Posthumanism and Subaltern Dystopia in Select Bengali Dalit Women's Writings

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Bengali Dalit women's life-writings through the intersecting frameworks of dystopian critique and posthumanist methodology. It argues that the caste system itself constitutes a form of lived dystopia—marked by structural violence, ecological precarity, and gendered exclusion. By analyzing selected texts such as "The Sahib Ghost" and "College Life," the paper highlights how these narratives foreground embodied suffering, relational subjectivity, and the entanglements of human and non-human life. Rather than depicting passive victimhood, these writings become powerful acts of resistance that challenge dominant definitions of humanity rooted in caste, patriarchy, and anthropocentrism. The analysis proposes that such texts imagine alternative futures grounded in community, ecological co-survival, and affective resilience. In doing so, they contribute to an emerging vision of Dalit posthumanism—one that does not reject the category of the human but seeks to radically reconfigure it. Life-writing thus becomes a critical site for reclaiming voice, asserting agency, and articulating counter-cartographies of survival in a world shaped by multiple forms of dispossession. Ultimately, this paper suggests that Bengali Dalit women's narratives offer vital pathways for rethinking dystopia as a present reality and for envisioning more just and inclusive futures.

KEYWORDS

Dalit life-writings, Bengali Dalit women, subaltern dystopia, posthumanism, embodied resistance, posthuman feminism, alternative futures.

INTRODUCING POSTHUMANISM AND SUBALTERN DYSTOPIA

In contemporary art and literature, dystopia no longer belongs solely to the realm of speculative fiction, it increasingly reflects the fractured, unjust, and ecologically unstable world we already inhabit. From climate collapse to authoritarian regimes, the dystopian imagination now mirrors the lived realities of violence, displacement, and existential precarity. For Dalit women in India, particularly in Bengal, dystopia is not a distant fantasy but a daily experience shaped by caste-based exclusion, and gendered subjugation. Their life-writing becomes a powerful medium to archive this embodied dystopia, where survival itself is a radical act. In an era marked by ecological devastation and cultural apocalypse, such narratives invite us to rethink human identity and agency. Posthumanism, with its emphasis on the co-belongingness of the human and non-human, offers a vital framework to imagine alternative modes of survival that challenge the Brahmanical-patriarchal order and forge relational, interdependent ways of being.

> Posthumanism is defined by Pramod K Nayar as a "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" (Nayar 2014, 2). Hence, posthumanism may be understood as a philosophical

> perspective that fundamentally reconsiders the nature of subjectivity. It views the human not as an isolated, self-contained entity, but as part of a dynamic assemblage that co-evolves with machines, animals, and other non-human agents. In doing so, it urges a broader, more inclusive definition of life and emphasizes the need for heightened ethical and moral responsibility toward non-human life forms in an era where the boundaries between species are increasingly fluid. According to Nayar, posthumanism carries a clear political stance because it questions the hierarchical structuring of life forms that leads to their domination, exploitation, and even annihilation. He argues that posthumanism is not merely a theoretical framework but a deeply political one. It critiques how anthropocentrism has historically created a hierarchy of life forms—placing the white, able-bodied, heterosexual human male, and in the South Asian context, the Brahmin, at the top. This structure marginalizes others, including animals, nature, subjugated humans, and even machines. Such a hierarchical worldview legitimizes violence, exploitation, and the erasure of both non-human and 'less-than-human' entities within human societies—such as women, Dalits, and indigenous communities. By foregrounding these critiques, one can align posthumanism with decolonial, feminist, and ecocritical politics, demonstrating its potential to dismantle entrenched systems of power and exclusion.

