

**Literariness Journal**

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly  
Journal of Literature and Cultural  
Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614  
E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

**Vol. 1, Issue. 3 June 2026**

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**The Politics of Flesh: Mapping Somatic Individuality and Biopolitical Control in *Alpha* by T.D. Ramakrishnan**

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**Abstract:** With ample theoretical interpretations and epistemological assumptions, the enigma of being a human remains elusive to unambiguous understanding. Though human beings have always been analysed as social and political organisms capable of actively producing, negotiating, and resisting relational configurations, the uniqueness of individuality has mostly been linked to psychological attributes, overlooking one of the most important entities that contribute to it: the corporeal dimension. Each individual has a distinctive bodily arrangement. The alignment of the skeletal system, generic features, composition of blood cells, visceral arrangement and diversity of neural systems contribute to the uniqueness of bodies, known as somatic individuality. In a rapidly biopoliticized world, somatic individuality is threatened by the governmental management of population by means of optimisation, standardisation, normalisation and control. The mere biological constitution of the body becomes a potential site of precarity and resistance. The proposed article is an inquisitive exploration of T.D. Ramakrishnan's debut novel *Alpha* analyses how somatic individuality drives the extraction of biovalue in a scenario in which life is the central premise of an experiment. Designed as an Anthropological experiment, Project Alpha problematises the uniqueness of biological matter in a biopolitical setting where the rules of the experiment direct the experimenters. Furthermore, the article analyses the possibility of biopolitical resistance against these extractive designs.

**Keywords:** *Biopolitics, Biovalue, Embodiment, Extraction, Somatic Individuality*

The philosophical and psychological discourses have traditionally disregarded the importance of the body and bodily experience in favour of the mind. This undue privileging of the mind in the binary opposition has led to an axiomatic assumption that the true essence of human beings is consciousness or mind. However, this Cartesian mind-body split has been philosophically challenged by theorists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who argues that consciousness is not devoid of bodily dimensions but rather embodied in such a way that individuality is constituted through the body as a medium. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty postulates, “It is through my body that I understand other people, just as it is through my body that I perceive things” (216). His insistence on consciousness as somatically constituted has provided theoretical rationale for the particularity of individuality to particular bodily perspectives. Nonetheless, a more nuanced understanding that the body is never inert or neutral complicates the whole perspective. This critical complication has its roots in the positioning of the body within the locus of power dynamics.

A radical shift in the conceptualisation of somatic individuality coincides with the understanding of the body as an effect of power relations. This complex matrix of power and the body has been extensively researched within the Foucauldian theoretical oeuvre, which in turn has become the foundational premise of biopolitical studies. Foucault identifies a peculiar form of power that exercises its influence over all the dimensions of life, including birth, reproduction and death, and calls it biopower. The enigmatic nature of life in its truest sense effectively denies it as accessible to the structures of power. Given this situation, an alternative solution to the operational dilemma is to control or manage the proximal tangible embodiment of life, that is, the body. In the introduction to *Biopolitics: A Reader*, the editors Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze echo a similar concern: “In other words, biopolitics is the explicit solution to an inexplicit problem: power’s inability to fully access life. The more that knowledge- power grows in intensity, the more the scene is set for the question of life to be answered by apparatuses that focus, in particular, on the body” (14). Biopolitics, in this context, is the optimisation, management, control and, in the worst scenario, the termination of life through the deployment and dissemination of biopower.

As mentioned earlier, the foundational research in biopolitical studies can be found in Foucault, who identifies two forms of biopower. He says, “The disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population constituted the two poles around which the organization of power over life was deployed” (Foucault 139). The first configuration is identified as disciplinary power that targets individuals by observing their bodies through surveillance, measuring and controlling them, and punishing them through educational, medical and disciplinary apparatuses. The second configuration is biopolitical power targeting a population through public health initiatives, reproductive control and other such strategically designed public policies by managing life at the level of the species. This maintenance of

bodies as individuals and population exposes the central paradox while linking somatic individuality and biopolitics. The biopolitical power structures, through these strategic measures of management using biopower, engender individual bodies. The subjects live within the regimes of power with an internalised belief that their individuality is natural and rather than produced and regulated by biopower. This intricate interaction between somatic individuality and biopolitical governance has been a primary focus within the novels of T.D. Ramakrishnan; notably, the most prominent depiction emerges in his debut novel, *Alpha*.

