

Capital, Code, and Care: Rethinking Labour and Ethics in Tanuj Solanki's *The Machine Is Learning*

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Abstract:

This paper offers a critical reading of Tanuj Solanki's 2020 novel, *The Machine Is Learning*, examining how contemporary fiction registers the shifts from industrial to cognitive capitalism. Diverging from Western science-fictional tropes of rogue superintelligences and apocalyptic cybernetic revolts, Solanki sites the machinery of automation within the climate-controlled glass facades of corporate India. Through the professional crisis of Saransh—a management consultant tasked with training an automated life underwriting system—the novel exposes how algorithmic governance extracts human tacit knowledge to engineer economic redundancy. Bringing together theories of cognitive capitalism, posthumanism, and affective precarity, this study argues that the primary threat of artificial intelligence is not sentient rebellion, but the rationalized, quiet reduction of human beings to expendable data streams.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Posthumanism, Cognitive Capitalism, Labour Displacement, Indian Corporate Realism, Affective Precarity

I. Introduction: Beyond the Neon and the Apocalypse

The twenty-first-century imaginative landscape has long been haunted by visions of automated governance and digital surveillance. From the totalitarian state apparatuses of Orwell's *1984* to the neon-drenched, high-tech dystopias of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, Western speculative traditions have consistently framed artificial intelligence through the lens of the cataclysmic or the anthropomorphic. In these narratives, the machine poses an existential threat to biological sovereignty; whether through sentient rebellion or integration into a vast digital matrix, the artificial entity challenges the boundaries of human consciousness.

Yet, as recent postcolonial critiques of technology demonstrate, the subcontinental literary response to automation occupies an entirely different register. Writers within the global South—and particularly within the hyper-digitized urban

spaces of contemporary India—rarely look toward cosmic machine revolts. Their anxieties are more immediate, grounded in the realities of structural inequality, precarious employment, and institutional hierarchies. The fear is not that a machine will wake up and conquer humanity, but that it will function precisely as designed by corporate boardrooms: maximizing capital extraction while rendering human labour cleanly, efficiently obsolete.

Tanuj Solanki's *The Machine Is Learning* (2020) stands as a vital benchmark in this emerging corpus of Indian corporate realism. Eschewing the cinematic pyrotechnics of cybernetic futurism, Solanki sets his narrative within the sterile, climate-controlled offices of Mumbai and Bengaluru. The plot follows Saransh, an ambitious management consultant deployed to 'Universal Life', a major insurance firm. His mandate is deceptively straightforward: to capture the cumulative domain expertise of veteran human underwriters and translate it into a proprietary machine learning algorithm capable of automating risk assessment, policy approval, and claims settlement.

As Saransh extracts decades of institutional knowledge, he confronts the unspoken terminal objective of his assignment: the systematic redundancy of the very workers training the software. Through Saransh's moral and professional unraveling, Solanki transforms abstract economic shifts—neural networks, data ingestion, and predictive modeling—into a deeply human drama of class complicity and existential alienation.

II. From the Factory Floor to the General Intellect: Cognitive Capitalism

To understand the socio-economic critique underwriting Solanki's novel, one must trace the historical mutation from industrial capitalism to what cultural theorists designate as "cognitive" or "informational" capitalism. In classical industrial formations, as Marx meticulously theorized, alienation was tethered to the mechanization of physical labour. The factory worker was severed from the product of their hands, reduced to an appendage of machinery. In the contemporary service sector, however, capital has penetrated the sanctuary of human cognition, emotional intelligence, and expert judgment.

Solanki's novel captures this shift within the white-collar corridors of metropolitan India. The life insurance underwriters at Universal Life are not factory hands on an assembly line; they are educated, middle-class professionals whose expertise is forged through years of intuitive practice, contextual evaluation, and nuanced decision-making. Under the imperatives of cognitive capitalism, this intellectual capital is systematically externalized, codified, and expropriated.

The mechanism of this extraction is precisely what Saransh performs daily. The AI platform arrives not as an independent intelligence, but as an empty

mathematical vessel hungering for human data. Saransh interviews senior staff, catalogs their tacit heuristics, and feeds historical applications into the neural network—a literal enactment of the Marxist expropriation of the "general intellect."

The profound irony woven into Solanki's narrative structure is the active complicity of the workforce. The underwriters take professional pride in their accuracy, unaware that their meticulous explanations are providing the high-resolution training data required to engineer their own economic dismissal. This dynamic echoes Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee's observations in *The Second Machine Age* regarding the shift from automating muscle to automating mind. Yet, while Silicon Valley optimists celebrate this transition as liberation from mundane toil, Solanki reveals its devastating material consequences within a developing economy where employment is the foundational pillar of social mobility and middle-class stability.

III. Technocratic Neutrality and Capitalist Realism

At the heart of the novel is Saransh, an archetype of the contemporary Indian managerial elite. Articulate, highly educated, and fluent in the sanitized vocabulary of corporate optimization, Saransh initially views his work through the lens of detached technological progress. His psychological posture mirrors Mark Fisher's concept of "capitalist realism"—the pervasive ideological conditioning that presents late capitalism as an immutable reality, rendering alternative futures unthinkable.

