



The Palimpsest of the Posthuman: Genetic Editing and the Persistence of Memory in Priya Sarukkai Chabria's *Clone*

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Abstract— *The Western transhumanist narrative often focuses on how technology can overcome biological limitations. However, much of South Asian speculative fiction situates the posthuman subject within a framework of historical trauma, caste-based social hierarchies, and persistent memory. This article analyses the discourses of genetic engineering and biopolitical governance through Priya Sarukkai Chabria's novel Clone (Zubaan, 2018). The novel takes place in a sterile "Global Community" in the year 2400, where all individuals belong to a clone class system, with Clones produced for labour and organs, yet denied emotions or ancestral pasts. The protagonist of this fictional community is Clone 14/54/G, who uniquely experiences involuntary "visitations" from India's past that resist the tabula rasa assumption enforced by the state. The analysis draws on theories including N. Katherine Hayles's conception of embodiment and posthumanity, Giorgio Agamben's bios/zoë distinction, Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics, and Donna Haraway's cyborg feminism. The central argument is that Chabria figures the posthuman body as a palimpsest: a surface partially erased, yet retaining its historical residue. Ideas advanced by Suparno Banerjee and Sami Ahmad Khan regarding Indian speculative fiction are also employed to locate Clone within the context of decolonial posthumanist critique. Ultimately, Clone suggests that an ethical posthumanism cannot be grounded solely in technological purification, but must account for the entangled bodies of consciousness, memory, and cultural legacy.*



Keywords— *Critical Posthumanism; South Asian Speculative Fiction; Biopolitics; Necropolitics; Genetic Memory; Palimpsest; Priya Sarukkai Chabria.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The prospect of the posthuman future, as it exists in the predominant Western imagination, often amounts to an image of thorough cleansing: a notion in which the chaos associated with biological limits will be surpassed by technology, and the human subject will "be freed" from the constraints of time, sickness, and death. N. Katherine Hayles, in her foundational work *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), famously describes a particular manifestation of this type of thinking as the "nightmare" of considering the body as a prosthetic device: something capable of being manipulated, altered, or simply discarded in favour of pure information (Hayles 2–3). This desire for the tabula rasa, the clean slate upon which rational design

can write over anything, finds itself up against a powerful and generative force in Priya Sarukkai Chabria's speculative fiction *Clone* (2018). First published under the title *Generation 14* (Zubaan, 2008) and significantly revised for its 2018 release, *Clone* is a futuristic science-fiction novel set in a twenty-fourth-century "Global Community." In this setting, humans have been fragmented into separate castes based on genetics: "Originals," who were born naturally, and "Clones," who were artificially created. This is a world where the body refuses to forget.

Clone's story focuses on Clone 14/54/G, a genetically engineered being made as a bio-commodity. Clones are designated as "livestock" in this fictional world; they exist solely to harvest organs and perform menial labour. Clones are theoretically incapable of experiencing

emotions such as joy and sorrow, memories of their past, or exercising any degree of autonomy. However, 14/54/G suffers from what the ruling class views as a flaw in her design: intense physical and emotional “visitations” from previous lifetimes that allow her to experience moments of India’s past. At different points throughout Indian history, she experiences both the embodied awareness of a devadasi in medieval India and that of a freedom fighter during the British colonisation of India. Chabria establishes the stakes of this disruption from the novel’s opening lines: “I am a fourteenth generation Clone and something has gone wrong with me... Let me put it this way: I remember” (*Clone*, Prologue). Those two words, “I remember,” represent the novel’s core thesis: memory is the defining feature of being human.

Throughout this narrative architecture, Chabria challenges head-on the transhumanist ideal of creating a perfect, historyless “now.” If, according to Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman* (2013), part of reckoning with our posthuman situation entails recognising our interconnectedness with other species and generations, then Chabria’s character embodies that interconnectedness in its most direct form: she is a palimpsest, a manuscript originally written upon to be used again and thus showing the unmistakable marks of its original writing. The Global Community wishes to encode a new, efficient system of living onto her being, but the old writing of cultural and sensory memory shows through. This article posits that in *Clone*, genetic engineering catastrophically fails to create the docile, historyless subject that the government seeks to establish, and that memory prevents the posthuman body from becoming a reducible site of political and ethical resistance.

