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Negotiating the Posthuman Future: Technology, Ethics, Politics, and Identity in Anil Menon's *The Beast with Nine Billion Feet*

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ABSTRACT :

Anil Menon's *The Beast with Nine Billion Feet* (2009) imagines a technologically saturated India in 2040 in which genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, immersive simulation, biometric surveillance, and transnational biotechnology have become ordinary features of life. Yet the novel does not treat technological advancement as either a simple utopia or a dystopian catastrophe. Instead, it examines the ethical, political, social, and affective consequences of technological power through the intertwined experiences of Tara and Aditya, the children of geneticist-turned-politician Sivan-bhau. This article argues that Menon's speculative fiction constructs a critical posthumanism in which the central question is not whether humans should use advanced technology, but how technological capacity can be governed without reducing life to property, data, or a manipulable commodity. The novel's treatment of synthetic life and the Dharma Rules foregrounds the need for ethical limits; its account of Free Life and GURT controlled seeds links biotechnology to questions of political power, corporate ownership, and popular sovereignty; and its representation of Tara's racialized self-consciousness, Adi's dyslexia, and the surveillance of everyday life demonstrates that technological modernity does not erase older forms of exclusion. Through the symbolic figure of the nine-billion-footed Beast, Menon finally connects population, collective humanity, ecological vulnerability, and technological responsibility. The novel therefore presents the future as an ethical problem: progress becomes meaningful only when scientific intelligence is accompanied by social responsibility, plurality, and respect for embodied life.

Keywords: Anil Menon; *The Beast with Nine Billion Feet*; Indian science fiction; posthumanism; biotechnology; synthetic life; surveillance; environmental ethics; identity; politics

Introduction

Anil Menon's speculative future is significant because it is not constructed as an abstract technological elsewhere. The narrative remains emphatically located in Pune. The city is renamed through several historical and imaginative identities—Pune, Poona, Punya-nagiri, Punaka, and the City of Virtuous Deeds while Aditya moves through streets crowded with vehicles, people, digital devices, and technologically enhanced forms of urban life (Menon 14). This localization prevents the novel from reproducing a generic Western science-fiction future. The future is Indian in its food, languages, family structures, public spaces, social hierarchies, and cultural references, even as its technologies are global and transnational.

The opening establishes this double movement between technological futurity and familiar social life. Tara is introduced as a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl in Pune, and the year is explicitly identified as 2040. Her environment is technologically advanced, yet her emotional problems are recognizably adolescent: school disappointment, family tension, insecurity about appearance, and anxiety about her absent father (Menon 1). At home, an artificial intelligence called the House performs functions ranging from climate control and solar-power regulation to security and communication, making technological mediation part of domestic routine rather than an extraordinary event which could be understood through

“He found the metal clasps that held climate-control unit to the container, unsnapped them and set aside the unit. He lifted the crate.” (TBNBF,47).

Aditya's world is similarly hybrid. He works at BodZ, uses a visor containing sophisticated sensors, and enters Illusion pods that can make his body experience simulated landscapes; nevertheless, his workplace anxiety, insecure employment, and attraction to friendship and play remain deeply human where Menon projects it as “Adi stared at the half page blur of tabular rows and columns for eight long minutes before he gave up pretending to check it for errors. He registered the résumé with various employment boards.” (TBNBF 48).

This article reads Menon's novel as a sustained inquiry into the ethics of technological power. Rather than treating the text merely as a prediction of future gadgets, the discussion focuses on four interconnected questions: how technology changes the meaning of life; how biotechnology becomes entangled with political and corporate power; how technological modernity interacts with older structures of identity and exclusion; and how the novel imagines ethical responsibility in a world where human beings possess unprecedented powers of intervention. The article also considers the novel's title as a central symbolic device. *The Beast with nine billion feet* is simultaneously a dream-image, a representation of humanity as a mass body, and a warning about the consequences of collective existence.

