

Selling the Self: Biopolitics and Biocapitalism in Richard Powers's
Generosity: An Enhancement

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ABSTRACT

Science fiction or sci fi often presents the theme of human transformation and alteration of human identity through technological advancement. Writers of science fiction often speculate on human augmentation to question the binary of natural and artificial. While numerous science fiction authors have explored the theme of physical augmentation, Richard Powers's approach represents a novel undertaking in addressing the issue of moral enhancement. In his narratives, enhancement becomes a double-edged sword. While enhancement provides the promise of greater potentiality, it also raises probing questions about the nature of human identity and the consequences of pushing the boundaries of natural evolution.

Generosity: An Enhancement presents a speculative vision of genetic enhancement and its capitalist underpinnings. It depicts the commodification of the human body as an object of scientific and economic exploitation. Powers questions the impact of posthuman capitalism by showing how genetic engineering is used to turn human into a commodity. In his narrative, biotechnology becomes a tool not only for scientific exploration but also for profit-making. It raises questions about autonomy, identity, and ethics. In the midst of a world transformed by advances in genetic engineering and human enhancement, the novel centers on a protagonist whose genuine optimism and inner strength spark both scientific interest and ethical debate. The research article titled “*Selling the Self: Biopolitics and Biocapitalism in Richard Powers’s Generosity: An Enhancement*” examines how the novel critiques the commodification of human life and genetic enhancement within the framework of biocapitalism, exploring the intersection of biopolitics, technology, and commercial exploitation.

Keywords: Biocapitalism, Biopolitics, Commodification, Human enhancement, Bioethics.

Posthuman capitalism emerges at the convergence of two interrelated ideas: posthumanism and the economics of late capitalism. Posthumanism critiques the belief that humans are at the center of the universe, since it is the theory that puts greater importance on the sociocultural relation of humans, machines, and the environment. Late capitalism is defined by the globalization of the market, advancements in technology, and the focus on the purchase of services and ideas rather than tangible goods. It serves as structural base for this convergence. They form a posthuman capitalism that challenges human identity, labor, and worth along with the system of value replacing it with frameworks of machines, data, and biological processes. This marks a different form of evolution not at the technological level but rather the functionality of capitalism itself. In classical industrial form of capitalism, labour and resources are

the main focus. But in the modern world, value is found in algorithms, data, and biotechnologies. Thus, capitalism in this framework contests the basic concepts of work, agency, and economic value.

There are various forms of posthuman capitalism, all of which overlap with each other. Each of these forms emphasizes the various aspects of how capitalistic forms are reconfigured by advanced technology. Within these interconnected systems, one significant phenomenon is biocapitalism, where the biological activities of human and non-human life become central to value creation and market growth. Biocapitalism is a deep transformation in how living bodies are thought, valued, and used in the capitalist system. It entails the conversion of biological components (from tissues, cells, and genes to whole organs) into commodities that can be harvested, exchanged, patented, and commodified. Biocapitalism therefore redefines conventional concepts of bodily autonomy, prompting imperative questions concerning the moral limits of the commodification of life itself.

In *Generosity: An Enhancement*, Powers presents a serious consideration of biocapitalism with attention to genetic engineering and human enhancement. Biocapitalism is deeply embedded in the story through its consideration of biotechnology and commodifying of human qualities. Powers examines the ethical and moral challenges of genetic enhancement, presenting a world where emotional and biological features are no longer innate but engineered and optimized. The novel underlines the capitalistic commodification of human traits, symptomatic of the very essence of posthuman capitalism in which biological factors are turned into marketable commodities. In the figure of Thassadit Amzwar, whose genetic makeup for happiness provokes interest from biotech companies, Powers deplores the capitalist desire to commodify even the most intimate parts of human life. The novel provides a somber message, demonstrating how the pursuit of perfection and market supremacy risks dismantling individuality, moral character, and social parity, ultimately challenging readers to consider the implications of a posthuman capitalist world.

