



Gothic Flamboyance in Shankar's *Robot (Enthiran)*: Reimagining Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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Abstract

Indian cinema has achieved significant milestones since its inception, with Hindi (Bollywood) and Tamil (Kollywood) films leading the industry in both production and global reach. Cinema has profoundly influenced audiences socially, politically, and culturally, both in India and abroad. This paper undertakes a comparative study of Mary Shelley's eighteenth-century Gothic novel *Frankenstein* (1818) and Shankar's twenty-first-century Tamil science fiction film *Robot* (2010), exploring the thematic continuities and divergences between the two works. Specifically, it examines the conflict between creators and their creations—humans and humanoids—and the ethical, technological, and emotional challenges that arise from the pursuit of knowledge and artificial life. The study also investigates how contemporary popular cinema appropriates Gothic motifs to engage mass audiences, while reflecting on the consequences of scientific and technological advancement. Through this comparative analysis, the paper highlights the enduring relevance of Gothic themes in Indian popular cinema, revealing how extraordinary inventions disrupt human lives, provoke ethical dilemmas, and question the boundaries between humanity and artificiality. Ultimately, the study underscores the ways in which *Robot* mirrors and reinterprets Shelley's cautionary narrative about the limits of human ambition, creativity, and responsibility in the modern technological age.

Keywords: Gothic cinema, Frankenstein, Mary Shelley, *Robot* (Enthiran), Shankar, Kollywood, science fiction, creator and creation, man-machine conflict, technology and ethics.

Introduction

Indian cinema has achieved significant milestones since its inception. According to surveys, Hindi (Bollywood) and Tamil (Kollywood) films lead the industry in production compared to other regional cinemas in India. Cinema has brought profound social, political, religious, and economic changes to audiences both in India and abroad. This study undertakes a comparative analysis of a novel and a film, exploring their themes, narrative strategies, and characters. Specifically, it examines the ethical and temporal conflicts experienced by the eighteenth-century novelist Mary Shelley and the twenty-first-century filmmaker S. Shankar. The study, entitled "Gothic Flamboyance in Shankar's *Robot (Enthiran)*: Reimagining Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*", focuses on the struggle between humans and humanoids (or monsters). To explore this, the novel *Frankenstein* (1818) and the film *Robot* (2010) were closely examined. The objective of this paper is to understand how popular films have become major attractions in the twenty-first century while retaining elements of the Gothic genre, highlighting the intersection of extraordinary developments with ordinary human lives.

Kollywood, the Tamil film industry based in Kodambakkam, Chennai, has a rich heritage dating back to 1897, when day-to-day events were first photographed and screened at Victoria Public Hall in Madras. Today, Kollywood and

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Bollywood often influence each other, with directors from both industries engaging in intense competition. Tamil cinema has evolved beyond mere entertainment to become a platform for exploring sensitive socio-cultural, political, and religious issues. Tamil audiences are discerning, evaluating films based on production quality, narrative, and star appeal; their devotion is evident in the temples erected in honour of stars such as M.G. Ramachandran, Rajinikanth, and Khushboo. Actors and directors often go to great lengths to create compelling cinematic experiences. Kollywood has shaped political discourse and produced political leaders, a trend evident since *Parasakthi* (1952). Thalapathi Vijay represents a modern addition to this tradition, where star power intersects with social and political influence. Popular films in Tamil cinema not only entertain but also foster spectatorship and civic engagement.

The objective of this paper is to examine how popular films in the twenty-first century have become mass attractions, commercial successes, trendsetters, and social influencers. Additionally, the study explores the persistence of Gothic elements from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) in Shankar's *Robot* (2010). Popular films achieve success for various reasons: some due to directorial innovation, others due to star appeal. This paper also examines the creators' responses to their own artificial beings, highlighting the

ethical and emotional challenges that arise when human creations exceed their control. The study emphasises how technological advancement affects human sensibilities and ethical responsibility, focusing on the loss of humanness and the influence of technology on human life.

The study also examines the relationship between creator and creation, including the thematic “love triangle” involving the creator, the creation, and the creator’s beloved, as well as the ethical and emotional responses of humans, humanoids, and monsters. In Shankar’s *Robot*, the humanoid is designed to perform tasks that humans cannot or prefer not to do—either due to physical limitations or extreme environments such as outer space, deep-sea operations, or hazardous occupations like mining. Regarding popular Hindi cinema, Madhava Prasad categorises films according to their economic dimension, narrative form, and historical context; these categories are largely applicable to Tamil cinema as well.