The study uses close textual analysis and follows MLA documentation. Because the attached edition is the primary source supplied for this study, citations refer directly to Anil Menon's novel, with page numbers corresponding to the 2009 Young Zubaan edition. The article deliberately distinguishes textual interpretation from claims that would require external historical or scientific verification. Its central contention is that Menon's future is posthuman not because humans disappear, but because the boundaries among human, machine, animal, data, and environment become increasingly unstable. The novel responds to that instability by placing ethical choice above technological mastery.

1. The Future as an Indian Technological Everyday

Menon's speculative future is significant because it is not constructed as an abstract technological elsewhere. The narrative remains emphatically located in Pune. The city is renamed through several historical and imaginative identities, while Aditya moves through streets crowded with vehicles, people, digital devices, and technologically enhanced forms of urban life (Menon 14). This localization prevents the novel from reproducing a generic Western science-fiction future. The future is Indian in its food, languages, family structures, public spaces, social hierarchies, and cultural references, even as its technologies are global and transnational.

The novel's technological objects are integrated into mundane routines. Adi's visor includes a GPS-based proximity sensor and text-recognition software; BodZ contains a vast synthetic garden, cafés, entertainment facilities, exercise spaces, and Illusion pods; and the House in the Shangri-la residence manages multiple domestic systems (Menon 14). These details produce a world in which technological mediation is normalized. Menon therefore avoids the conventional science-fiction spectacle in which technology appears only at moments of crisis. Instead, technology becomes infrastructure. Its power lies precisely in its ordinariness.

At the same time, the novel repeatedly shows that infrastructure is never neutral. The House can communicate and protect, but it can also lock doors and respond to external commands. During the investigation surrounding the genetically engineered parrot, Adi discovers that his own house can be used to restrict his movement: the automated system locks the terrace door after receiving an order where Menon depicts as "Tara glanced at her aunt's room. It was dark, but upstairs, the light was on Adi's room. Ria clambered down to let Tara out." (TBNBF 41).

The domestic space thus becomes a technological extension of authority. Similarly, surveillance appears in ordinary devices. Tara knows that security systems may employ face recognition, while Adi is later tracked through the GPS of his cell phone. Menon's future is therefore technologically convenient but also increasingly legible to institutions.

This tension between convenience and control is one of the novel's defining characteristics. The Illusion pod offers Adi extraordinary freedom: it enables him to experience places that are physically distant and to transform simulated movement into bodily experience (Menon 18). Yet the same world contains employers, security systems, cameras, and political authorities capable of monitoring movement. Technology expands human agency while simultaneously creating new forms of dependence. Menon's critical question is consequently not whether technology is good or bad. The more difficult question is who controls it, who benefits from it, and what happens when systems designed for convenience become instruments of power.

2. Synthetic Life and the Ethics of Genetic Design

The novel's most sustained ethical inquiry concerns synthetic life. Aditya participates in a biotechnology project involving genetically engineered sharks. The project seeks to simplify the shark's immune system while preserving its unusual resistance to disease, and it represents Adi's emergence as a serious genetic designer (Menon 20). The sharks are not merely scientific objects. They embody the novel's question of whether the ability to create life also creates a responsibility toward that life.

The Dharma Rules provide the first formal response to this problem. According to the narrative, synthetic life must be sterile, permanently trackable through GPS, and terminated after use (Menon 21). The rules appear rational because they are intended to prevent uncontrolled reproduction and ecological escape. Yet their logic also exposes a troubling contradiction: the engineered organism is created as a temporary instrument and therefore receives a predetermined life-span. Scientific control extends to the entire biological existence of the creature. Menon thus presents genetic engineering as an ethical practice that cannot be separated from questions of ownership, autonomy, and mortality.

The genetically engineered parrot intensifies this problem. Adi encounters the bird in a truck transporting animals and recognizes it as a designed organism. The parrot's unusual coloration and ability to speak make it both fascinating and disturbing.