*Alpha* is a profoundly unsettling novel that centres on an anthropological experiment titled Project Alpha, meticulously designed by Professor Upalendu Chatterjee, A professor of anthropology at JNU, Delhi. Thirteen people, who are the experimenters, including the Professor, have to live on Alpha, an uninhabited island and “live as primaeval beings, for twenty-five years, uncontrolled by the norms of society, without rules or laws. They were to have no language, clothes, weapons, or houses; in fact, anything that modern life offers would be unavailable to them” (3). Professor Upalendu initiates Project Alpha with the hypothesis that, with emancipation from the shackles of laws, customs and social ties, human beings evolve considerably, exploring their potential to the fullest. Malini, one of the investigators of the project, recounts, “The Professor argued that the human intellect was strong and tenacious. And that if we let it be free for twenty-five years, unhindered by societal norms, we would be able to gain more than what we would lose” (17).

Project Alpha, a purely outcome-based anthropological experiment, rigorously examines life. As biopolitical studies reveal through the comprehensive examination of the lives of these people on a remote island, the experiment targets the concrete vessel of life, the body. Consequently, the problematisation of the Professor’s research design begins with the selection of samples; in this scenario, the selection of twelve individuals from the larger population pool. This purposive sampling carried out by the Professor undoubtedly implies the possible surveillance of these twelve bodies in the pre-experimental phase. A compilation of the biographical sketches of these people, prepared by Professor Banerjee, a friend of Professor Upalendu, substantiates the surveillance measures he must have taken to ensure the feasibility of his research.

The completion of Project Alpha relies on the intellectual and physical evolution of the second generation; therefore, the health and reproductive viability of these investigators are crucial to the successful completion of the experiment. In this context, the ableist assumptions about the body align with the somatic individuality of the investigators. The criteria of selection by the professor methodically exclude bodies labelled disabled from the research framework. This systematic omission of bodies that are normatively considered aberrations within the population pool problematises the

notion of somatic individuality. A sample in an anthropological experiment that anticipates a highly evolved second generation presumes to be an ideal representative of human corporeality. By strategically marginalising bodies that fall outside the spectrum of standardised health indicators or those with diverse neurological compositions, the formulator of the research design theoretically jeopardises the understanding of somatic individuality, a sensitive awareness that each individual is uniquely embodied across all physiological and neurological parameters. The unmindful categorisation by virtue of standardising bodies caters to the enforcement of binaries: able bodies and disabled bodies, which in turn narrow down the diverse possibilities and potentialities of somatic individuality. An insightful recognition of the uniqueness of bodies devoid of a dichotomous preoccupation would have undoubtedly contributed to the empirical data of the experiment by radically incorporating the complete ontological possibilities of human embodiment and somatic variation.

A distinct yet parallel dilemma that destabilises somatic individuality in *Alpha* correlates with the experiment's uncovering of the biopolitical management of the research samples. To elaborate this concern further, the very notion of biopolitics demands contextual interpretation. As the critical intersection of life and politics, biopolitics operates at the level of the biological configuration of life. An examination of biopolitics' primary interest in life, in conjunction with the professor's preoccupation with it, highlights the foundational premise of Project Alpha. The professor's journals handed over to Professor Banerjee prior to the commencement of the experiment reveal the driving force that catalysed it. The Professor writes,

The cyclic occurrence of births and deaths has always fascinated me. Why does it happen to man when he is sixty or seventy, and to other organisms in due course? What is the force that controls these occurrences? Why is that man grows to be strong and healthy till the age of thirty and then grow steadily weaker after fifty and then dies? Why does growth and retardation or the process of growing old exist like a parabolic graph? How can one circumvent the inevitability of death that exists in life? How can we sustain the status quo once a human being has attained full growth? (127)

The excerpts from his personal journals show the sophistication and subtlety with which the professor analysed life, pointing to the primary objective of biopolitical discourses: life, more precisely, the body.

The peculiarity of each investigator's body, its diverse physiological dynamics and constitution, is the raw material for Project Alpha. The uniquely organised bodies of each investigator undergo standardisation as a set of samples arranged to achieve a single experimental outcome, a highly evolved second generation under the meticulous surveillance, quantification, evaluation, and

documentation by the Professor. This scenario parallels the reduction of human beings to measurable data points in terms of their biological matter is the contemporary reality of biopolitical governance. Beyond the systemic corporeal reality, individuals are measured and, in turn, governed for the tissues, cells, neurons, sperm, oocytes, and embryos. Nikolas Rose conceptualises the above-mentioned dangerous exposure of somatic individuality to strategic biopolitical measure in his seminal work *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* observes,

Our contemporary vital norms are no less, but no more, shaped by their conditions of formation as those of previous generations. On the one hand our very personhood is increasingly being defined by others, and by ourselves, in terms of our contemporary understandings of the possibilities and limits of our corporeality. On the other hand, our somatic individuality has become opened up to choice, prudence, and responsibility, to experimentation, to contestation. This, then, is the problem space that defines the biopolitics of our contemporary emergent form of life (76).