The novel explores the ethical and emotional dimensions of posthuman existence through the narrative of Thassadit Amzwar, a young lady who possess hyperthymia. Thassa, an Algerian Berber refugee and university student, exhibits an exceptional ability for joy that seems to surpass conventional human emotional spectra. The novel proposes the idea of a “happiness gene” capable of enhancing the whole species. Thassa remains happy despite growing up through the horrors of the Algerian Civil War. The novelist describes Thassa as “a happy girl passes through the world’s wretchedness and stays happy” (Powers 40). He employs Thassa’s steadfast optimism to critique society’s fixation on happiness, while simultaneously examining the dangers of reducing human emotions to mere genetic sequences. As a charismatic and innovative geneticist, Thomas Kurton is fascinated by the prospect of elucidating the genetic foundation of happiness, motivated by the conviction that emotional states may be scientifically comprehended, isolated, and even augmented. Thassa’s distinct character serves as the impetus for his research, as Kurton perceives her as essential to a genetic advancement that could render permanent bliss attainable for everyone.

Thassa embodies the transformation of an individual into a commodity, as her exceptional emotional resilience and persistent happiness are exploited by scientific and corporate interests. Thassa’s “hyperthymia,” becomes the focal point of scientific exploration, reducing her identity to a genetic phenomenon that can be exploited for profit. Her genetic code becomes a contested resource, with various stakeholders seeking to exploit her uniqueness. Her body, therefore, is no longer her own; it becomes an economic and scientific phenomenon subjected to medical scrutiny, corporate patenting, and media sensationalism. As Kaushik Sunder Rajan in *Biocapital* remarks, “Every individual, because of his or her genomic risk profile, is a potential target for therapeutic intervention. In this calculus, every individual is a patient-in-waiting and, simultaneously, a consumer-in-waiting” (132). Powers critiques the loss of individual agency in a society where the human body is valued for its marketability rather than its inherent worth.

“Happiness becomes ‘one fungible commodity that the future will trade in,’ and Thassa herself is portrayed as a ‘publicly traded commodity’ in an insecure ‘market’ of feelings” (187).

Thomas Kurton, a scientist with a corporate-driven agenda, embodies the techno-capitalist mindset that values genetic enhancement as a lucrative industry rather than a humanitarian advancement. His pursuit of Thassa’s genetic anomaly illustrates the reduction of human complexity into a dataset for economic exploitation. He believes that Thassa’s intense joy can be traced to a specific genetic trait, which, if identified, could be used to improve the emotional well-being of the wider population. Kurton views life and biology as raw materials for optimization and commercialization. His vision of enhancement is a pivotal exploration of biocapitalist ideology, where the human body is treated as a modifiable and marketable entity. Kurton’s statement - *“Enhancement. Why shouldn’t we make ourselves better than we are now? We’re incomplete. Why leave something as fabulous as life up to chance?”* (Powers 29) - reveals a philosophy rooted in the commodification of human biology.

Kurton’s ambition to create “superior” humans underscores the commodification of human identity. Genetic traits, such as happiness, are treated as marketable assets, reflecting the shift from intrinsic human value to economic potential. Kurton’s research is firmly rooted in monetising scientific discoveries. He states during a presentation, “Gene sequencing is getting a hundred times cheaper and faster every year. Someday you’ll be able to order behavioral-trait tests for less than you’d pay a psychological testing service. And the answers won’t depend on self-reporting” (Powers 226). The novel provides instances which vividly portray Kurton’s vision of human enhancement and the resulting commodification of human identity. Kurton’s model of genetic enhancement is exemplified in his explanation to science journalist Tonia Schiff about artificial chromosome pairs: *“We can insert them, right alongside the regular set, and load them up with useful genes, as we discover them. And we can flick these genes off and on as desired”*

(Powers 107). This “plug-and-play” model of genetic modification reduces human attributes to purchasable upgrades, much like software patches, illustrating how biotechnology commodifies human identity.

The novel critiques the biopolitical implications of genetic ownership, where even the building blocks of life become commodities: “One-fifth of human genes have already been patented. You have to pay a license fee just to look at them. People like Thomas Kurton buy and sell genetic material like it’s movie rights” (Powers 30). This scenario demonstrates the biopolitical implications of owning and regulating access to genetic material. Kurton’s corporate ventures and scientific achievements, which include patented genetic sequences, highlight the biopolitical control exerted by corporations over the fundamental aspects of life. Powers’ critique of Kurton’s scientific pursuits is profoundly shaped by Foucault’s conceptual framework of biopolitics. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault asserts, “Biopolitics takes control of life and populations, shaping and regulating them to serve economic interests” (71).