Dystopia, as defined by Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash in their edited volume *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility* (2010), refers to a utopian vision that has failed or serves only a privileged few. As they put it, dystopia "is a utopia that has gone wrong, or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society" (Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash 2010, 1). Dystopia exposes sites of rupture and fragility within society. Concepts like

utopia, dystopia, and chaos are not merely imaginative projections of the future or reflections on the past, they also function as practical tools through which individuals attempt to reinterpret their present circumstances and envision alternative, attainable futures. Often associated with "fearful futures where chaos and ruin prevails" (Claeys 2016, 5), dystopia represents a vision of societal collapse marked by disorder, oppression, or despair. By placing 'subaltern' characters at the center, dystopian narratives highlight the lived realities of those routinely marginalized or silenced within dominant socio-political frameworks. These narratives resonate strongly with contemporary structures of inequality, offering critical insights into systems of oppression and the possibilities of resistance from the margins. This intersection becomes especially potent in the context of Dalit women's autobiographical writings in Bengal, which have emerged as a powerful mode of self-articulation, protest, and memory-making that challenges both patriarchal norms and caste-based exclusions. Writers like Kalyani Thakur Charal, Manju Bala, Chuni Kotal, Smritikana Haoladar, and Lily Halder document lives shaped by everyday humiliations, and cultural erasure.

This paper examines how Bengali Dalit women's life-writings articulate a form of subaltern dystopia rooted in caste oppression, gendered marginalization, and material deprivation. Through a posthumanist lens, the paper re-reads these narratives as complex, embodied accounts of relational existence that challenge the limits of liberal humanist discourse. Focusing on two representative texts—Smritikana Haoladar's short story "The Sahib Ghost" and Lily Halder's autobiographical narrative "College Life"—the analysis reveals how bodily illness, ecological surroundings, and everyday acts of endurance converge to construct alternative ways of being within structures of systemic exclusion. These texts suggest that the dystopian condition functions as an everyday reality for Dalit women, where the distinction between the human and the nonhuman continually dissolves under the pressure of caste hierarchies and material deprivation. Reading

these life writings through the frame of *Dalit dystopia* makes visible the intersections between posthumanism and caste experience, where survival itself becomes an act of resistance and redefinition. The paper thus positions dystopia as both a representational and conceptual bridge linking Dalit existence with posthumanist reimaginings of life, agency, and interdependence.

CASTE, SPECTERS, AND SUBALTERN DYSTOPIA IN SMRITIKANA HAOLADAR'S "THE SAHIB GHOST"

Bengali Dalit writer Smritikana Haoladar, known for her incisive portrayal of caste and gendered realities, explores these intersections in her short story "The Sahib Ghost," translated by Sipra Mukherjee, where a haunting narrative of caste, colonial legacy, and marginalization unfolds within the everyday landscape of an Adivasi village. The story is set around an Ambedkar Birth Anniversary celebration, where the narrator, along with other invited guests, visits the village to deliver speeches and perform Dalit songs. The group stays at the home of an Adivasi sardar, a household illuminated not by electricity, but by cow-dung fuel. This detail, seemingly mundane, reveals the entangled lives of humans and non-humans—cows, cowherds, fuel, and labor—in conditions of deep poverty. Within this ecology of survival, the boundaries between human agency and animal labor gets blurred. It helps us see this coexistence as a marker of a subaltern mode of life that resists anthropocentric norms and speaks to alternate systems of value and care.

The village itself carries the violent imprint of colonial exploitation. The Adivasis had originally been brought from Ranchi as indentured labourers for the indigo plantations- a recurring site of extractive, racialized labor under the British. The historical figure of Biswanath Sardar, who led a rebellion against this system, was executed within the plantation premises, marking the land itself as a site of resistance and erasure. A pond nearby is believed to be haunted by the ghost

of a 'Sahib,' said to prey on village women only, connoting a spectral continuity between colonial violence and gendered subjugation. The spectral presence of the sahib haunts both the geography and the genealogy of the village. While presented as a supernatural concern, this belief functions as a mechanism of dominance—an example of how patriarchal structures weaponize myth and fear to enforce spatial boundaries on women. In doing so, the story reveals a gendered dystopia, where social norms are reinforced through the internalization of cultural narratives that restrict women's freedom under the guise of protection. The ghost, then, becomes a metaphor for the invisible but pervasive forces that regulate women's bodies in caste-bound, rural societies—constructing a lived dystopia where mobility, autonomy, and safety are denied to them.