However, as the implementation deepens, Saransh's corporate insulation fractures. Solanki orchestrates this moral awakening through human encounters that disrupt the smooth flow of aggregated data. When Saransh is forced to look past the spreadsheets and confront the individual vulnerabilities of the senior underwriters, the euphemistic corporate vocabulary—phrases like "resource optimization," "headcount rationalization," and "digital transformation"—sheds its protective gloss. He realizes that his technical success is directly proportional to human displacement.

This dynamic exposes the chilling reality of algorithmic governmentality. Saransh possesses immense technical agency—the power to tweak parameters, adjust weights, and refine processing speeds—yet he possesses zero moral agency. The corporate apparatus at Universal Life operates on an unyielding, metrics-driven logic that dismisses ethical hesitation as sentimental inefficiency. Solanki thus illuminates the fragmented psyche of the globalized tech-gentry: individuals who enjoy material privilege precisely because they are willing to serve as the administrative executioners of global capital.

IV. The Ontology of Data: Posthumanism and the Flattened Subject

Beyond its socio-economic critique, *The Machine Is Learning* engages in a profound philosophical inquiry into the redefinition of the human subject under big data regimes. Drawing on N. Katherine Hayles's formulation of the posthuman—

wherein informational patterns are privileged over material embodiment—Solanki demonstrates how datafication operates as an operational strategy of corporate control.

Within Saransh's algorithm, the human subject undergoes a dual reduction:

1. The Worker as Metric: Employees are broken down into discrete bundles of processing speeds, accuracy rates, and operational costs.
2. The Client as Risk Profile: Insurance applicants are stripped of their lived socio-economic realities and reduced to static biometric vectors and mortality probabilities.

This ontological flattening evacuates care and responsibility from institutional interaction. Traditional underwriting allowed for a margin of human intuition—a reviewer could weigh regional nuances, familial distress, or complex economic histories. The AI platform, by contrast, substitutes statistical correlation for moral comprehension, neatly severing power from accountability.

Solanki's titular paradox—The Machine Is Learning—poses a sharp philosophical question. The machine learns to mimic the outputs of human cognition, but it cannot inherit the ethical hesitation, social consciousness, or moral grief that anchors genuine judgment. By prioritizing predictive efficiency over human complexity, the corporate apparatus ensures that the worker is forced to behave like a machine long before the software ever replaces them.

V. The Localized Geopolitics of Disruption

One of Solanki's most significant contributions is his insistence on grounding technological disruption within the specific geopolitical and cultural topography of contemporary India. Western science fiction frequently imagines AI through universalized, metaphysical anxieties of state surveillance or existential annihilation. In Solanki's Mumbai and Bengaluru, however, automation cuts ruthlessly across pre-existing class strata, linguistic hierarchies, and postcolonial inequalities.

The spoils of the algorithmic transition—massive capital gains, soaring valuations, and executive bonuses—accrue exclusively to a tiny, Westernized, English-fluent elite. Conversely, the costs—structural unemployment, professional degradation, and social precarity—fall squarely upon regional, lower-middle-class professionals who lack the safety nets or linguistic capital required to pivot easily in a winner-take-all digital economy. By unmasking these neo-colonial dimensions of global tech transfer, Solanki highlights the profound structural mismatch of importing Silicon Valley automation frameworks into a developing nation where formal social security is virtually non-existent.

VI. Affective Precarity and the Poetics of the Mundane

Finally, Solanki's novel registers the subtle emotional corrosion of life under late capitalism, aligning closely with Franco "Bifo" Berardi's diagnosis of semicapitalism. In this regime, capital no longer merely extracts physical output; it

colonizes human attention, emotional resilience, and cognitive bandwidth. Anxiety ceases to be an acute psychological exception and hardens into the baseline emotional structure of daily existence.

The aesthetic brilliance of *The Machine Is Learning* lies in its rigorous adherence to stylistic realism—what might be termed the "poetics of the corporate mundane." Eschewing melodrama, Solanki adopts a clinical, measured prose style that mirrors the flat language of management reports and slide decks. The settings—climate-controlled boardrooms, glass-fronted offices, and sterile business hotels—function as Marc Augé's "non-places," spaces entirely stripped of historical depth or organic community. Within these sealed environments, Saransh's internal guilt and alienation contrast sharply with the external corporate calm, mapping the quiet psychological erosion of life governed by metrics.

VII. Conclusion

Tanuj Solanki's *The Machine Is Learning* reclaims literature's vital function as a space for moral critique and ethical resistance against the totalizing myths of technological determinism. By stripping away the celebratory rhetoric of digital transformation, Solanki exposes the core mechanisms of cognitive capitalism: the expropriation of collective knowledge, the datafication of the human subject, and the systemic rationalization of labour displacement. Ultimately, the novel serves as an urgent reminder that as we architect the tools of tomorrow, we must insist that technology remain fiercely subordinated to human dignity, social equity, and collective well-being.

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