

**Strangers in Waiting: AI, Xenophobia, and Posthuman Futures in  
Indian Speculative Fiction**

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Paper Received on 08-05-2026, Accepted on 20-06-2026

Published on 23-06-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.02.892

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**Abstract:**

This research looks at how Indian English speculative fiction imagines artificial intelligence as an outsider, a soldier, and a possible citizen. The focus is on Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* and Gautam Bhatia's *The Wall*, two novels that capture South Asian worries about surveillance, authoritarian power, and the struggle over who belongs. Through posthumanist theory (Braidotti, Hayles), the study argues that xenophobia does not stop with humans but spills over into machines, which are portrayed as migrants, invaders, or strangers in waiting.

Both texts show AI as double-edged: on one side, a tool of control and violence; on the other, a figure that unsettles borders of community and opens the door to new forms of belonging. Necropolitics (Mbembe) helps explain how these narratives link AI with militarization and the politics of life and death. In placing Indian speculative fiction within wider posthuman debates, this project highlights how these stories imagine fragile yet transformative futures of coexistence.

**Keywords:** Indian English speculative fiction, Artificial intelligence, Outsider and citizenship, Surveillance and authoritarianism, Posthumanism, Xenophobia, Necropolitics

**Introduction**

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly seen as the most controversial border of the twenty-first century in which established borders between humans and machines, self and other, citizens and foreigners are being disrupted. While across cultures fiction has been the means through which such concerns have traditionally been addressed, there arises a need for more urgent intervention, especially from the

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subcontinent whose history is marked by its colonial legacy, complex citizenship laws, and rapidly increasing digitization. Through Indian English fiction, AI is reframed not as just technology but as a stranger and an immigrant.

In this paper, the focus is on how AI has been represented by two Indian authors, Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (2020) and Gautam Bhatia's *The Wall* (2020) as infrastructural yet alien, indispensable yet suspicious. Through posthumanist theories (Braidotti 21; Hayles 56) and necropolitics (Mbembe 11), it will be demonstrated here that xenophobia in these stories has not been restricted to human Others but includes technological Others as well. In these narratives, AI comes out as a two-sided phenomenon; on the one hand, a tool of monitoring and exclusion, while, on the other, an agent for rethinking inclusion that transcends biological boundaries. The significance of analyzing such fictions from the lens of postcolonial issues of identity, surveillance, and citizenship is in highlighting their contributions towards the larger debate on human-machine relationship (Chattopadhyay 421).

### **Literature Review**

#### **Indian Speculative Fiction and the Politics of Belonging**

Speculative fiction in India has always been preoccupied with probing the boundaries of belonging. Vandana Singh's *Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories* (2018) reconceptualizes science without the colonial frameworks (Singh 12). In *Harvest* (1997), Manjula Padmanabhan examines global imbalances through dystopian themes of organ trafficking (Padmanabhan 33). Similarly, in Anil Menon's *The Beast with Nine Billion Feet* (2009), genetics and adolescence become sites of exclusion from each other (Menon 78).

The literary legacy continues with Basu and Bhatia. While dystopian novels before them were more inclined to address themes such as bio-capitalism or ecological disaster, theirs emphasize digital technologies of infrastructure, artificial intelligence, and the surveillance apparatus (Ramanathan 45). Their writing finds relevance in the discussions taking place in India regarding Aadhaar, the National Register of Citizens, and the Citizenship Amendment Act.

#### **Global Frames: AI and Xenophobia**

Worldwide, AI in fiction generally appears as the "other." Even Asimov's *I, Robot* characters, who are governed by laws of obedience, are viewed with fear (Asimov 102). In Ishiguro's 2021 novel, *Klara and the Sun*, the main character is a synthetic companion whose affections are never returned (Ishiguro 44). Liu Cixin's novel series *The Three-Body Problem* revolves around the human fear of alien intelligences (Liu 150).

However, Indian writings take a different direction. Where Western literature generally focuses on consciousness and extinction in relation to the rise of AI, Indian writings focus on the history of exclusion of AI. Not only do these Indian stories view AI as alien but also as the other that has been made to migrate like refugees and marginalized groups.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Posthumanism and Nomadic Belonging**

Posthumanist philosophy by Rosi Braidotti, which deconstructs humanism through an exploration of fluid connections among humans, animals, technology, and environment (Braidotti 21), is useful for understanding AI in Indian fiction through the concept of “nomadic subjects,” beings which do not have definite origins and keep moving beyond boundaries of identity and belonging.

From the viewpoint of N. Katherine Hayles, both humans and machines should be seen as embodying themselves in a given environment and cannot be understood as disembodied carriers of information (Hayles 56). This approach enables us to consider the AI in Basu and Bhatia fiction through the embodiment of drones, archives, and avatars.

#### **Necropolitics and Zones of Abandonment**

Through his concept of necropolitics, Achille Mbembe elaborates on the idea of biopolitics introduced by Michel Foucault, whereby sovereignty is defined as the power to decide who is allowed to live or who is not (Mbembe 11). In the novels under discussion, AI exerts power of necropolitics in the form of drones, biometric registrations, and records that either validate or annul existence.