Nevertheless, the central paradox in Project Alpha is the biopolitical erasure of the somatic individuality of thirteen investigators, including the Professor, who serves as both formulator and subject. In the Alpha experiment, this radical violation primarily arises at the level of reproductive biopolitics. A natural phenomenon like reproduction becomes calculative, measurable, quantifiable and deliberate bodily interaction with a precalculated eugenic objective under the biopolitical control of the Professor. To Upalendu Chatterjee, these investigators are perceived as reproductive vessels rather than individuals with autonomous bodily functions. The genetic constitution of these individuals is entangled with a perpetual ethical obligation to reproduce offspring in accordance with preconceived external experimental imperatives, effectively erasing individual autonomy. In this convoluted scenario, the investigator's role in Project Alpha transmutes into what Foucault calls "ethical substance"(Foucault 185). Consequently, Project Alpha generates new forms of genetic responsibility toward these biopolitically managed ethical substances, and the production of these new subjectivities must ensure that they are not genetically at risk. As Nikolas Rose points out,

With the emergence of the genetically at risk person, genes themselves have been constituted as an "ethical substance" (Foucault 1985: 26)—that one works in relation to the self (genetic identity, reproduction, health) and in relation to others (siblings, kin, marriage, children). And this ethical work framed in terms of genetics intersects with, and becomes allied with, a more general style of work on the self in contemporary advanced liberal democracies that construes life as a project, framed in terms of the values of autonomy, self-actualization, prudence, responsibility, and choice.

While contextualising Project Alpha within Reproductive biopolitics, the time span of the experiment becomes crucial. During the inception of the experiment, “most of them were in their thirties, well educated; some were researchers in various disciplines”(3). The precalculated twenty-five-year time span closely parallels the reproductive span of these individuals, enabling the complete extraction of their reproductive viability. Moreover, the social isolation they experience during the tenure of Project Alpha significantly challenges and hinders the further constitution of their somatic individuality, which is considerably influenced by such external factors. In Alpha, sexual interactions become biological conscriptions in which the biopower of the Professor circumscribes the contours of the most natural biological interaction. Moreover, the sexual interactions in *Alpha* are further complicated by the internalisation of biopolitical logic by the investigators themselves.

The internalisation of genetic determinism and eugenic probabilities influences the sexual interaction between the investigators on the island. They plan deliberate sexual interactions with fellow investigators whom they think have perfect genetic constitutions. After twenty-five years of the experiment, Santosh recounts Urmila’s adamant resolve to get impregnated by the Professor, who undeniably has a strategic upper hand among the group as the formulator of Project Alpha. He says, “Urmila had made one resolve before embarking on the experiment. Her first child must be the Professor’s. Though the Professor preferred to watch everyone from a distance, eventually Urmila succeeded in getting what she wanted”(48). The Professor, who is a simultaneous investigator in the experiment, must be available for such an interaction. Santosh continues, “She created a situation where he couldn't deny her, a state in which he had to respond in accordance with the rules that he himself had set (47). Urmila internalises the logic that the biovalue of the Professor’s genetic materials and neurological constitution is higher than that of any other in the group. The resulting offspring are perceived as inheriting all of this. Conversely, the deliberate withdrawal from having sexual interaction with investigators whom they think intellectually inferior substantiates the internalised logic of bio value. For instance, Anwar, who was expelled from the university for his leftist political leanings, ends up in the household of the Professor as a domestic helper. He then becomes part of the project, carrying a sense of alienation from his fellow investigators. “From the very first day on Alpha, Anwar felt inferior to the others. He felt that they did not consider him their equal because of his social status and lack of formal education. When each of them found a mate, Anwar felt lonely and isolated” (87).

The primary hypothesis of the professor about Project Alpha is disconfirmed by the second generation’s inability to achieve the expected outcome. Even after selective breeding and internalised reproductive biopolitics, the offspring exhibit retarded mental abilities. On the contrary, they displayed remarkable physical agility to survive the harsh environment and climatic conditions of the island. After the completion of the experiment's time span, Santhosh recounts,

Though the progress was barely noticeable, whatever they discovered they were able to use cleverly. They showed extraordinary expertise in throwing stones. You might find it difficult to believe this, but most of the children in the new generation have extremely good aim when throwing stones. You might find it difficult to believe this, but most of the children in the new generation have extremely good aim when throwing stones at birds. The great speed with which they can move their limbs and their natural responses may be their mental abilities as the professor had believed. But the lack of basic information needed for activities retarded the possibility of faster and greater progress. May be their mental faculties did not receive the required raw material to reach their true potential (115).

