

Eruptions of Funk in Priya Chabria's *Clone*: Ruminations on Bio-Ethics and Human Consciousness in a Posthuman Transgenetic World

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Abstract

*Priya Sarukkai Chabria in Clone explores the historical dimension of imagined possibilities in the distant future of twenty-fourth-century India. This distant society of the future is a systematic Utopia/Dystopia named Global Community based on hierarchic organisation with little room for divergence and the population classed as - Originals, Superior, Zombies, Firehearts, and Clones. This posthuman world becomes a space for examining what constitutes human nature. The thrust of the premise in Priya Sarukkai Chabria's *Clone* is the nostalgia for the humanist subject, a subject that is undermined by bio-engineering which attempts at erasing human 'consciousness' by bio-engineering and transgenic cyborgization. The moral and ethical dimensions of bio-engineering are problematized and the text questions whether the de-coupling of mind-body can erase the constraints of human consciousness, for, after all, consciousness is the essence of human subjectivity. This paper would adopt a Cultural History approach and interpret the text as a matrix interspersed with diverse discourses to interrogate the ideological foundation which gave form, function, and content to the idea of Utopia/Dystopia.*

Keywords: Bio-Ethics; Utopia/Dystopia; Consciousness; Science Fiction; Clone

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Mark Poster in *Cultural History and Postmodernity* states, “Cultural history might then be understood as the study of the construction of the subject, the extent to which, and the mechanisms through which, individuals are attached to identities, [and] the shape and characteristics of those identities” (8). French historian Roger Chartier’s *Cultural History* stated that Cultural History aimed at examining how “a special social reality was constructed” by remaining aware that all social classifications or schemata were always themselves contextually embedded and the product of vested interests, rather than abstract (and ahistorical) analytic categories (13). The anthropologist Clifford Geertz defined Cultural History as “a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge and attitudes toward life” (89).

Priya Chabria’s *Clone* becomes a site for the historical dimension of imagined possibilities in the distant future of twenty-fourth-century India. This distant society of the future is a systematic/apparent utopia named Global Community based on hierarchic organisation with little room for divergence and the population classed as – Originals, Superior, Zombies, Firehearts, and Clones. In the Global Community’s order of reality, Original alone have ‘life’, Firehearts were created to have empathy and were supposed to have ‘presence’, Superior Zombies to claim ‘existence’ and Clones to exhibit ‘actuality’. The protagonist is Clone 14/54/G, a fourteenth-generation clone of a writer Aa-Aa living in late twenty-first-century India. Aa-Aa’s diary, called “Aa-Aa’s Pillow Book”, details the circumstances that led to the formation of this new world order in the twenty-fourth century:

The last Great War, “The Clash of Civilizations”, changed the world, forever spinning it into a future that we have named the Trans-Species Epoch. The unofficial name for this conflict is “The War against the Earth”. I learnt of multitudes who had died beating, as it were, the security domes of our new cities, for the earth could no longer support such a large stock of humans.

... Founded on the death of millions, I understood why it became imperative that those who survived forget what made them be. All shreds of dissent were torn, thrown into the winds of the past, and jettisoned forever beyond the horizon. We became better and better at suppressing our histories and ourselves. (*Clone* 128-129)

Mankind’s history has been one of dislodging seeming dystopias with aspirational utopias and, in the process, erecting another dystopia in their place. Thus, *Clone* as a literary text is part of a matrix open to yoking of incompatible fields of science, philosophy, literature, history, mythology and culture. Chabria’s plot and setting is a futuristic society regimented by technology and peopled by bio-enhanced and transhuman beings; in stark contrast to the setting are her poetic prose and the writer protagonist Aa-Aa and her clone 14/54/G. The dissonance in the style and setting makes the absence of the fluid human self in such a society all

the more glaring. Obviously, the nostalgia for a diversely endowed human subject with a propensity towards “inner consciousness” is sorely felt.

This article studies the the ‘eruption of funk’ in *Clone*, examining how moments of rupture, disruption, and dissonance function as sites of resistance against technoscientific rationality. It explores how funk operates as an aesthetic and philosophical intervention that unsettles dominant bio-ethical discourses, foregrounds embodied consciousness, and reasserts the unpredictability of human affect within a posthuman, transgenetic world.