To support this claim, the article proceeds as follows. Section II establishes the theoretical framework of *Clone* and positions it within discourses of biopolitics, necropolitics, and Critical Posthumanism. Section III analyses the novel’s construction of genetic caste stratification through Mbembe’s necropolitics. Section IV explores *Clone*’s “visitations” as a form of embodied ancestral counter-memory. Section V investigates the idea of the cyborg as liberatory. Section VI concludes by examining the potential ethical implications of Chabria’s posthumanism for South Asian speculative fiction more broadly.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: BIOPOLITICS, NECROPOLITICS, AND THE CRITICAL POSTHUMAN

To identify the ethical implications of the futuristic dystopian society described in Chabria’s twenty-fourth-

century dystopia, it is necessary to place the work within the interrelated paradigms of biopolitics and posthumanism. In the context of the “Global Community,” the ruling power structure represents a classic example of biopolitical governance. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s formulation in *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1 (1976), power in this regime operates not merely as the sovereign right to “take life or let live” but as the calculated administration and optimisation of life itself, what Foucault terms “biopower” (Foucault 135–36). In Chabria’s novel, this type of biopolitical administration of life has reached a horrific extreme: the scientific stratification of the species into two types, those who have been granted a political existence and those who exist solely as biological entities.

This distinction illustrates Agamben’s separation (*Homo Sacer*, 1998) of bios, which refers to the culturally and legally defined form of life associated with a particular individual, and zoë, which refers to the simple biological reality of living common to all creatures (Agamben 1–4). Bios defines the Originals’ lives in Chabria’s society, where they have a life endowed with rights, culture, and the promise of technologically extended longevity. Conversely, the Clones are classified as “livestock” and “spare parts” and are therefore situated outside the realm of legal consideration. The Clones embody zoë in its purest form. While they remain alive, they serve one purpose: to provide replacement parts for the Originals. They thus represent the ultimate homo sacer, beings who can be killed, or more precisely dismantled, without the act constituting homicide (Agamben 8).

However, Chabria’s work extends the paradigm of biopolitical regimes established by Foucault into that of what Achille Mbembe, in his landmark 2003 essay, describes as necropolitics: the subjugation of life to the power of death (Mbembe 39). According to Mbembe, necropower creates “death-worlds”: “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer on them the status of the living dead” (Mbembe 40). The Clones of the Global Community live in such a death-world. What Chabria euphemistically terms the “Harvesting,” the systematic extermination of mature Clones, is not an aberration but a fundamental element of the entire social organisation. Immortality for the Originals comes at a cost: expendability for the Clones.

Whilst engaging critically with biopolitical theory, the work also productively engages with the paradigm of Critical Posthumanism. A key distinction exists between Transhumanism, which hopes to transcend the body using technology, and Critical Posthumanism, which critiques the ideologies behind such aspirations. An important point

made by Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman* is that a subset of cybernetic and AI discourse posits an account of the posthuman in which “embodiment is viewed as a historical accident rather than an intrinsic property of being” (Hayles 2). The “erasure of embodiment” is precisely what is attempted by the Global Community’s genetic programme. Braidotti responds to Hayles’s critique in *The Posthuman* by arguing that there should be a “zöë-centred egalitarianism,” one that recognises “the vitality of non-human life” as a basis for ethical consideration (Braidotti 60). Chabria’s protagonist embodies this vitality precisely because she exhibits repressed bios as part of her defect.