Later, Adi and Tara debate whether the bird's condition should be understood in moral terms. Adi initially resists the vocabulary of good and evil, arguing that the problem is one of design and trade-offs rather than moral intention. Tara, however, refuses to accept an ethical framework in which suffering can be reduced to a technical imperfection. Their disagreement places two models of scientific ethics against one another: technical rationality and moral responsibility.

Menon does not allow either position to remain simple. Adi's technical expertise enables him to understand the bird's genetic construction, but his emotional response gradually becomes stronger than his abstract reasoning. The parrot becomes a living individual rather than an experimental product. His attempt to protect it places him in conflict with the law and with his father's public principles. The police explain that genetically engineered lifeforms are banned and that the parrot has become a political liability because Sivan-bhau, the founder of Free Life and opponent of reducing life to entertainment, is himself associated with the creature's possession (Menon 40). The irony is central: a political movement founded to challenge the commodification of life becomes vulnerable because a single engineered animal exposes the contradictions between principle, law, and affection.

The novel's treatment of Sivan's research on ageing develops the same ethical question at a larger scale. Vispala accuses Sivan of discovering a method of controlling ageing and destroying the records. Sivan denies that he successfully defeated mortality, arguing instead that mortality is part of human existence and that extending life cannot automatically produce a better life (Menon 217). His position turns the debate away from technological capability and toward the meaning of finitude. The novel therefore resists the fantasy that every biological limit is simply a technical problem waiting to be solved.

Sivan's position is reinforced by the Dharma Protocols, which require him not to conduct experiments on others that he would not except for himself (Menon 218). The principle is simple but radical: the scientist must remain inside the ethical consequences of his own inventions. Menon thereby imagines scientific responsibility as a form of self-limitation. Knowledge is not condemned; unrestrained experimentation is. The novel's ethical framework consequently resembles a principle of reciprocity: technological power becomes legitimate only when the creator accepts responsibility for the beings affected by it.

3. Biotechnology, Corporate Power, and Political Sovereignty

The politics of *The Beast with Nine Billion Feet* emerge most clearly through the conflict surrounding Free Life. The movement is associated with Sivan-bhau's attempt to develop alternatives to GURT-controlled seeds. The narrative presents this intervention as part of an open-source genetics movement: Sivan distributes knowledge and seeds rather than allowing genetic technology to remain controlled by powerful corporations (Menon 69). Biotechnology consequently becomes a question of political economy. The ownership of genetic knowledge determines who controls agriculture, livelihood, and the future of food.

DSP Pranay's account of Sivan's political rise makes the stakes explicit. Sivan becomes a major political force because his power comes from ordinary people, while international interests oppose his attempt to change the rules of biotechnology. Pranay explains that biotechnology is a global enterprise and that governments are under pressure from powerful international actors (Menon 70). The novel thus rejects the idea that scientific research occurs in a politically neutral space. Genetic knowledge is connected to capital, national interest, corporate power, and popular sovereignty.

The episode involving the farmers and Mother Earth is particularly revealing. A protest against corporate control of agriculture is violently disrupted through LaughMakers, technologies capable of altering bodies and emotional states. The farmers are rendered physically and socially helpless, and even the organization of the protest is complicated by sub-caste divisions (Menon 68). Menon therefore connects two kinds of power: technological coercion and inherited social fragmentation. The problem is not simply that corporations possess powerful technologies; it is that existing social divisions can make collective resistance easier to manipulate.

The novel also exposes the commodification of political participation. Adi earns money by recruiting people to attend rallies, morchas, and sit-ins, where they are paid to perform whatever political slogans, they are instructed to perform (Menon 159). Politics becomes a service industry. The crowd itself is a commodity, and participation can be purchased. Vispala's intervention telling Adi that he should work only for causes he genuinely supports—marks an important moment in his ethical development (Menon 160). Menon contrasts manufactured political participation with responsible political agency.