Eruptions of Funk

The phrase ‘eruptions of funk’ was used by Toni Morrison in her novel *Jazz* (1992) to denote a disruptive and improvisational energy which erupts against oppressive structures and provides opportunities for the retrieval and acknowledgement of fragmented memories and unacknowledged past. She employed it in the context of the African American experience in the United States of America, whereby visceral and painful experiences of slavery, racism and cultural oppression erupt from submerged spaces of the self, giving them a voice and a narrative. Susan Willis interprets it as, “‘Funk’ is really nothing more than the intrusion of the past in the present. It is most oppositional when it juxtaposes a not-so-distant social code to those evolved under bourgeois society” (280).

In *Clone*, the protagonist undergoes such ‘eruptions of funk’ in a regimented society of twenty-fourth-century India. In the Prologue, Clone 14/54/G states:

I am a fourteenth generation Clone and something has gone wrong with me...
Let me put it this way: I remember. My consciousness is morphing in an unplanned way. I'm also very lonely. It's not pleasant to have memory and no one to share it with. I don't dare. Which is why I've decided to keep a diary hidden as a cell chip in my system. So far undetected; so far, so good. (Chabria 1)

As new sensory ideas and words make their way into her vocabulary, her sense of her own reality starts altering, and occasionally she responds by reducing her mode of function.

The story is told in the first-person narrative mode throughout the novel, and the voice is that of Clone 14/54/G. Her suspicions regarding sudden ‘thought-experiences’ that engulfed her and overwhelmed her led her to research her Original Aa-Aa. She discovers that Aa-Aa was a writer who lived in late twenty-first-century India and was a controversial figure:

She was a writer interested in Zensub-Alternate structures; had enrolled with a Bhakti-Sufi sect called The Universalists before it was deleted; was incarcerated in The Turret for eight decades; a voice-tomb was prohibited; but she was reclaimed as she was found fecund. Correctly mated. She produced twelve progeny. (34)

The involuntary intrusion of scenes and characters from the past related to her Original, Aa-Aa, into her consciousness, which she terms 'visitations', completely unsettles her. Inhabiting a constricted hierarchical world order as a clone, she was not supposed to be able to dream or remember, and this occurrence is a threat to the narrator's programmed existence. These 'visitations' encompass a major chunk of the text and include ancient, mediaeval, and twentieth-century history of India. She experiences intrusions of memories, sometimes as a human, sometimes as a parrot, sometimes as an animal, and relives lives from a long-lost time. These visitations echo historical and mythological themes reaching far back into Indian history.

Initially, the memory eruptions of Aa-Aa and "Visitations" are confusing and unsettling for Clone 14/54/G, and the author depicts it in a disjointed and non-linear mode to exactly replicate the confusion it creates. These incidents find a coherence when the life of Aa-Aa is researched into and the author inserts the diary jottings of Aa-Aa in the chapter titled "Aa-Aa's Pillow Book" and another subsequent chapter after it titled "The Visitations". The pillow book unravels much of the life of Aa-Aa and the disillusionment she felt with the ideals of the Global Community. It records her interest in the history of the world and the lessons that it can impart to the contemporary world, as well as her love for the natural world, including enjoying sex with "primitive people" without the aid of sex tools or technology. She mentioned that she had written *Fictive Biographies*, a series on histories narrated by different species who possessed equal validity and voice. The Chapter "Visitations" has the character of a parrot who was a pet of the third wife of a Mughal nobleman, Nawab-Wazir. It also has characters from the Buddhist world of ancient India. This memory speaks of the irrepressible power of stories, emotions and ideals and the way eruptions might happen despite attempts to silence them by the established power elite. These eruptions stir emotions and passions considered incomprehensible and impossible for a clone and awaken dormant human nature within her. The eruptions of memory in her are welcomed by the hidden subverts and empaths while considered dangerous by the Originals. For instance, the Fireheart clone named Couplet, assigned to extract the full content of Aa-Aa's last speech from 14/54/G, risks everything to support her:

"Yesterday I thought we were both done for," said Couplet.

I went on my knees to look Couplet in the face. "Thank you. You risked your neck to save me."

"It's such a little neck," said Couplet, touching its nape.

"Yes." I patted its shoulder.

"Where did the declaration come from? That didn't quite sound like the Original. She tended towards opulent detailing More is less in her case."

I stood. "Couplet, you got it right, right away."

"Yes?"

“It’s mine.”