In her book *Posthuman Feminism* (2022), Rosi Braidotti discusses how, within the posthumanist convergence, the notion of 'man' as the central, dominant figure of the human species is fundamentally decentered. She writes, "Exposing anthropocentric arrogance and the violent exploitation of non-human others is a core value for posthuman feminism, which joins forces with, but also goes beyond, the critique of humanism" (Braidotti 2022, 105). Braidotti argues that in response to the intensifying pace of contemporary life, posthumanist feminism brings together ecological consciousness and technological engagement with a strong commitment to social justice. It reaffirms the perspectives of those historically excluded or marginalized—the subaltern, the dehumanized, the sexualized, the racialized, and those reduced to 'naturalized' others. This decentering is especially relevant when examining how patriarchal systems sustain their dominance by positioning man at the top of social and ontological hierarchies. In this short story, the myth of the ghost that targets only women becomes a tool through which this hierarchy is reinforced. Here, the non-human figure of the ghost is not simply a supernatural element but a cultural mechanism used to discipline the movement and autonomy of women—particularly those from Dalit

or Adivasi communities, who are already relegated to the margins as 'sub-human' or less-than-fully-human. This story evinces how patriarchy employs both myth and the non-human to preserve its authority, making posthumanist critique essential to understanding the gendered dystopia embedded in such narratives.

A striking element of the narrative is the physical appearance of the Adivasi family hosting the visitors. Though socially considered lower caste, the family is described as unusually fair-skinned: "so fair; with sharp noses, and eyes like the blue sea!" (224). The narrator speculates that their grandmother may have had a sexual relationship—consensual or coerced—with a white man, possibly the 'sahib ghost' himself. The legacy of this encounter lives on, not only in skin colour and rumoured ancestry, but in the collective memory and shame of the community. Their fair appearance and prosperity do not spare them from caste-based discrimination. Despite their efforts, they are unable to secure the construction of a school in the village. The figure of the 'Saheb' holds particular significance in this context, and Anand Teltumbde's perspective as an Indian scholar and human rights activist offers valuable insight. He explains that the term 'Saheb' was originally used "for an Englishman but later used as an honorific, for natives who were educated, westernized and placed in bureaucratic authority. It denoted someone far above the masses, one who was endowed with authority and power. It was the icon of the saviour." (Gordin, Michael D., Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash 253). In view of Teltumbde, the Saheb figure is imagined as a liberator—someone who would lead the people out of bondage toward progress, provided the masses rallied behind him. However, in the story under discussion, this imagined role is subverted: though the person referred to as 'Saheb' makes efforts to uplift the community by attempting to establish a school, he receives no support due to his lower-caste identity. Even wealth, land, or physical traits associated with upper-caste or colonial privilege cannot shield them from the stigma. As the narrator laments, "Not

riches, not land, not the colour of your skin, nothing could erase that poisonous identity" (Chatterjee and Mukherjee 2021, 226). This line underscores the dystopian essence of caste: it is a deeply entrenched, inescapable structure that governs social perception and access to resources, regardless of material progress. In his book chapter titled "Making and Unmaking of the Marginal Subject: How a Dalit Migrant Remembers the Nonhuman," Samrat Sengupta emphasizes the relational worldview held by Dalit communities, observing that, "Dalit subjects live with other nonhumans in a shared sense of precarity" (Sengupta 2025, 37). Sengupta observes that the human and the nonhuman exist in a dynamic relationship of mutual becoming and unbecoming—marked by closeness and conflict, comprehension and mystery—rather than maintaining the human's traditionally superior ontological status. This observation finds powerful resonance in "The Sahib Ghost," where the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman blur within a shared landscape of vulnerability and survival. Viewed through the dystopian lens, Haoladar's narrative unfolds in a world already marked by decay and dispossession, where the jungle, clay and hurricane lamps, cow-dung fuel, cows, a haunted pond, and a beloved milk-white horse coexist with human lives. The story's ecology of coexistence evokes a dystopic environment shaped by the spectral and the material, where life itself is sustained through precarious interdependence. In a society riddled with hunger, poverty, colonial residue, caste hierarchies, gendered violence, class divides, and illness—in short, an apocalyptic social reality, centering the human only reinforces entrenched violence and exclusion. The posthumanist lens here enables a radical reorientation, shifting attention from the autonomous subject to relational modes of being that challenge anthropocentric privilege. "The Sahib Ghost" thus reveals that human identity, particularly for Dalit and Adivasi communities, emerges through entanglements with nonhuman agents—land, animals, ghosts, and collective memory. Reading the story as a *Dalit dystopia* underscores how survival itself becomes

an act of resistance within a collapsing moral and ecological order, compelling a rethinking of humanist ideals and their exclusions.