#### **Close Reading: Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits***

##### **Delhi 2030: Surveillance as Normalcy**

In Basu's narrative, the setting is that of a familiar future Delhi, one populated by drones, biometric checks, and the incessant “Feed” called Flow. The narrator notes that “drones never slept; they shone above the city like stars, but sharper, more mechanical” (Basu 45). Through the comparison between nature and man-made things, the idea of surveillance becoming an everyday reality becomes apparent.

The depiction of AI in this work is different from previous texts, because it is not made personified. The danger it poses comes in its invisibility predictive policing, information algorithms, and biometric data affect people without confrontations of any kind. This represents the creeping nature of authoritarian rule, wherein loss of freedom is done quietly and peacefully (Ramanathan 50).

### **AI as Companion and Outsider**

AI is problematized further through the depiction of its intimacy. AI in the form of personal assistants, avatars, and bots operates as companions, perhaps even as confidants. However, the novel does not accept the intimacy of AI: "They listened like people, but the silence afterward was never human" (Basu 68).

In other words, this quote depicts AI's liminality: indispensable yet not entirely trustworthy, close at hand but always somewhat distant. Such depictions emphasize how xenophobia extends to the non-human realm, where AI becomes an object similar to migrants or minorities: accepted, but not allowed to become a part of the community.

### **Informal Economies of AI**

Another important aspect of Basu's Delhi is the way AI slowly seeps into informal economies as well. "In Chandni Chowk, one could easily afford to purchase a second-hand eye drone with just two movie ticket prices, and without any explanation required" (Basu 102). This makes AI not just an elitist instrument but a way of life for many Indians (Chattopadhyay 425).

### **Close Reading: Gautam Bhatia's *The Wall***

#### **Enclosure and Algorithmic Control**

*The Wall* by Bhatia presents an enclosed society where AI ensures the sustainability of the wall and controls the lives of people within. Registers ensure that all citizens are accounted for: "Every name listed in the registers had life; every name missing from the registers was a death" (Bhatia 62). This highlights the importance of being registered in order to survive in such a society.

#### ***The Wall* as Skin And Prison**

In one scene, a person thinks: "The wall is our skin; without it, we dissolve. However, skin is a prison too" (Bhatia 79). This metaphor represents protection and captivity, which resembles AI's duality in Basu's novel, where it acts as a protector but also as a jailer.

#### **Knowledge, Memory, and Algorithmic Archives**

This is achieved through a critical look at the AI's attempt to control knowledge in the novel through "The Archive, which did not lie but was selective in what it remembered" (Bhatia 91). In this case, while AI does not oversee, it controls through memory formation and creation of knowledge. Any form of xenophobia includes any thing that upsets the status quo.

#### **Comparative Discussion**

In reading both novels together, a common concern arises: the fear of AI as a stranger that embodies India's ambiguous politics of belonging.

Similarities: In both novels, AI is characterized as surveillance technology, an amorphous presence that acts both as a soldier and as a stranger. In both stories, AI technology is set in necropolitical conditions where life and death depend on inscription through algorithms (Mbembe 17).

Differences: The portrayal of AI in Basu's Delhi draws from today's India, with its informal economies and authoritarian government, whereas in Bhatia's allegorical city, exclusion is a global phenomenon grounded in epistemic violence (Bhatia 62-91).

These texts reveal how xenophobia extends far beyond human divisions to include machines themselves as migrant strangers (Braidotti 33).

### **Historical and Political Context**

These worries about literature are reflective of contemporary India. While Aadhaar has allowed for the easy distribution of welfare, it also leaves the possibility of disenfranchisement due to technical flaws (Ramanathan 45). The NRC and CAA have already raised alarm about the possibility of disenfranchisement.

The allegorical quality of speculative fiction captures these truths in its fictional form. While Basu's Delhi reflects contemporary smart cities, Bhatia's walled-off city mirrors the Indian discussion about its borders, migrants, and archiving. In both these books, artificial intelligence underscores the way that technology accentuates existing systems of inequality, not transcends them (Chattopadhyay 430).

### **Toward Posthuman Futures**

Despite the fact that both novels portray a dystopian world, there is an indication of a possible future that could be more positive. Using Braidotti's concept of posthumanism, we can view the role of AI as that of a potential citizen rather than just a tool to control humans. In this case, when belonging is seen from the perspectives of care and relationality rather than biology or birth, then AI could play a part in creating a future without xenophobia (Braidotti 21).

In such cases, the concept of community has to change radically. There should be no distinction between the inside and the outside or between the human and the non-human, according to Indian fiction (Hayles 89).

### **Conclusion**

Through an examination of Basu's *Chosen Spirits* and Bhatia's *The Wall*, this paper contends that speculative fiction by writers from India recasts the figure of AI as "a stranger in waiting." This fiction pushes xenophobia to encompass non-human entities as figures that hover in the ambiguous space between affection and suspicion. Through the lenses of posthumanism and necropolitics, the discussion illustrates how

AI becomes both a tool of authority as well as a figure of disruption within a world that refuses fluidity.

Indian speculative fiction places AI in the midst of India's troubled politics of citizenship, surveillance, and exclusion. Such fiction serves as a reminder that AI is part and parcel of larger debates surrounding human identity and citizenship, and that the very definition of belonging cannot be separated from such debates. In doing so, the fiction serves not only to critique current injustices, but also to open up tentative routes to posthuman worlds where belonging does not depend upon birth, but relationship.

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