“Entirely your own?” (Chabria 103)

Bio-Ethics and Human Consciousness

The author conjures a ‘novum’, Darko Suvin’s term, and warns against an “alternate reality logically necessitated by and proceeding from” the developments in genetic engineering and the fact that bio-ethics is imperative in the co-opting of technologies in human life (Suvin 75). Leon Kass, a critic of bio-engineering, warns that bio-engineering reinforces a “soft dehumanization” which is as damaging as “the cruel dehumanization of Nazi and Soviet tyranny” (Kass 4, 7). Priya Chabria’s *Clone* articulates both the longing and fear provoked by the spectacle of a world confronting totalitarian regimes which suppressed the welfare of the individual for that of the group.

The narrative style is a philoso-poetic articulation of the anxieties of losing the humanist sensibility in a world of the distant future. It’s a tale of caution for the pro bio-engineering enthusiasts who hold the view that “genetics will enable us to redesign humans, make better people, exploit our wonder genes, reach our inevitable genetic future, assist in radical evolution, and design our babies” (Clayton 337). A narrative written in twenty-first-century India about a transhuman world of the future in the twenty-fourth century, Chabria’s tale adds heft to Francis Fukuyama’s belief that human beings have “natural tendencies” and “natural human desires”, which draws from evolutionary biology and psychology the concept of human nature (Fukuyama 126-7). This organicist metaphor imparts a temporal dimension to a substantive quality, thus attributing to the concept of nature abstract ideas, feelings, or modes of being.

Cary Wolfe declares in *What is Posthumanism?* that Posthumanism is not exclusively about the “decentring of the human in relation to either evolutionary, ecological or technological coordinates” but also includes a critique of humanism that keeps intact some of its “values and aspirations” while at the same time showing “how those aspirations are undercut by the philosophical and ethical frameworks used to conceptualize them” (xvi). Neil Badmington in *Posthumanism* opens up a new critical paradigm on the Posthuman condition when he states, “What matters, rather, is that thought keeps moving in the name of a beyond, in the shadow of the unknown, in the faultlines of the ‘post-’” (10). According to Pramod K. Nayar, Critical posthumanism is the “radical decentring of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines” (8). Literary texts that have since the Renaissance always shown us how humans behave, react and interact – indeed it has been said that literature ‘invented’ the human – have now begun to show that the human is what it is *because* it includes the non-human (Badmington 2).

As *Clone 14/54/G*’s awareness continues to evolve into more complex thought processes and feelings, the power elite, the Originals, try everything in their power

to recover Aa-Aa's secrets, especially the full content of the speech which she could not deliver as she had died midway, in order to nip subversion in the bud. She is placed in a luxurious facility named The Recovery Pad and subjected to various truth-extracting procedures like psychological manipulation, physical torture, and inoculation to spit out the truth. She attracts the particular attention of an Original named The Leader, and both become lovers; her increasingly volatile and passionate heart refuses to believe that she is being played with by The Leader when Couplet the Fireheart insinuates as such.

“So you trust The Leader still?”

“Who else do we have, Couplet?”

It sighed, its antenna wilted. “Well then, play the game, Clone, but know you are playing a game”. (Chabria 104)

Clone 14/54/G starts her life journey from a conforming subject whose life revolved around working like an automaton in the fringes of society to a surreptitiously resisting subject, resulting in becoming a being who starts to erupt in fits and starts. At the monthly meet for replicas, she meets one of her clone twins, 14/53/G, who offers her an antidote to the drug given to them by the administrative elite to stop their reproductive process. Her decision to take the antidote is the first step towards reclaiming the agency of her subjectivity: “I secured the door, called for my bed, sat and opened the packet. Inside lay a red pill the size of a teardrop. I placed it on my tongue. It tasted salty and metallic; it tasted of blood” (Chabria 50).

The more she thought of Aa-Aa and her disclosures, stating, “The Great Fading That Awaits Us All”, the more she was made aware of the fact that there is no escaping death. The evolution of her consciousness to reflect on it makes her a perfect conduit to carry forward the messages of her original Aa-Aa. Clone 14/4/G demonstrates a cyborg-nature in her attempt to challenge the features of her society's culturally authorized concepts of nature:

These concepts are not difficult to come to terms with for a Clone for this has no profoundly affecting valence for me. At heart I know I am replaceable. It is, no doubt, different for an Original.

Yet why do I wish my stories survive? As days turned dark, I plunged deeper and deeper into this unknown. What must I understand to accept the Great Fading that awaits us all?