BODIES IN CRISIS: ILLNESS, CASTE, AND THE POSTHUMAN IN "COLLEGE LIFE"

Bengali Dalit writer Lily Halder, whose autobiographical narratives lay bare the textures of everyday oppression and endurance, explores a more intimate form of dystopia in "College Life," translated by Debi Chatterjee. Here, dystopia does not manifest through grand political collapse or futuristic decay but through the quiet, relentless weight of caste, poverty, and bodily suffering. The text begins with a moment of shared vulnerability: Lily and her brother Bablu are both afflicted by chickenpox, their illness coinciding with the news that their grandmother, suffering from diabetes, is gravely unwell in the village. Lily's visit to her uncle's home in Kanchan Nagar, a resettlement colony in Burdwan allocated to refugee families, offers a brief glimpse of ecological beauty that contrasts sharply with the hardship in the rest of her narrative. The land is lush with bakul trees, flowering shrubs, and even sightings of peacocks in the forest nearby. The scent of bakul flowers fills the air, and the Damodar River flows in the background, a world where the human and non-human co-inhabit space in quiet interdependence. This sensory detail is not incidental; it becomes significant when viewed through a posthumanist lens. Nature is not romanticized here but acts as a silent, resilient presence alongside the human figures struggling for survival. The environment becomes part of the fabric of the Dalit experience. The serenity of the landscape is soon interrupted by tragedy. Bablu is diagnosed with a brain tumor just days after their arrival. Illness signals the fragile boundaries of life in marginalized communities where emotional and financial support are scarce. Arko Chattopadhyay in his recent book *Posthumanism: Politics of*

Subjectivity (2025) comments that, "Most of the human body is comprised of nunhuman phenomena and life- forms like bacteria, viruses and proteins. This bio-environmentalist conception makes us think about the fact that the 'human' is nothing but a cultural name for the corporeal" (Chattopadhyay 2025, 7). Bablu's illness, first chickenpox and later a brain tumour, embodies this posthumanist understanding of the body as a site of entanglement with nonhuman agents. His gradual deterioration underscores the vulnerability of the human body, and the subaltern dystopia. The body in this narrative is not a sovereign entity but one that is constantly shaped, invaded, and defined by both biological and socio-political forces, reinforcing the idea that 'the human' is never purely human, but always already entangled with the nonhuman. After being diagnosed with a brain tumor, Bablu stays in the hospital for two months. The family's inability to afford medical treatment forces them to turn toward faith as a last resort. Lily recounts that their father placed great trust in the sanctity of religious ritual, believing that "the holy water from the prayer pot at his home is to be drink, all ailments would be cured as per the father's Gurudev." Her mother, desperate and powerless in the face of Bablu's worsening condition, begins administering the holy water to both Bablu and the ailing grandmother, Thakuma. Lily offers a striking observation:

> "We were witness to how poor families took recourse to religion for survival!" (Chatterjee and Mukherjee 2021, 359).

This line exposes the systemic failure of institutions—medical, economic, and social—that leaves the marginalized with no choice but to rely on spiritual hope in place of tangible care. When Bablu is finally discharged from the hospital, it is with the expectation that medicine will accompany his recovery. Yet reality is far crueler. The father, due to the crushing weight of poverty, does not buy