At BodZ, a different version of commodification appears in the workplace. When the franchise is sold to Sunny-bhai, Adi learns that non-skilled workers are vulnerable to layoffs, while technological expertise becomes a means of securing employment (Menon 15). Adi initially dismisses his own labour as insignificant because his real attachment is to Illusion technology. Yet the threat of unemployment forces him to confront the economic structures underlying the technological world he enjoys. Menon's future therefore does not abolish labour exploitation; it reorganizes it around new technological hierarchies.

4. Surveillance, Data, and the Loss of Private Space

Surveillance is woven into the novel's everyday architecture. The House monitors and controls domestic systems; security cameras observe movement; face-recognition technologies protect privileged spaces; GPS devices track engineered organisms and human users; and digital communication creates an environment in which location and identity can be continuously recorded. The effect is not a single authoritarian state but a network of overlapping technological authorities.

One of the most significant examples occurs when Vispala locates Adi through his cell's GPS after failing to contact him. The event is presented casually, almost humorously, but its implications are serious: physical absence no longer guarantees privacy (Menon 159). Later, Tara plans an infiltration of the Bastille while anticipating face-recognition technology and motion sensors (Menon 104–05). Security has become so technologically sophisticated that ordinary concealment is difficult.

Yet Menon also shows that surveillance is not necessarily external. Family life itself becomes mediated by monitoring technologies. The children know that cameras may observe them, and Shirin explicitly acknowledges cameras during her interactions with Adi (Menon 198–99). In such a world, privacy is not simply taken away; it is gradually redefined as an unusual or inconvenient condition. This is a crucial feature of Menon's future: technological surveillance becomes normalized because it is embedded in entertainment, communication, safety, and domestic management.

The novel's response is not a rejection of technology. Adi himself uses camouflage bacteria to create a space that deceives cameras and infrared sensors, demonstrating that technological knowledge can also become a tool of resistance (Menon 88). The same intelligence that produces surveillance can be redirected toward evasion. Menon thus presents a contest between technological control and technological literacy. Power does not belong permanently to one side; it moves toward those who understand how systems work.

This dynamic is especially important because Adi is not an outsider to technology. He is a participant in the system. He works within technological institutions, designs synthetic organisms, uses Illusion technology, and understands surveillance mechanisms. His resistance therefore develops from within technological modernity rather than outside it. The novel suggests that ethical technological citizenship requires users to understand both the possibilities and the risks of the systems they inhabit.

5. Identity, Skin Colour, Disability, and the Persistence of Social Difference

Menon's technological future does not eliminate older forms of prejudice. Tara's experience provides the clearest example. She is dark-skinned and is repeatedly made conscious of that fact. Chitra proposes a technologically sophisticated cosmetic intervention involving genomic analysis and a melanin treatment, while Tara has already internalized the social insult of being called "kauva," or crow (Menon 4). The scene is significant because the technology does not create the prejudice; it gives the prejudice new tools.

The novel therefore links beauty culture with biotechnology. In a society capable of manipulating melanin at the genomic level, skin colour becomes a site for technological correction. Chitra's language presents the procedure as modern, harmless, and fashionable, but Tara experiences the proposal as confirmation that her natural appearance is unacceptable (Menon 4). Menon's satire exposes the paradox of a future that possesses sophisticated genetic technologies while retaining conventional standards of beauty.

The same pattern appears in the educational and social environment. Tara's teacher refuses to cast her as Juliet despite her knowledge of the role, and Tara interprets the decision through the racialized imagery of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (Menon 1). The future has not transcended literary hierarchies of beauty; instead, the old aesthetic judgment persists inside a technologically advanced society. Menon thereby suggests that social progress cannot be measured by technological development alone.

Adi's dyslexia introduces another dimension of identity. During a family gathering, he is suddenly unable to read a handwritten note, revealing that he has gradually lost reading ability since childhood. His father interprets the problem as dyslexia and attempts to reassure him, while Adi reacts strongly against pity (Menon 151). The episode is important because Adi is otherwise characterized by exceptional technological and genetic intelligence. His difficulty with reading complicates the conventional association between intelligence and standardized academic ability.