How should I change? (Chabria 112)

The Originals have succeeded in prolonging life to an average of 250 years through the process of plasma transfusion dip, which is concocted in the Plasma Transfusion plants. These plants were manned by clones where the nature of the work was inhumanly oppressive. In their pursuit of immortality, the Originals cloned lives with their DNA material (as fecundity was abysmally low among them) so that despite their fading from the world, their genes would continue to exist and live on. Aa-Aa in her diary notes that, “though I was suitably mated, I produced just two

offspring. Despite our best efforts of body and technology we are a vanishing race; we have lost the human species' ability to procreate effortlessly (Chabria 35).

Confronted with the inevitability of death Aa-Aa begins to rebel against the sham posturing of the Originals, and everything seems to be an exercise in futility. The Originals try to gag her by imprisoning her, but she proves wily as she confesses:

However, during the two decades I was incarcerated, I produced four children by seducing the Originals in whose "care" I was. It seemed as if my transgressive voice-tombs had triggered my fecundity. This achievement improved the conditions of my imprisonment. (Chabria 135)

The Cyborg's subjectivity appears where boundaries are transgressed, as they are aware that boundary construction is never innocent. Aa-Aa's silencing through death is not a finality, as her voice finds eruptions in her mutated clone 14/54/G. The moment of final denouement comes during the great annual event of the Global Community, The Celebrations, where Clone 14/54/G claims and declares her humanity:

"The secret is that I am human. Each one of us is human. We still have the capacity to live as humans".

The voice that was mine yet not mine alone ricocheted from every part of the arena. Remember with me: I claim my birthright to be human."

I lifted the Staff of Certitude and shouted, "None can stop us, for we are human!" (Chabria 269)

The Leader had revealed to her the fact that Aa-Aa was his mother and he was inoculated against her memory, but that technology could not completely erase the memories and feelings registered in the consciousness of the human mind. He confesses to her, "Her face stayed with me, her hands the quality of her voice" (222). He was in the Children's Stand during the Celebrations when she was pushed. He reveals his true identity as the leader of the secret resistance against the sham utopia of the Global Community, which was first called out by his mother, Aa-Aa.

The cultural context that shapes the evocation of a futuristic society in *Clone* is very much informed by the issues, attitudes, values, assumptions and prejudices embedded in human society since time immemorial. The biased prejudices and feeling of entitlement are indoctrinated into the minds of the Originals' children in a school meant specially for them, and the chanting goes thus,

"We are Originals. We're the Best.

We're kind, we rule at others' behest.

Firehearts are liars we suppress

Or the Truth they will repress.

Strong Zombies we keep in check

Or our Order they will wreck.

Clones are those we guide and shield,

The mutants too we put away

For they are ill and shouldn't stray. This we do for the Common Good

And not from hatred, it's understood!" (Chabria 231-232)

In this seemingly dystopic world, art and literature are peripheral activities, and the practitioners are considered disruptive to the structured and regimented social order. Creative artists require fluid boundaries and are seekers of the ideal/truth, and this trait is bioengineered into the Firehearts, as the Global Community has bred them "for the purpose of interrogating the living" (Chabria 4), and they "are the poets of [our] society, and being poets, they cannot speak lies. They make excellent investigators, for they will not give up until they are satisfied with the answers, even if their antennae burn up in the attempt and they writhe and perish" (Chabria 4). Chabria hints that empathy and altruism in pursuit of the truth are also what elevate a human being and bring about radical changes in society, and the Fireheart, the possessor of this sole human trait in the text, becomes the agent provocateur in the transition of *Clone*14/54/G.

Dystopian fiction addresses larger cultural anxieties, and *Clone* is a wary questioning of the social and ethical norms transgressed in man's pursuit of a Utopian society. The Global Community is a congealing of ideals, the degeneration of mutuality into convenient social stratification for the power elite. In a futuristic world of genetic enhancement and prolonged human life, the author brings into focus the question of bioethics and how an attempt at Utopic possibilities might result in eruptions of dystopic traits within the concerned society. The rigid class structure of the Global Community is reminiscent of the caste system in India from ancient times to the twenty-first century. Despite being a technologically advanced society of the future, the society that Chabria envisages in *Clone* remains cliched in its social structure, reminiscent of the contemporary Indian oppressor/oppressed binary. The author's prognosis on genetic enhancement and technological advancement articulates a cynicism and scepticism and makes it obvious that a society which considers feelings, literature, art, and nature as subversive will ultimately develop ruptures and fissures from within. Weaving an eclectic combination of philosophical reflection, genetic enhancement, bio-ethics and history, the narrative of *Clone* debunks the grand narrative of progress and liberation propagated by the Global Community in twenty-fourth-century India.

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