This scenario reveals a critical methodological failure of the Professor. His primary hypothesis indirectly suggests that evolution is a measurable process with linear progression unaffected by external influences. Furthermore, the Professor presumes that evolution depends entirely on genetic inheritance. This insistence on genes as a determining variable overlooks embodied experiences, social interactions, cultural factors and environmental influences. After being rescued by Avinash after the targeted time span, Santosh asks, “But the fundamental knowledge that is acquired should be transferred to the next generation through our genes. When animal instincts are thus transmitted, why aren't intellectual capabilities inherited?” (116). Avinash replies, “A man who learns to drive a car doesn't genetically pass on this ability to his progeny; he has to teach them. In the same way, education from a qualified teacher is an important aspect of growing up. This limitation of the human brain has been confirmed by this experiment” (116).

In an overtly biopolitical setting like Alpha, where the subtlest aspects of life and, more particularly, the body are open to the inscriptions of power, resistance to the structures transcends traditional notions of resistance as emancipatory. In Alpha, a controlled experimental environment, resistance may not be a unidirectional counter-interactive force that operates outside the system in an agitative manner. Rather, acts of resistance against the biopolitical involve several micro-acts that depart from conventional paradigms by destabilising the ways of managing the living and living matter.

The anthropological experiment, Project Alpha, the brainchild of Professor Upalendu Chatterjee, is a deterritorialisation from a greater schema of totalitarianism by the then prime minister, Indira Gandhi. She has entrusted the Professor “with the duty of planting metallic tablets in the parts of the capital city” (134) that aims at rewriting history to favour authoritarianism. Through Project Alpha, the Professor seeks alternate lines of flight by uprooting from the purview of the Prime Minister’s

power. By removing twelve people from the regime's territorial control and coercive power, the Professor has attempted to create a “smooth space” (435), as Deleuze and Guattari identify, outside the periphery of power. However, the deterritorialisation has inevitably culminated in the reterritorialisation of the very structures of power the Professor resisted. In short, an act of resistance against the regime has reconfigured and reproduced new forms of subjectivity and forms of life under the breeding mandate of the Professor.

Another notable manifestation of resistance comprises random deviations from the fundamental methodological structure of Project Alpha. Michel Foucault, in his *Security, Territory, Population*, identifies such forms of deviation as “counter-conduct” (268). As per the primary rule of the experiment, sexual intercourse must not be specific but random. This mandate by the professor prevents the investigators from having a single sexual partner. However, Aruna and Anwar manage to build a relationship of mutual intimacy, defying the professor's breeding mandate. Aruna accidentally saves Anwar from an attack of red ants. “When his health became normal, Aruna belonged to Anwar and Anwar to Aruna. But they managed to hide their relationship from the others to maintain the pretence of obeying the rules of the experiment” (88). This counter-conduct is an active resistive strategy to escape the circumference of the professor's calculative eugenic breeding. The removal of romantic involvement dictates the act of procreation as a purely functional process, ruling out the emotional significance. In another sense, the act of romantic involvement is an unabashed declaration of bodily autonomy, which the experiment restricts in favour of eugenic logic. Moreover, such interpersonal relationships outside the experimental spectrum lead to the formation of new subjectivities exterior to the research design that may destabilise and subvert what the experiment primarily envisions: biopolitically circumscribed subjectivity formations.

Another similar instance of defiance manifests in the relationship of Merlin and Rajesh. They have chosen Project Alpha not out of an ontological necessity but as a way to escape from Merlin's father, who disapproved of their love affair. The Professor, who meticulously curated the investigators for his experiment, remained uninformed about their romantic involvement. On the one hand, the couple has been able to carefully conceal their personal lives from the surveillant gaze of the Professor. On the other hand, they have transgressed the Professor's rule, much like Aruna and Anwar during the course of the experiment. Unlike the mechanical reproduction the Project envisions, the investigator's act of organic reclamation of their bodies, desires and formation of non-instrumental subjective connections reframes biopolitical bodily governance and subsequent calculative interactions. This active mode of rejecting the biopolitical reduction of the body to the functional matrix of reproduction becomes a micropolitical act of defiance.

Project Alpha is ultimately a twenty-five-year plan of selective breeding that transforms the somatic individuality of thirteen people, including the formulator, into biopolitically extractable living matter. The investigator's somatic individuality is strategically reduced into two biological entities: genetic constitution and reproductive capacity. The extraction of biovalue is entangled with the internalisation of these structures by the investigators, making Project Alpha a highly contested site of the body, power, biopolitical existence, and atomised acts of biopolitical resistance.

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