FROM HUMAN TO POSTHUMAN: READING *ASTRAL SURGE* THROUGH A TRANSHUMANIST LENS

_____

Dr. W. Abraham Selvakumar[1],
Assistant Professor of English
Bishop Heber College (Autonomous), Trichy -17, Tamil Nadu, India.
Ms. S. Nancy[2], Assistant Professor of English
Bishop Heber College (Autonomous), Trichy -17, Tamil Nadu, India.

_____

Abstract

This paper explores the interrelationship between science fiction and transhumanist thought through the lens of Nirmal Ranganathan's novel *Astral Surge*. Science fiction as a genre has historically examined human responses to technological and scientific developments, from ancient myths to modern speculative narratives. This study contextualizes *Astral Surge* within this tradition, focusing on its portrayal of genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, and the philosophical underpinnings of transhumanism. Central to this analysis are the contrasting characters Catherine Osborne and Ron Osborne, who embody opposing trajectories of human enhancement—the ethical and the destructive. The paper draws on key theorists, including Julian Huxley, Nick Bostrom, and Ray Kurzweil, to evaluate how the novel dramatises the hopes and fears surrounding human augmentation. It argues that *Astral Surge* demonstrates both the promises and perils of technological evolution, ultimately situating itself within ongoing debates about posthuman identity, ethics, and the future of humanity. The study concludes by suggesting that while transhumanism envisions liberation from biological limitations, it also risks deepening social inequalities and redefining what it means to be human.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, astral surge, cyborg, posthumanism, science fiction, transhumanism.

Literature and science have long shared a reciprocal relationship, with each shaping human imagination and inquiry. Science fiction, in particular, represents a genre where scientific speculation and creative imagination intersect. Writers from antiquity, such as Lucian of Samosata, to modern figures like H.G. Wells and Isaac Asimov, have explored themes of space travel, time travel, alien encounters, and artificial intelligence. This background situates science fiction as a crucial space for examining human responses to technological process.

An International Conference: Digital Humanities: Narratives, Literature and Cultural Transformations RJOE Journal, ISSN:2456-2696; Impact Factor: 8.373(SJIF)

58

Nirmal Ranganathan's novel *Astral Surge* continues this trajectory by dramatising the ethical dilemmas of genetic engineering and transhumanism. Through the characters of Catherine Osborne, a psychologist who represents balance and ethical responsibility, and Ron Osborne, a scientist whose ambition leads to destructive consequences, the novel presents a dual perspective on the promises and perils of technological enhancement. This article critically examines *Astral Surge* as a text that reflects contemporary transhumanist debates, engaging with thinkers such as Julian Huxley, Nick Bostrom, and Ray Kurzweil. It argues that the novel functions not merely as a work of speculative fiction but also as a philosophical commentary on the future of human identity.

The term 'transhumanism,' first popularised by Julian Huxley in 1957, refers to the idea of enhancing human life through technological and biological means. Huxley envisioned a future in which humanity could overcome limitations of disease, ageing, and intellectual capacity. "The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself… not just sporadically, an individual here in one way, an individual there in another way, but in its entirety, as humanity." (71)

Later thinkers such as Nick Bostrom and Ray Kurzweil expanded this discourse, linking it to the 'posthuman' condition in which humans transcend biological boundaries. Bostrom describes the posthuman as a being whose capacities radically exceed those of present-day humans. "The human species in its current form does not represent the end of our development but rather a comparatively early phase" (01). Kurzweil, meanwhile, predicts the coming 'singularity,' a merger of human intelligence and artificial intelligence that would redefine consciousness itself.

Science fiction has long been a medium to explore these themes. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* anticipated the dangers of scientific overreach, while H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* explored evolutionary possibilities. In the twentieth century, Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke examined artificial intelligence and cosmic futures. Indian and Western traditions alike have thus provided fertile ground for speculation about humanity's technological trajectory. Within this framework, *Astral Surge* can be understood as part of a global literary engagement with transhumanist ideals.

In *Astral Surge*, the siblings Ron and Catherine Osborne embody two divergent paths of human enhancement. Ron, a scientist working at the Institute of Medical Sciences and Research, is driven by ambition and the desire to accelerate evolution through genetic engineering. "We will become vastly smarter as we merge with our technology" (24). His experiments represent the optimism of transhumanist thought the belief that human beings can deliberately guide their own

An International Conference: Digital Humanities: Narratives, Literature and Cultural Transformations RJOE Journal, ISSN:2456-2696; Impact Factor: 8.373(SJIF)

59

evolution to transcend natural limitations. "You seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once did; and I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been (14). Catherine, on the other hand, represents the ethical and spiritual dimensions of human development. Her resistance to Ron's experiments underscores the dangers of technological ambition divorced from moral responsibility.

The novel addresses contemporary debates about cyborgs and technological implants. Ron's vision aligns with the real-world experiments of individuals such as Neil Harbison, the colorblind artist who became the first officially recognised cyborg. Through Catherine, however, the narrative emphasises that such advancements may come with risks of alienation, inequality, and moral compromise. The novel dramatises the tension between the utopian promise of enhancement, longer life, sharper intellects, and superior physical capabilities and the dystopian dangers of misuse, social stratification and loss of human essence.

By employing transhumanist discourse as a narrative framework, *Astral Surge* functions as a cautionary tale as much as an exploration of possibility. It echoes Bostrom's observation that transhumanism is an early phase of human development but warns against uncritical acceptance of technology as the solution to all human limitations.

Conclusion

The accelerating pace of technological innovation challenges humanity to reconsider its identity and future. *Astral Surge* captures this tension by presenting both the allure and danger of transhumanist visions. Ron Osborne's pursuit of enhancement highlights the potential for technology to redefine humanity, while Catherine Osborne's ethical stance reminds readers of the need for balance. The novel situates itself within a long literary tradition that uses speculative fiction to interrogate the impact of science on society.

This study concludes that *Astral Surge* dramatizes the dual nature of transhumanism: This study concludes that *Astral Surge* dramatizes the dual nature of transhumanism: as a pathway to liberation from biological limitations and as a potential source of inequality and ethical peril. By situating transhumanist thought within fiction, the novel not only contributes to literary discourse but also participates in larger philosophical debates about the posthuman condition. The future of humanity, as the novel suggests, will depend not only on technological progress but also on our ability to align that progress with ethical and cultural responsibility.

An International Conference: Digital Humanities: Narratives, Literature and Cultural Transformations RJOE Journal, ISSN:2456-2696; Impact Factor: 8.373(SJIF)

60

References

Asimov, Isaac. *Asimov on Science Fiction*. Doubleday, 1981.

Bostrom, Nick. "A History of Transhumanist Thought." *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2005.

Huxley, Julian. *New Bottles for New Wine*. Chatto & Windus, 1957.

Kurzweil, Ray. *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. Viking, 2005.

Ranganathan, Nirmal. *Astral Surge*. [Publication details if available].

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor & Jones, 1818.

Wells, H. G. *The Time Machine*. William Heinemann, 1895.

An International Conference: Digital Humanities: Narratives, Literature and Cultural Transformations RJOE Journal, ISSN:2456-2696; Impact Factor: 8.373(SJIF)

61