the body which can be understood beyond fixities of the organism and as a potentiality (149-66). So identity and subjectivity in these concepts move beyond the materiality of the human body in the field of cognition and can be seen as emerging through machinic and affective assemblages. Hayles also talks about the distribution of cognition across humans, machines, environments, and systems, which is dramatised in the graphic novel beyond just the narrative as the author Braidotti's posthuman theory also situates this traid within a relational ontology because of its entanglements with the human, nonhuman, and technological other. Hugo, SuperHugo and AiDa are mutually constitutive in that way. This interplay of the posthuman subject aligns Ramanujan's culturally rooted pluralism, which came earlier, with Western posthuman thought.

In Ramanujan's text, he differentiates between "context-free" systems, which are based on universalisation and singular truths and context-sensitive systems, where meaning and identity are dynamic based on the situational demands (34-37). He associates the Indian self as being context-sensitive, highlighting its layered nuances, which can be overlapping and contradictory sometimes (38-40). It argues for the acceptance of multiplicity over seeking coherence. While this framework emerges from Indian epistemologies, the notion of a plural, non-unitary self resonates more broadly with theorists such as William James's concept of the "plural self", Deleuze and Guattari's formulation of subjectivity as multiplicity and becoming, and Rosi Braidotti's posthuman subject, all of which challenge the idea of a stable, singular human identity. In this sense, the novel can situate Indian philosophical thought in conversation with global posthumanist debates on distributed selfhood, machinic subjectivity, and co-authorship.

Taking this as the foundational methodological framework, reading *Dream Machine* allows one to read the graphic novel as a composite of divergent visual registers, ontological layers, and consciousness. The shift between human-made and AI-generated panel sequencing shows the contradictions as productive tensions that reveal the multi-layered

nature of selfhood, which reflects Ramanujan's thought of how an Indian self is capable of inhabiting contradictory modes simultaneously by extending it to the domain of the machine.

Hugo, SuperHugo, and the AI: A Triad of Plural Selves

Appupen and Daudet's worldmaking is a complex structure that not only inhabits human and nonhuman entities but also extends itself to hold space for dream alter egos. The protagonist of the graphic text, Hugo, is the human creator and businessman who created KLAI and has also created the exaggerated persona of SuperHugo, who represents an alter ego. AiDa, although just an AI voice assistant, needs to be given crucial attention because its memory has access to data provided by Hugo, based on which it further operates, making it a machinic extension that both mirrors and deviates from Hugo, producing images and narratives that sometimes align with and sometimes disrupt his intentions. Centring the narratives with these three interconnected figures, the text brings forth much-debated questions of selfhood.

The traditional conceptions of selfhood have always been chained to the realm of consciousness, which has been reserved for only human entities. In "What is it Like to be a Bat?", Thomas Nagel challenges this anthropocentric way by rethinking the nature of consciousness and where it resides. Nagel argues that consciousness is not an abstract, disembodied phenomenon but a physical one, deeply rooted in materiality. Consciousness is perception, and it is existence. It doesn't just emerge; it is produced through material embeddedness. He asserts that consciousness cannot exist independently without the body; rather, it is moulded through the body's sensory engagement with the world. Any entity that exists materially does so with sensory experiences, which become the basis for consciousness. Extending it to the realm of AI, the question becomes layered, thereby situating the complications of where consciousness sits in the multiplicity of selves.

Just like Ramanujan exemplifies in his essay, this triad reflects the idea of identity as a composite. Hugo's selfhood is highly dispersed and unstable. It is distributed across the aspirational SuperHugo, the AI, which shows his dependency and anxiety and his embodied experience as the human Hugo. Each of these have their distinct visual styles and narrative tones illustrated in the graphic novel.
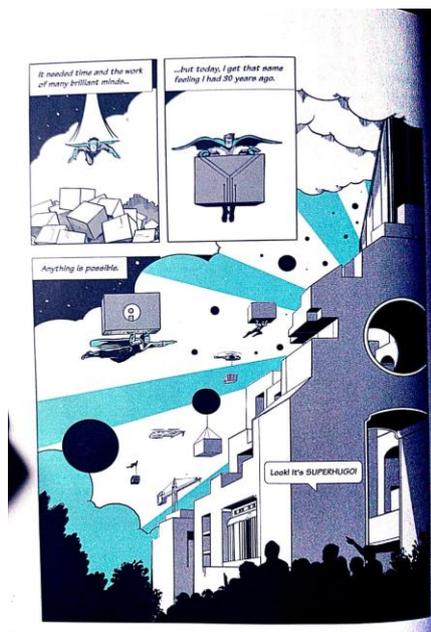
Figure 1 (Appupen and Daudet 8)