Powers critiques the role of corporate institutions like Truecyte, which seeks to capitalise on Thassa’s genetic predisposition to happiness. Thassa becomes the subject of intense scientific and corporate interest, as her unique genetic makeup is positioned as a breakthrough in biotechnological enhancement. Thassa’s genetic information is extracted and studied under the assumption that “If not Truecyte, then some other research group, private or public, will pinpoint whatever part of the secret of happiness lies hidden in the body” (Powers 158). Truecyte, embodying the capitalist drive to patent and market human biology, views Thassa not as an autonomous individual but as intellectual property - a genetic resource to be decoded, replicated, and sold. The corporation’s pursuit of her genetic material highlights the novel’s central tension: the posthuman body as a site of economic exploitation. Powers critiques this commodification by illustrating how Thassa’s identity is reduced to a product of scientific curiosity and financial gain. Through Thassa’s transformation into a corporate asset, *Generosity*

underscores the dangers of a world where human essence is no longer intrinsic but monetised, further blurring the lines between scientific progress and capitalist exploitation.

Through the character of Thassa, whose genetic propensity for happiness makes her a target of scientific and commercial interests, Powers examines the commodification of the transhuman. Thassa's distinct personality is immediately recognized as a possible "enhancement" that may be manufactured and marketed, transforming her whole being into a commodity for the public to purchase. "She succumbs fatalistically to the lab tests. If someone interesting truly does coil up in her cells, someone will find it. If not Truecyte, then some other research group, private or public, will pinpoint whatever part of the secret of happiness lies hidden in the body" (Powers 160-61). As Vandana Shiva in *Stolen Harvest* said, "Just as industrial agriculture views soil as a commodity to be exploited for maximum yield, the biotech industry views human and animal bodies as raw material for genetic engineering and profit" (121).

By effectively turning her identity into a marketable commodity, Thassa is deprived of her autonomy and is exposed to a type of victimization motivated by capitalist interests. As media and scientists try to take advantage of Thassa's genetic uniqueness, she finds herself trapped in a system driven by capitalist motives. As Braidotti in *The Posthuman* exposes, "Advanced capitalism both invests and profits from the scientific and economic control and the commodification of all that lives. This context produces a paradoxical and rather opportunistic form of post-anthropocentrism on the part of market forces which happily trade on Life itself" (59). Thassa's DNA is being extracted for research purposes, reflecting the broader implications of biotechnological exploitation and the reduction of human identity to a mere subject of scientific investigation. Here, Powers critiques biocapitalism by illustrating how human beings are increasingly reduced to their genetic codes, with their physical and emotional attributes commodified for profit. In the world of biocapitalism, personal autonomy and individual identity become secondary to the economic interests that drive the commercialization of biological and genetic resources. Medical

corporations aggressively compete for access to Thassa's genetic material, especially her eggs, perceiving them as a lucrative resource for the prospective commercialization of her unique genetic predisposition towards happiness. "The market for her eggs will burst as spectacularly as any speculative bubble" (Powers 309). Powers thus critiques the ethical implications of a system where human lives and experiences are measured, manipulated, and marketed for economic benefit, raising questions about the limits of human subjectivity in the face of technological exploitation.

In *Generosity: An Enhancement*, the narrative compellingly explores the intersections of biocapitalism and biopolitics, critiquing the commodification of human identity in a posthuman capitalist framework. The novel vividly illustrates how genetic material, particularly Thassadit Amzwar's genetic predisposition for happiness, becomes a contested site of scientific and corporate interests. Through the character of Thomas Kurton and the Truecyte Corporation, Powers reveals the ethical and existential dilemmas of treating human attributes as marketable assets. The story underscores the loss of personal autonomy, as Thassa's unique genetic makeup is transformed into a public commodity subjected to scientific scrutiny, media sensationalism, and corporate exploitation. By highlighting the reduction of human complexity to data points and economic value, Powers critiques the broader implications of biocapitalism, where even the most intimate aspects of life are commodified. Ultimately, *the novel* offers a warning, encouraging readers to consider the moral boundaries of technological advancement and the potential erosion of individuality in a world driven by profit and genetic manipulation.

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