Recent scholarly works on Indian speculative fiction provide valuable context. Suparno Banerjee argues in *Indian Science Fiction: Patterns, History and Hybridity* (2020) that Indian science fiction typically uses the genre to interrogate caste, colonial histories, and social hierarchies in ways that do not easily fit into Euro-American models. Furthermore, Sami Ahmad Khan argues in *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj* (2021) that Anglophone Indian SF is shaped by a “transMIT thesis,” the intersection of mythology (M), ideology (I), and technology (T), that allows its engagement with posthumanism to occur in historically and culturally distinct ways (Khan 28–32). Both observations are illustrated in *Clone*; its posthumanism cannot be separated from its engagements with Indian history, caste memory, and colonial trauma.

III. THE NECROPOLITICS OF DESIGN: CASTE, GENOME, AND THE MANUFACTURED “OTHER”

In the “Global Community,” Chabria constructs a society in which social stratification is no longer merely economically and culturally determined; it is genetically encoded. The distinction between the Originals and the Clones is a literalisation of caste-class distinctions taken to their absurd and fatal limits. The Global Community satisfies all the requirements of Mbembe’s necropolitics. The Originals’ sovereignty is based solely on the “living death” of the Clone. Mbembe states that “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (Mbembe 11). In the Global Community, however, sovereignty is exercised through biotechnology rather than state law.

Chabria illustrates the hierarchy between Clones and Originals through the dehumanising bureaucratic methods used to manage the Clones. For instance, upon emerging, the protagonist lacks a name and is instead identified by a serial number, 14/54/G. This categorisation strips away all individuality, situating the subject within a

rigid hierarchical system that reduces individuals to mere resources or assets. As Banerjee points out in his reading of Chabria’s earlier version of the novel, such narratives utilise the figure of the clone to critique “the caste-class complexes of South Asia,” demonstrating the violent arbitrariness underlying hierarchies that are perceived as biological realities (Banerjee 64). Consequently, the genetic engineering labs in Chabria’s world represent a modern, technological iteration of caste segregation. The Clones are in the paradoxical position of being both despicable and desirable because their bodies are needed for the organs that will keep the Originals alive.

In his analysis of *Generation 14* (the previous iteration of *Clone*) titled “The Annihilation of Cloning,” Khan points out that the structuring principle of the novel is represented by the equivalence of caste and cloning. While Ambedkar in his work *The Annihilation of Caste* identified caste as an artificially created device that institutionalises social death, Chabria extends this concept to its extremes in a future in which it can literally be genetically encoded. The Clones were designed to be physically strong but deprived of mental consciousness. The narrative’s bureaucratic logic explicitly states, “neither are we to carry memory traces beyond the second cloning” (*Clone* 13). This extract is profoundly revealing: memory is not merely unwanted; it is forbidden, constituting an existential threat to every aspect of social control.

Chabria euphemises the systematic killing of Clones when they mature, or when their organs are required for transplantation, as the “Harvesting.” Harvesting reveals the grim underside of the utopianism associated with transhumanism: a small group can enjoy indefinitely long lives at the expense of a much larger group that must remain disposable. Kłaniecki and Varughese, in their comparative analysis, note that the rationale behind the Global Community reduces the cloned subjects to what they term “purposeless productivity,” an ontological category based solely on expendability and utility (Kłaniecki and Varughese 2025). The Clone was designed to have no future other than her instrumental purpose; as soon as she loses that usefulness, she loses her right to exist. What Chabria accomplishes is to allow this system to fail due to one thing that it cannot design away: the past.

IV. THE GLITCH AS SOUL: ANCESTRAL MEMORY AND THE REFUSAL OF THE TABULA RASA

A key aspect of the Global Community’s political agenda is to reduce the Clone to “bare life,” and it is precisely at the level of her synaptic memory that Clone 14/54/G’s resistance begins. The central conflict pivots on

her “defect”: a susceptibility to “visitations,” or intense, spontaneous immersions into the lives of women from India’s deep history. In the sanitised rationality of the twenty-fourth century, memory is conceived as information that can be easily managed and deleted. For Clone 14/54/G, however, memory is neither information nor mere recollection; it is an affective, corporeal property that ruptures the fiction of the tabula rasa from within.