Menon's representation of Adi therefore challenges the idea that a technologically advanced society automatically becomes more inclusive. The future possesses sophisticated information systems, but Adi's experience shows that access to knowledge is not identical with conformity to one dominant mode of literacy. His technological brilliance and reading difficulty coexist. The novel thus invites a broader understanding of ability, intelligence, and human difference.

These representations also complicate the category of the posthuman. The posthuman subject in Menon is not an abstract technologically enhanced individual. It remains marked by skin colour, family history, disability, class, language, and emotional vulnerability. Technology modifies bodies, but it does not erase social meanings attached to bodies. Indeed, technology can intensify those meanings by making them measurable, marketable, and modifiable.

6. Gender, Family, and Alternative Forms of Agency

Although Adi is the principal technological protagonist, the novel gives women important forms of intellectual and political agency. Vispala is a powerful scientist and political actor whose influence extends across biotechnology and international relations. Mandira is presented as confident, mobile, and socially unconventional, while Tara gradually becomes an active investigator rather than merely a protected child. Aunt Sita, despite her anxiety and domestic responsibilities, sustains the family and provides emotional continuity.

Vispala is particularly important because she complicates the traditional association of technological authority with masculinity. In Adi's dream, she appears partly mechanical and partly human: transparent, equipped with an artificial limb, and armed with a sword engraved with double-helix imagery (Menon 233). The image fuses biotechnology, myth, and female power. She is not represented simply as a scientist but as a figure of technological agency who can confront the monstrous consequences of collective human activity.

Tara's development provides a different model of agency. At the beginning of the novel, she experiences herself primarily through school, family, and appearance. Yet her encounters with Ria and Francis gradually expand her understanding of the world. When she suspects that her friends are in danger, she decides to act even though adults and institutions might dismiss her concerns. Her decision to investigate the Bastille transforms her from observer into participant (Menon 87).

Family is consequently not presented only as a source of restriction. It is also the emotional structure through which ethical responsibility becomes meaningful. Adi's relationship with Tara, his memories of his mother, and his complicated relationship with Sivan repeatedly pull him back toward questions that cannot be solved through scientific calculation. Tara's letters later become powerful reminders of home, memory, and emotional continuity, even when Adi tries to avoid them (Menon 234–35). The novel's technology may connect people instantly, but its deepest emotional communication often occurs through deliberately inefficient forms such as letters.

The contrast is telling. Digital systems are fast, efficient, and trackable, whereas Tara's letters are slow, physical, personal, and resistant to technological optimization. Adi initially considers the letters inefficient, yet he keeps their stamps and is affected by the memories they contain (Menon 234). Menon therefore gives material memory a value that technological efficiency cannot replace. The future requires not less technology, but a recognition that human relationships cannot be reduced to speed and data transfer.

7. Environment, Population, and the Symbolism of the Beast

The novel's title receives its fullest significance in Adi's dream near the end. The Beast has nine billion eyes, hearts, feet, and throats; its body contains faces of different ages and colours, while it moves across a devastated landscape of mud (Menon 237–38). The image transforms the global population into a single monstrous organism. It is simultaneously plural and singular: nine billion individuals become one body.

The number nine billion is crucial because it turns population into embodiment. Instead of presenting demographic growth as an abstract statistic, Menon gives it feet, faces, voices, hunger, and movement. The Beast is frightening not because every individual is evil but because collective humanity has become an overwhelming material force. Its many feet suggest movement, expansion, pressure, and ecological impact.

The dream also connects population with environmental degradation. The Beast moves through a mud-scarred landscape, while its body is associated with decay (Menon 237). The ecological imagery does not operate as a separate subplot. It is connected to the novel's concerns about biotechnology, consumption, agriculture, and human intervention. The future's technological abundance does not guarantee ecological health. On the contrary, technological capacity can increase the scale of human impact.