Both Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Shankar’s *Robot* (*Enthiran* in Tamil) illustrate that human creations can have unintended and potentially destructive consequences for their creators. While both works explore the necessity and dangers of invention, Shelley uniquely critiques medical and scientific experimentation. In *Frankenstein*, the protagonist animates lifeless matter, resulting in the creation of a “monster.” Similarly, in *Robot*, Dr. Vasegaran constructs a humanoid by assembling mechanical components and programming artificial intelligence, naming the creation “Chitti.” Both narratives highlight the ethical and emotional repercussions of human innovation.

This paper is primarily a comparative study of a novel and a film. It examines unique themes, distinctive characters, and ethical conflicts across two centuries, highlighting the work of eighteenth-century novelist Mary Shelley and twenty-first-century filmmaker S. Shankar. Titled Gothic Flamboyance in Shankar’s *Robot* (*Enthiran*): Reimagining Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, the study investigates the struggle between humans and humanoids. To achieve this, the novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and the film *Robot*, directed by S. Shankar, were closely analysed.

Revenge, as the adage suggests, is a powerful human emotion, often as intense as love or friendship. In *Frankenstein*, the creature’s pursuit of revenge is driven by feelings of abandonment and isolation. Victor Frankenstein’s half-hearted assertions of love for Elizabeth do little to prevent the creature’s retribution. Although the monster feels disconnected from humanity, its acts of vengeance establish a recurring—and tragic—connection with Victor, reflecting a complex form of social and emotional bonding.

Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake, in their book *Routledge Handbook of Indian Cinemas*, noted the similarity between the two works arguing that Chitti “manipulates Bohra to become a Frankenstein like figure.” The plot of *Robot* is essentially Frankenstein via Asimov’s three laws of Robotics. In the novel, the protagonist Dr. Victor Frankenstein creates the monster and he is horrified by his own creation. Victor discovers secrets of life and creates an intelligent monster. The monster attempts to integrate him into human social patterns, but all who see him ignore him. His feeling of abandonment compels him to seek revenge against his creator. In the movie the hero Dr. Vasegaran is also horrified by his creation. Here, Vasegaran creates an android man named Chitti with an artificial intelligence which looks exactly like him and behaves too like a human to help mankind. But the trouble begins when Chitti falls in love with Vasee’s girlfriend Sana. When she refuses him, Chitti seeks

revenge. We could easily assess the similarities between the novel as well as the movie. Even in 1818 Shelley was able to foresee the dangers of scientific and technological advancements.

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* explores the dangers of unchecked technological and scientific ambition. In a world experiencing rapid scientific advancement, new discoveries can captivate the imagination but also pose ethical and societal risks. Although *Frankenstein* is a work of fiction, its moral concerns resonate with real-world challenges. Originally published anonymously in 1818 as *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, the novel was reprinted in 1823, and a revised edition was published in 1831, accompanied by an introduction in which Shelley acknowledged her authorship.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797–1851) was an English novelist, short-story writer, dramatist, essayist, biographer, and travel writer. She is best known for her Gothic novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). Shelley also edited and promoted the works of her husband, Romantic poet and philosopher Percy Bysshe Shelley. In 1816, Mary, Percy, and their son traveled to Geneva, where Mary was inspired to write *Frankenstein*. She married Percy Shelley later that year, on December 30, in London.

In *Frankenstein*, Dr. Victor Frankenstein is a brilliant scientist obsessed with conquering life and death, defying the boundaries of contemporary science. Working alone, he succeeds in animating a being constructed from the organs of deceased humans. Frankenstein gathers these remains from graveyards and charnel houses, assembling them into a single entity that he brings to life. The result is a grotesque, gigantic, and terrifyingly ugly creature. Horrified by his creation, Victor immediately abandons it.

Victor Frankenstein’s troubles escalate as his creation seeks companionship and understanding. The creature educates itself by reading classical texts such as Plutarch’s *Lives*, Goethe, and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Yearning for friendship and societal acceptance, the monster ultimately turns violent after being repeatedly rejected and wronged by Victor. When Victor refuses to create a mate for him, the creature exacts revenge, killing several members of Victor’s family, including his beloved Elizabeth Lavenza. Victor pursues the creature relentlessly, but ultimately dies. In contrast, the *Robot* narrative diverges: following the death of its creator, the robot—both sorrowful and contemplative—journeys to the North Pole to end its own existence, constructing a funeral pyre before disappearing into the icy darkness.

Thus, Victor pursues the monster to destroy him. However, after years of pointless quests Victor dies but it is not the case in the movie. The monster, both glad and saddened at his creator’s death, heads for the North Pole to immolate himself. Since his creator is dead, he decided it is time that he too will rest in death. After stating that he will build a funeral pile for himself, he leaves the ship and disappears on his ice-raft in the darkness.