In these frames, the readers are introduced to Hugo's mind through a graphic representation of his psyche as a superhero called SuperHugo. The way that he is visually personified is distinct from the way Hugo is, as can be seen in the frames of the next page.
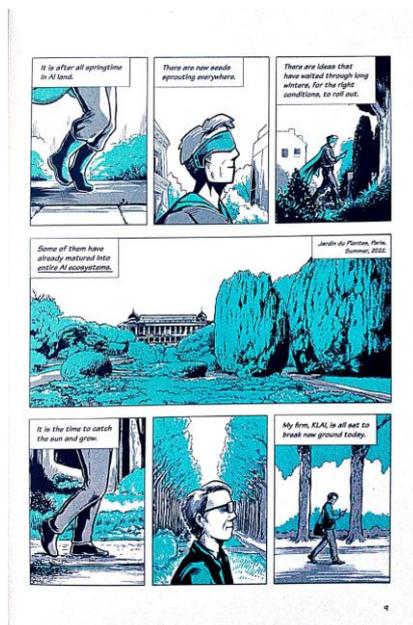

Figure 2 (Appupen and Daudet 9)

The contradiction between the two selves of Hugo is illustrated here, one where he feels like a superhero because of the deal that he has just made with his capitalist ambitions. And the other one is the CEO of KLAI.
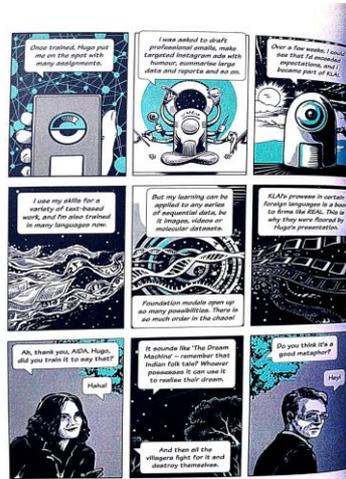

Figure 3 (Appupen and Daudet, 18)

The LLM AiDA is represented here as a bot who, after "her rigorous reading, she was already making associations, connecting dots and creating patterns"(Appupen and Daudet 17). She starts finishing Hugo's sentences and talking to Anna, Hugo's partner. This anthropomorphisation that happens with AI companions in real life and in fiction, therefore, contributes to nonhuman personhood seen as an extension of the human. [AiDA isn't represented here as an exploration into the questions of selfhood but as "the dream machine" that the authors reference from an indian folk tale where "whoever possesses it can use it to realise their dream". "And then all villagers fight for it and destroy themselves" (Appupen and Daudet 18)].

In a personal communication with one of the authors of the book, Appupen, he talked about his discussion with his co-author, Laurent Daudet, about how AI is an Western algorithm that doesn't fit the Indian demographic, which is based on contradictions and pluralities of population. So to fit AI into the Indian imagination is a difficult task. One way to do it would be to bring it down to the level of Indian context-specific imagination. So, while looking at the characters in the novel, it resonates with the puranic and epic traditions Ramanujan references, where characters have multiple versions of themselves that appear in various universes across stories. In those terms, SuperHugo can be seen as less of a Western alter ego and more like an amplified persona in an Indian cosmology of selves. According to

this framework, even AiDa is not an external but part of the layered self that is uncanny yet deviates from Hugo's identity. In this way, SuperHugo and AiDA together articulate an Indian posthumanist framework in which contradiction and plurality coexist, offering a basis for rethinking the posthuman subject in relation to artificial intelligence.

Conclusion

Humans do not only materially create robots but also (during development, use, and interaction) 'construct' them by means of language and in social relations, which must be presupposed when we think about these robots and interact with them (Coeckelbergh 6). This 'construction', especially through fictive narratives, is essential in discourse formation and conversations about ethical responsibilities in a world inhabited by artificial intelligence. The term 'intelligence' itself is used to imply a model which works through programming rather than any level of self-conscious operations, bringing into question what we see as intelligence itself, extending it to discussions about consciousness, selfhood and identity formation as explored in the paper.

These ongoing debates, emerging across disciplines, require critical philosophical intervention, especially from the Global South, where entities like AI are experienced differently than in the West due to the diversity of populations, modes of living, and ways of experiencing and narrativising the world. Research of this nature is therefore necessary as it attempts to locate AI within Indian consciousness and cultural memory rather than importing conceptual frameworks wholesale. This reading of *Dream Machine*, co-written by an Indian author and analysed through the framework of an Indian scholar, examines how Indian narrative thought offers alternative epistemologies for understanding what it means to think, feel, and become alongside artificial beings. The graphic novel shows how this plurality is not just thematically present but also structurally integrated in its hybrid authorship, where the narrative is engineered with both human intention and machine interference, making the text itself a posthuman subject.

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