The novel repeatedly returns to the relationship between living systems and human design. Genetically engineered animals are created, tracked, and terminated; agricultural seeds become objects of corporate control; synthetic environments replace or imitate natural spaces; and Illusion technology creates experiences of distant landscapes. These examples suggest a culture increasingly capable of reproducing, modifying, and simulating nature. Yet Menon repeatedly reminds readers that biological systems remain interconnected and resistant to complete control. The shark project itself demonstrates this complexity: Adi recognizes that in genetics everything is connected to everything else (Menon 20).

The Beast can therefore be interpreted as a warning against fragmentation. Human beings often treat problems separately—population, biotechnology, environmental damage, political power but the novel insists that they interact. A genetic intervention can become a political issue; a political movement can become an international economic threat; a technological system can become a surveillance mechanism; and a personal identity problem can become a market for genetic modification.

At the same time, the Beast should not be reduced to a symbol of population catastrophe. Its nine billion faces include babies, lovers, and people without hope, and its colours include multiple human identities (Menon 237). The image therefore contains both terror and diversity. The Beast is monstrous partly because humanity is immense, heterogeneous, and difficult to govern as a single entity. Menon's solution is not to imagine the disappearance of difference but to recognize the ethical responsibility produced by interdependence.

8. Death, Mortality, and the Limits of Technological Mastery

The question of mortality runs beneath the novel's biotechnology plot. Sivan's research into ageing becomes the ultimate test of technological ambition. If ageing can be controlled, then one of the most fundamental biological limits might be transformed. Yet Sivan rejects the pursuit of immortality when he recognizes that the length of life cannot compensate for the quality and meaning of lived moments (Menon 217).

This argument is important because the novel does not reject scientific curiosity. Sivan is himself a brilliant scientist whose achievements are repeatedly acknowledged. What he rejects is the assumption that every discovery must be implemented simply because it is possible. His destruction of research records becomes an act of ethical restraint. In a culture of technological acceleration, refusal becomes a legitimate scientific choice.

The novel consequently challenges a common narrative of progress in which the future is imagined as a continuous expansion of human control. Menon proposes a different model: progress includes knowing when not to proceed. The Dharma Protocols embody this idea at the level of laboratory practice, while Sivan's refusal to pursue immortality embodies it at the level of personal philosophy. Both imply that the ethical scientist must recognize limits.

Mortality also connects the technological and the emotional dimensions of the novel. Adi's fear of losing people, Tara's grief, Sivan's memories of Usha, and the family's repeated encounters with absence all demonstrate that human life derives meaning partly from its finitude. Technology can preserve data, create simulations, and modify organisms, but it cannot simply reproduce the lived value of a relationship. The novel therefore places memory and affection alongside science as forms of knowledge.

9. Narrative Style, Humour, and the Ethics of Speculation

Menon's critical vision is strengthened by his comic narrative style. The novel frequently combines scientific terminology with slang, wordplay, Indian cultural references, and adolescent humour. This stylistic hybridity prevents the narrative from becoming a solemn technological warning. Instead, readers encounter biotechnology and surveillance through characters who joke, misunderstand, flirt, argue, dance, and worry about school.

Adi's language is especially important. His speech is compressed, playful, and shaped by technological culture, while Tara's voice is observant, ironic, and self-questioning. Their different perspectives allow the novel to stage ethical disagreements without turning them into abstract philosophical lectures. The debate about the genetically engineered parrot, for example, emerges from sibling conversation rather than from a formal ethical debate (Menon 33–34).

The humour also destabilizes technological authority. BodZ's supercomputers are named after fictional monsters, and the Illusion pods are treated by Adi as both sophisticated machines and everyday conveniences (Menon 17). The effect is to domesticate the future. Once technology becomes ordinary, its ethical consequences can no longer be hidden behind spectacle.

This narrative strategy is especially appropriate for young adult science fiction. Tara and Adi learn about politics, biotechnology, mortality, and power through experience rather than through institutional instruction. Their education is ethical as much as scientific. Tara learns to question beauty standards and authority; Adi learns that technical expertise does not exempt him from responsibility; both learn that friendship can become a form of moral action.