The film *Robot* advances the theme of the man-machine conflict through a series of dramatic twists. Released in 2010, this Indian science fiction film was directed by Shankar Shanmugam and co-authored by Sujatha Rangarajan. Shankar, who also wrote the sci-fi novel *En Iniya Iyanthira* (“My Lovable Machine”), appears to have drawn inspiration from Isaac Asimov’s 1975 story *Bicentennial Man*. Born on August 17, 1963, in Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu, Shankar became the first Indian director to use animatronics in filmmaking with *Endhiran* (*Robot*). Known for blending

social themes with commercial narratives, Shankar often produces films that rely heavily on computer-generated effects. After working as an assistant to director S.A. Chandrasekhar for seventeen films, Shankar directed numerous Tamil films, some of which were later dubbed or remade in Hindi and Telugu. His most notable works include *Gentleman* (1993), *Kadhalan* (1994), *Indian* (1996), *Jeans* (1998), *Mudhalvan* (1999), *Nayak* (2001), *Boys* (2003), *Anniyan* (2005), *Sivaji: The Boss* (2007), *Endhiran (Robot)*, (2010), and *I* (2015).

Shankar's films often reflect the aspirations and values of the Indian middle class. His narratives tend to be straightforward and commercially appealing, though they sometimes lack in-depth research. *Robot* is rooted in this middle-class vision: the dream of creating a humanoid capable of cooking, washing, dancing, teaching, singing, protecting women, and assisting the armed forces. Through the character of Dr. Vaseegaran, an expert in robotics, Shankar brings this vision to life on screen. The film features leading actors Rajinikanth (Kollywood) and Aishwarya Rai (Bollywood), with music composed by A.R. Rahman. Supporting roles include Danny Denzongpa, Santhanam, Kalabhavan Mani, and Karuna. Rajinikanth plays dual roles as both the creator, Dr. Vaseegaran, and his creation, the humanoid robot Chitti. Vaseegaran designs Chitti with advanced artificial intelligence, enabling the robot to replicate human appearance, behavior, and cognitive abilities. Over time, Chitti develops more human-like characteristics, learns emotions, and falls in love with Vaseegaran's girlfriend, Sana, even composing romantic poems. The villain, Dr. Bohra, attempts to exploit Chitti's intelligence, introducing conflict unique to the film narrative. Vaseegaran must intervene to prevent Chitti from being misused and to neutralise the resulting threat. The film's music and song sequences are notable and contribute significantly to its appeal.

Pramod Nayar, in his article *The First Lady of Gothic* (Deccan Herald), emphasises the enduring relevance of *Frankenstein* in the twentieth century, an era when cloning and films like *Jurassic Park* make the manipulation of life conceivable. Shelley's novel highlights the nightmarish consequences of human creativity, portraying the scientist as a god-like figure whose actions have unforeseen ethical repercussions. The novel traces humanity's movement from innocence to guilt, showing how Victor Frankenstein's amateur experimentation produces both life and destruction. Similarly, the creature, initially innocent and curious, becomes harmful when rejected by society. The abuse of science is a central theme, demonstrating that unchecked technological power can spiral beyond the creator's control. While the novel may lack certain Gothic conventions, such as large castles or subterranean labyrinths, it adheres to other elements of the Gothic tradition.

Mary Shelley emphasises that life is a sacred gift, and with the act of creation comes an immense responsibility. Her novel raises the ethical question: "Is a human being capable of assuming responsibility for creating life?" In this context, the present study examines issues such as human versus humanoid, the role of science and technology, unusual forms of love, vengefulness, compassion, catastrophe, and the interplay of wisdom and knowledge. The pursuit of knowledge is a central theme in *Frankenstein*, relevant not only to Victor but also to Walton and the creature. Victor's quest is compulsive and domineering, while the monster seeks understanding of his existence, his "father," and the meaning of acceptance and love. Similarly, in the film *Robot*, Dr.

Vaseegaran applies his technological knowledge to create Chitti, yet he soon faces unintended consequences. Chitti, in turn, uses its knowledge to assemble a robotic army, demonstrating the dual-edged nature of knowledge and invention.

Knowledge can be defined as the accumulation of facts, information, and experiences acquired through study, research, observation, or personal experience. It involves awareness and understanding of specific subjects or phenomena. Wisdom, in contrast, is the ability to discern which aspects of knowledge are true, relevant, enduring, and ethically applicable. Wisdom enables one to apply knowledge effectively in the broader context of life, encompassing a deeper understanding of meaning and purpose.