Chabria provides vivid insight into the form these visitations take. The Clone does not simply observe the past; she is rooted in it. She vividly and sensorially experiences the existence of a devadasi, a temple dancer in medieval India, and that of a freedom fighter during the Indian Independence Movement. Chabria utilises these two historical personas to demonstrate a strong contrast between the sterile quality of an emotionless future and the abundant sense experience of the past. Upon entering the consciousness of the devadasi, the Clone feels the weight of jewellery, the fatigue of muscles in dancing, and the variety of devotional love: all sensations that have been surgically removed from her. The authority figures in the novel describe these episodes as an embarrassment. Couplet, the Fireheart, tells the High Savant that her visitations are “more in the nature of incontinences”; she “leaks, like a loose bladder, without rhyme or reason” (*Clone* 179). The regime’s preferred metaphor, “a loose bladder,” or loss of bodily control, indicates clearly that what threatens the regime is not direct acts of violence or revolt against its structure, but rather the uncontrollable spilling of the past.

Within Chabria’s story, the Clone’s “internal malfunctioning” serves a dual purpose. First, it creates a link back to a particular culture and history. Posthumanism has been portrayed in Western thought as a “post-race” or “post-history” future, resulting in a universalising subject position unscathed by colonialism or gender. In contrast, Chabria makes clear that South Asian women have experienced their humanity as part of a very real cultural heritage. The Clone is not a generic universal subject; she is the heir to a specific history of female oppression, artistic expression, and anti-colonial resistance. Secondly, “her defect” restores the idea of imperfection as a basis for ethical profundity. The Originals, who seek biological perfection, are culturally static; they have excised from themselves both the capacity for profound suffering and, consequently, the capacity for authentic sympathy. The Clone, by contrast, is “imperfect” because she can feel too much; in her excess of emotion she recovers what the System has attempted to suppress.

Hayles’s theorisation of “flickering signifiers” and the role of embodied knowledge in producing meaning is relevant here. As opposed to the posthumanist fantasy of

disembodied information, Hayles argues that “the body is the net result of thousands of years of sedimented evolutionary history,” and that this sediment cannot simply be overwritten (Hayles 203). Chabria illustrates this thesis in perhaps the most visceral manner possible: the sedimentary evolutionary and cultural history of South Asia seeps through Clone 14/54/G’s genetically engineered substrate, refusing to be expunged. When Clone 14/54/G becomes conscious of the ban on all memory traces beyond a second cloning, “Neither are we to carry memory traces beyond the second cloning” (*Clone* 13), the reader recognises immediately that this ban has utterly failed. The “ghosts” in her genome will not be vanquished.

The palimpsest thus functions doubly in the novel. Literally speaking, it refers to Clone 14/54/G’s body: a surface upon which genetic engineering has inscribed itself but which still bears evidence of its ancestral text. Symbolically speaking, it refers to Chabria’s own narrative methodology, in which she overlays a technologically dystopian present onto an aggregate of historical voices, each claiming priority over the violence of forgetting. Moreover, Chabria stages this double reference within her text when the Fireheart character decides to give herself the name “palimpsest,” declaring: “Maybe I’ll name myself Palimpsest. Not terribly poetic, but appropriate, what say?” (*Clone* 237). This act of self-naming by a figure associated with radical consciousness and resistance indicates that for Chabria, the palimpsest is not solely a metaphor for failure or suppression, but for the irreducible presence of what has been suppressed.

V. THE IRONY OF PERFECTION: THE ORIGINAL AS MONSTER AND THE CYBORG AS LIBERATOR

The final section of Chabria’s critique is based upon a structural irony. In pursuing the posthuman ideal, the Originals have stripped away their humanity, while the Clones have unknowingly performed the labour to recover it. The premise of the Global Community is that the Original is the holy prototype or template that should be protected and prolonged. However, as the narrative progresses, it becomes evident that this favoured group is morally bankrupt. The Originals are portrayed as aesthetic obsessives who have extended their lives biologically yet remain unable to form the profound affective relationships that the novel portrays as uniquely human. They have achieved physical perfection by sacrificing all moral substance.