the required medicines. The family lacks even sufficient rice to feed everyone. In such a context, holy water becomes the only available "remedy." This situation encapsulates a form of social dystopia in which care is replaced with ritual, medicine with belief, and recovery with resignation. As Bablu's condition deteriorates, he gradually loses his eyesight. George Lundskow in his book *The Sociology of Religion: A Substantive and Transdisciplinary Approach* (2008) says how throughout history, religion has provided a response to the deep uncertainties of human existence. He writes, "Ancient in history, religion seems at once like a grand monument to humanity's greatest aspirations and an edifice to our profoundest horrors. From religion rises hope, liberation, and purpose, but also cruelty, war, and destruction." (Lundskow 2008, XI) By engaging with religion's teachings and participating in its rituals, individuals find meaning in life where otherwise there might only be emptiness and despair. Religious beliefs represent the collective values of society; because they emerge from shared social life rather than individual experience, they are often perceived by individuals as timeless and transcendent truths. In this story, Bablu's father's reliance on Gurudev's holy water rather than medical treatment reflects how deeply religious authority can shape decision-making, especially among those facing poverty and limited access to healthcare. His faith in spiritual remedies over science is not merely personal but emerges from a broader social condition where economic hardship leaves people vulnerable to the comforting promises of religious figures. For many like him, religion becomes a coping mechanism—a way to create meaning and hope in the face of helplessness. In such moments, individuals develop emotional and spiritual connections that transcend the tangible world, cultivating a sense of the supernatural when material remedies are out of reach.

As Lily navigates the world of higher education, caste follows her into the classroom. She hears whispers among her peers about the

Scheduled Caste stipend she receives, a reminder that her identity is constantly under surveillance, her merit questioned, her presence in the college space marked as conditional. Lily's decision to work as a salesgirl to support her family financially underscores how survival is a collective, embodied labor in Dalit lives. Reflecting on her place within the family structure, she feels: "In families boys are needed. There is no value of the survival of ugly, dark-complexioned, lanky girls like me" (360). This painful self-assessment is not just personal; it is culturally constructed. The social dystopia Lily inhabits is not only external but internalized. Lily's internalized sense of worthlessness arises from a social order that privileges masculinity, fair skin, and wealth, while marginalizing women, those with dark complexions, and the economically deprived. The postanthropocentric perspective, along with posthumanist feminism, offers the potential challenge these deeply embedded discursive hierarchies.

Bablu, despite his will to survive, ultimately dies—an outcome of neglect, and poverty. His death, like his illness, is a slow erasure caused by lack of access to medicine, food, and care. From a posthumanist perspective, these narrative lays bare the precarious materiality of the Dalit body, where survival depends not only on biology or willpower, but on the surrounding assemblage of non-human agents—medicine, food, religious objects, family labor, and institutional absence. These forces come together in ways that determine life and death, healing or decay.

Lily's struggle with tuberculosis further intensifies the text's portrayal of casteed dystopia. When Lily herself is diagnosed with TB, she clutches onto a volume of Tagore's essays—a striking juxtaposition between the rarefied world of canonical literature and the gritty, starving reality of her own life. The act of reading becomes both a form of solace and resistance, a means to retain dignity and pursue intellectual growth even as the body weakens. Despite her illness, Lily manages to obtain injections and three months' worth of medication,

but these efforts exist in stark contrast to the basic lack of food. Her relatives advise her to eat nourishing meals to aid her recovery, but she painfully admits she can scarcely manage one square meal a day. The situation worsens when Lily's father is also diagnosed with TB. In a quiet, almost tragic act of sacrifice, she gives him the same medicines she had collected for herself through a relative. Aaron Bradshaw in his book chapter "Posthuman(izing) Biomedicine" writes,

> …truth is not a future consensus reached when we know what is really happening behind-the-scenes of illness and disease, but an ongoing manifestation of our pragmatic engagements with the world, in which both the world, ourselves, and our microbial others are constantly reconfigured. (Bradshaw 2023, 39)