10. Toward an Ethics of Interdependence

The different strands of the novel converge around the concept of interdependence. The geneticist cannot separate laboratory work from politics; the corporation cannot separate biotechnology from agriculture; the individual cannot separate technological convenience from surveillance; and the human cannot separate itself from other forms of life. Menon's future is therefore structured by networks rather than isolated individuals.

The novel's treatment of synthetic life demonstrates that biological intervention has consequences beyond the laboratory. The Dharma Rules attempt to contain those consequences, but the parrot episode shows how quickly an engineered organism can become a legal, political, and emotional problem

(Menon 21, 40–41). Free Life similarly demonstrates that a seed can become a political instrument when genetic ownership determines who can reproduce food (Menon 69–71). These examples suggest that technology is always social.

Interdependence also explains why the novel refuses a simple opposition between science and nature. Sivan is not anti-science; neither is Adi. Their conflict concerns the purposes to which scientific knowledge is directed. The novel therefore does not advocate a return to a pre-technological world. Instead, it imagines a technologically capable society that must develop equally sophisticated ethical frameworks.

The final movement toward Sweden does not resolve these tensions through a simple geographical escape. Adi carries Pune with him through memories, letters, dreams, and unresolved relationships which could be understood through ““(Menon 234). His movement across national boundaries demonstrates that technological globalization does not erase emotional or cultural belonging. The future remains transnational, but identity remains relational.

The novel’s final emotional gesture is consequently not a technological breakthrough but a recognition of connection. The Beast has nine billion feet because humanity is collective. It is terrifying when viewed as an anonymous mass, but its many faces also indicate that collective life consists of individual stories. Menon’s ethical challenge is to hold both truths together: humanity possesses enormous collective power, and every exercise of that power affects embodied lives.

Conclusion

Anil Menon’s *The Beast with Nine Billion Feet* presents the future as a field of ethical negotiation rather than technological destiny. Its 2040 Pune is filled with artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, immersive simulation, surveillance, and transnational biotechnology, but technological sophistication does not eliminate social inequality, political manipulation, prejudice, economic insecurity, or emotional vulnerability. Instead, technology amplifies the consequences of existing structures.

The novel’s most important contribution is its insistence that scientific capability must be accompanied by ethical responsibility. The Dharma Rules establish limits on synthetic life; Sivan’s refusal to pursue immortality demonstrates the ethics of restraint; Free Life challenges the corporate control of genetic resources; and Adi’s protection of the parrot reveals the emotional dimension of responsibility toward engineered life. Together, these episodes suggest that the central problem of biotechnology is not whether humans can redesign life, but whether they are prepared to accept responsibility for what they redesign.

Menon also complicates the promise of technological progress by showing that old forms of exclusion survive inside the future. Tara’s skin-colour insecurity, the technological marketing of cosmetic alteration, Adi’s dyslexia, workplace inequality, and caste divisions within political protest demonstrate that technological modernization does not automatically produce social justice. A society can possess extraordinary machines while reproducing ordinary prejudices.

Finally, the Beast with nine billion feet transforms these concerns into a powerful image of collective humanity. The Beast is monstrous because human beings have become a vast ecological and technological force, but it is also made of countless individual faces. The image therefore resists both technological utopianism and apocalyptic simplification. Humanity is neither master nor victim of the future; it is a participant in a network of relationships among people, animals, machines, institutions, and environments.

Read in this way, Menon’s novel offers a distinctly ethical form of Indian speculative fiction. Its future is not valuable because it predicts particular technologies accurately. Its value lies in asking what kind of people, institutions, and political cultures are necessary when such technologies become possible. The novel ultimately argues for a future in which intelligence is measured not only by the ability to manipulate life but by the ability to recognize limits, protect vulnerability, resist commodification, and remain answerable to others. The nine-billion-footed Beast is therefore less a prophecy than a moral figure: it asks what humanity will become when its collective power finally becomes large enough to reshape the world.

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