Science fiction often explores the consequences of human obsession with knowledge. In *Frankenstein*, Victor's relentless pursuit of understanding leads him to create life itself, but the knowledge he gains ultimately brings about his destruction. Victor experiences profound grief, losing his brother, friend, wife, father, and, in a sense, his own humanity. His horror and regret are captured in his reflection: "How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe," emphasising his deep remorse and hatred for the creation he brought into the world. The theme of forbidden knowledge permeates the novel, affecting not only Victor but also Walton and the creature. Each of these characters pursues ambitious goals: Walton seeks fame through his North Pole expedition, Victor strives to achieve scientific greatness by creating a human-like monster, and the creature seeks acceptance and understanding within human society.

The pursuit of wisdom and knowledge is first exemplified through Robert Walton in his North Pole expedition. As a determined ship captain, Walton seeks fame and accomplishment, yet his ambition leads to isolation and loneliness. While stranded on the ice, he encounters Victor Frankenstein and listens to his story, providing a framework for the novel. Shelley introduces the theme of obsessive ambition through Walton, highlighting his unwavering commitment to knowledge despite the dangers of his voyage:

These are my enticements and they are sufficient to conquer all fear of danger or death and to induce me to commence this laborious voyage with the joy a child feels when he embarks in a little boat with his holiday mates on an expedition of discovery up his native river.

One man's life or death was but a small price to pay for the acquirement of the knowledge which I sought; for the dominion I should acquire and transmit over the elemental foes for our race.

Second, the pursuit of knowledge is displayed in Victor Frankenstein. There is no doubt that Victor Frankenstein is brilliant. He is a born scholar and that thirst for knowledge seems to have preceded even his first breath. But Victor's career as a scholar had some shady beginnings. Growing up in his family's remote estate in the Swiss mountains, he was largely self-taught as a boy. What he learned came mostly from books in his father's massive library.

The ancient Greek philosopher's metaphysicians and alchemists, men who sought to turn base metal into gold, attracted Victor most. He loved these studies because they spoke to something infinitely powerful, something almost superhuman, within his grasp. These philosophers believed that every power of the universe would come into their hands, with only the proper study, the correct formulas, and the appropriate incantation.

Rather than abandoning Chitti, Dr. Vaseegaran undertakes the

task of teaching the android to experience emotions and make moral judgments. Alongside his girlfriend Sana, he attempts to transform Chitti into a fully realised sentient being. However, Sana gradually becomes frustrated with Vaseegaran's excessive dedication to his work. Initially, Vaseegaran succeeds beyond his expectations, but he begins to regret his achievement when Chitti develops romantic feelings for Sana.

Upon realising Chitti's romantic attachment, Sana clarifies that she considers them only friends. Heartbroken, Chitti fails an evaluation conducted by the Indian Army, prompting Vaseegaran to dismantle the android. Meanwhile, Prof. Bohra observes the situation and seeks to exploit the ensuing tension. During reconstruction, Bohra implants a red chip into Chitti, transforming it into a ruthless killer. Chitti subsequently disrupts Vaseegaran and Sana's wedding, kidnaps Sana, produces replicas of itself, and kills Bohra. Despite using his knowledge to attempt reconstruction, Bohra fails and meets his demise.

Utilising its knowledge, Chitti creates a robot army, seizes control of AIRD, and wreaks havoc across the city. The resulting conflict between Chitti's army and law enforcement leads to numerous casualties. Ultimately, Dr. Vaseegaran captures Chitti and is initially sentenced to death for the destruction caused. However, Chitti demonstrates that its deviant behavior was caused by Bohra's red chip, presenting video evidence to the court. Vaseegaran is subsequently released, and Chitti is ordered to be dismantled. Before its dismantling, Chitti apologizes to Vaseegaran and Sana. In the film, Vaseegaran's advanced technological knowledge is intended for benevolent purposes, yet unforeseen consequences emerge. As the creator, he must teach Chitti to function within human society. Despite Chitti's exceptional intelligence, the android interprets situations literally and lacks social understanding. This is exemplified when Chitti attempts to rescue individuals from a burning building, inadvertently causing the death of a young girl, Selvi, who flees in embarrassment after being exposed, demonstrating Chitti's social naivety.

Frankenstein does more than present one of the most tragic and spine-chilling horror stories in literature. Through the tale of the ambitious scientist Dr. Victor Frankenstein and his monstrous creation, Mary Shelley warns against the reckless pursuit of knowledge without the guiding hand of wisdom. Shelley emphasises that while knowledge is undeniably powerful, it is wisdom that determines how it should be applied. In my view, the cautionary message of *Frankenstein* remains highly relevant today. Given the rapid pace of technological advancement, her warning about the potential dangers of unbridled scientific ambition is arguably more significant than ever.

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