Bradshaw's perspective becomes particularly relevant in this context, as recognizing non-human actors like microbes, bacteria, and environmental factors in the experience of illness helps bridge the gap between lived bodily realities and a posthumanist understanding of health as shaped through human and non-human entanglements. This view sees illness as not simply residing within individual bodies, but as distributed across the entangled material agencies of humans and non-humans. The human body's entanglement with tumor, diabetes, TB, and chicken pox challenges the notion of an autonomous, self-contained subject and instead highlights the need for an ethics that recognizes survival as unstable, shared, and shaped by both human and non-human forces. Yet even in this atmosphere of decay and despair, Lily turns toward creativity and self-articulation. She begins to write and publish, and this activity rekindles her desire to learn: she feels the need to read more books to write better. This moment is quietly transformative. Her body, though deteriorating, becomes a site of meaning-making rather than passive suffering. She reclaims

agency through language and literature, asserting that intellectual life is not the privilege of the well-fed or upper-caste, but a space that can be re-entered through sheer will, even in dystopic conditions. From a posthumanist perspective, Lily's survival is sustained not by humanist institutions, but by an assemblage of textual encounters, bodily endurance, illness, food (or its absence), and family relations. Her experience redefines what it means to be human—not as an autonomous, rational subject, but as a being radically shaped by vulnerability, interdependence, and the persistent will to imagine otherwise.

Lily Halder's "College Life" powerfully illustrates how human existence, especially for the caste-marginalized, is mediated through a precarious assemblage of injections, brain tumors, and unpurchased medicines. The body is not autonomous but deeply dependent on material conditions—food, treatment, familial labor, and access to aid. In this dystopic world, where poverty dictates life and death, even the most basic medical care becomes a luxury. Yet, amidst this collapse of institutional support, books emerge as quiet companions in crisis. Tagore's essays in Lily's hands are more than reading material—they are an anchor of thought and imagination when the body fails. Nature, too, offers fleeting moments of respite. The scent of the bakul tree, the rustle of leaves, and the presence of peacocks become sensory fragments of comfort—non-human presences that provide a temporary escape from social cruelty. In a world ravaged by the blindness of casteism, patriarchal devaluation, and religious fatalism, Halder's narrative invites a posthumanist reading—one that sees survival not as a triumph of the human subject, but as an entangled, fragile negotiation with ecology, illness, and inherited oppression. Posthumanism here does not transcend the body but returns us to it—exposing its vulnerabilities while also expanding our understanding of relational, embodied endurance within an apocalyptic social order.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS ETHICS OF CO-SURVIVAL?

> Rosi Braidotti argues, "Posthuman feminist and other critical theorists need to resist hasty and reactive recompositions of cosmopolitan bonds, especially those made of fear" (Braidotti 2018, 690).

Braidotti suggests that instead of seeking a single universal model, it is more productive to cultivate multiple, interconnected forms of alliance, community, and human composition—diverse ways of becoming-world together. She emphasizes the need for emotionally engaged and relational frameworks to comprehend the emerging power structures that define contemporary existence. Social categories such as caste, race, gender, age, and ability still determine who is seen as fully human. While global crises affect everyone, the experience of such crises is neither uniform nor impartial; it is shaped by entrenched social hierarchies and exclusions. As Braidotti reminds us, acknowledging collective vulnerability must not obscure the structural inequalities that determine who counts as fully human. Within this context, Bengali Dalit women's life-writings provide a vital ground for exploring the relationship between dystopia, Dalit experience, and posthumanism. These narratives do not depict dystopia as a speculative vision but as a lived and ongoing condition born of caste, gendered violence, poverty, and ecological fragility.

Approaching these life writings through a posthumanist framework does not impose an external theory on Dalit texts; it helps illuminate how they already embody a posthuman ethics from within marginality. Their engagement with bodily suffering, nonhuman presences, and ecological interdependence reveals an alternative understanding of humanity—one grounded in vulnerability, endurance, and connection rather than mastery or hierarchy. A Dalit posthumanism thus reimagines the human as relational, plural, and co-constituted within networks of caste, ecology, and community. Bengali Dalit

women's life-writings transform dystopia from a static image of despair into a dynamic mode of witnessing and reimagining. They expose the dystopic textures of everyday existence while envisioning new ethical forms of co-survival. Through these acts of narration, the Dalit woman becomes both the chronicler and the re-creator of her world, proposing futures where human and nonhuman, body and environment, memory and resistance converge to reshape life beyond the boundaries of caste and exclusion.

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