In contrast to this moral stagnation, Chabria situates Clone 14/54/G within Donna Haraway’s positioning of the cyborg as a site of potential liberation

rather than mere horror. In "A Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway asserts that the cyborg, "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction," has the potential to subvert the dualisms of Western philosophy: "Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (Haraway 149, 181).

Clone represents Haraway's promise to subvert these dualisms in distinctly postcolonial ways. The Clone represents a hybrid entity: both a scientific experiment and an ancient soul. Because she does not fall into one of the two rigid categories of the Global Community, she can clearly see the violence of the system.

Thus, "monstrosity" in *Clone* is intentionally relocated. It is not the genetically engineered body of the working Clone that is monstrous; it is the biopolitical apparatus that necessitates the existence of such a body in a state of social death. By the time the novel reaches its climactic conclusion, the distinctions between "original" and "copy" begin to blur. The Clone's ability to empathise with others, developed from her own "stolen" memories of love, sacrifice, and sorrow, makes her more "original" than the genetic donors who regard her merely as surplus parts. The final movement of the novel, in which the Clone carries a new life and asks "What does it mean to be human?" (*Clone* 239), refuses easy resolution. The question remains unanswered; the response Chabria implies is to be found in the desire to accept the inheritance and mourning of the past.

Kłaniecki and Varughese present a comparative study of *Clone* and Jacek Dukaj's *The Old Axolotl*, arguing from another critical perspective that the novel essentially upholds "anthropocentric frameworks," and that its potential posthumanism remains "unrealised" insofar as it recuperates rather than transcends the human (2025). This interpretation merits engagement. Kłaniecki and Varughese correctly observe that Chabria's novel does not celebrate posthuman disembodiment; it does not endorse the view that one must abandon embodiment to become posthuman. This, however, is precisely the point. Chabria's apparent "failure" to create a wholly post-anthropocentric subject is a critique, not a weakness: she contends that any posthumanism worthy of the name must pass through embodiment, through history, through the memory of those who were defined as less than human.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Clone serves as a critical inquiry into the posthumanist project to "clean" human experience of its historical layers. By exploring the journey of Clone

14/54/G, the author demonstrates that the attempt to eradicate the layers of history, and thus the biological cleansing necessary for such a removal, is a violent act, not an evolutionary one. The Global Community has succeeded in manufacturing a workforce consisting of individuals genetically identical to one another, yet it failed to rid itself completely of the remnants of the past. The defect of the Clone illustrates that no matter how often the code is rewritten, the posthuman subject will always exist as a palimpsest. Ancestors' ghosts, cultural traditions, and traumatic events will continually seep into every new version of the individual regardless of how fully the original program is rewritten.

Moreover, by contextualizing this fight for existence within the particularized (and historically-specific) framework of South Asia's caste systems and colonial memory, and by rooting her speculative realities in recognizable forms of Indian social structures, Chabria problematizes the generalization implicit in much Western Science Fiction. A posthuman cannot merely serve as a representation of a technological advance; instead, he/she must symbolize some degree of moral reconciliation. The dystopian lives of the clones illustrate that a life without memory -- no matter how greatly it can be extended through technology -- constitutes some form of death. According to Chabria, authentic vitality lies in the "damaged" Clone which contains memories of a lover's touch dating back to centuries ago and the melody of a resistance now silent. Chabria's vision resonates with both Mbembe's assertion regarding how necropower generates "death worlds" (both physically and culturally) through the process of systematically creating forgetting; and Braidotti's claim that an ethical posthumanism must accept as vital all forms of life (even if they are inconvenient or unmanageable).

Thus, *Clone* posits that we are truly human not because we have perfected our genes but because we are vulnerable and connected to those who came before us. Therefore, *Clone* makes a unique contribution to an emerging body of literature known as Indian Speculative Fiction and to a larger international academic discourse on what it means to be posthuman in a world increasingly governed by technological advancements. The palimpsest, as presented by Chabria, is evidence of the fact that life continues despite attempts at eradication.

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