Cross-Cultural Representation of Dystopia

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ABSTRACT

This article challenges the western-centric hegemony that defines the genre by investigating the cultural relativity of dystopian narratives. By running a comparative analysis of four dystopian texts from four distinct geographical regions, the intention is to demonstrate how the conceptualization of "dystopia" is linked to the cultural and historical background of its origin.

The intention is to illustrate how the meaning of dystopia is saved by collective traumas of an individual's heritage and their unique anxieties and values. Through this cross-cultural analysis, the article argues that the society's most guarded values reflect the dystopian functions. By identifying four texts and their depiction of "dystopia", this study would conclude that there is no universally concrete idea of dystopia, rather, the genre serves as a versatile means to express the uniqueness.

KEYWORDS

Personal Dystopia; Bio-Political Hegemony; Algorithmic Nature.

"Perhaps one did not want to be loved so much as to be understood." This statement, taken from George Orwell's *1984*, explores the idea that being intellectually and emotionally validated feels far superior than being loved. From a dystopian context, where individual

identity is erased, this statement brings out one's deepest desires to be understood and seen. The use of the word "perhaps," suggests that this statement is made after a set of experiences, and can be taken as the final statement. When one tries to conceptualise the idea of dystopia, one usually imagines the anxieties being manifested in the futuristic world, making it no less than the worst nightmare, but it is far more than that.

The word "dystopia" is derived from the Greek word "dus" meaning "bad" and "topos" meaning "place." Dystopia serves as an antithesis to the concept introduced by Sir Thomas More, that is, 'Utopia'. Thomas More was a 16th century lawyer and a philosopher, famous for his contribution *Utopia* in the year 1516. In his work *Utopia*, More explores a fictional island named Utopia, where there is no private property, and the socio-political structure is completely governed by the society itself. Along with the abolition of private property, More, in his work, also argues that different religions can coexist in a society or labourers can have six hours work per day, and these served as direct criticisms of the Tudor rule in England. More's vision transformed itself into a picture, enabling us to look at a fictional place of perfection, far away from corruption, poverty and senseless violence of 16th century Europe.

The transition from Thomas More's idea of "Utopia" to the concept of "Dystopia," arrived, theoretically, much later in the year 1868. John Stuart Mill, the philosopher and economist, coined the word "Dystopia" in his speech at the British House of Commons. Mill brought forward the idea of dystopia to criticize the Irish land policies made by the government. He argued that if Utopia meant a place too good to be true, then dystopia is the antithesis of Utopia. As noted by Ashraf, Mill famously said that:

> It is perhaps too complimentary to call them Utopians, they ought rather to be called dystopians or caco-topians. What

> is commonly called Utopian is something too good to be practicable, but what they appear to favour is too bad to be practicable.

The representation of dystopia has significantly evolved over time. From Mill's speech about institutional failure, this genre has flourished mirroring the specific anxieties of the era in which it is located. During the pre-modern foundations, writers focus on political failures as the initial cause of their dystopia. Texts like *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells, talks about the social inequities and class divisions and *The World as It Shall Be* by Emile Souvestre talks about a future where commercialism has become a religion and governs the country by treating humans as biological commodities. By the early to the mid-20th century, there were noticeable changes in the environment on account of the World Wars. Authors like Orwell, Huxley, started writing about totalitarianism, mass control/surveillance and loss of authentic individuality or individual identity; texts like *The Iron Heel* by Jack London explore the rise of Fascist authoritarianism; and climate change and over-dependency on technology provide the basic premise for E. M. Forster's *The Machine Stops*. In the late 20th to the early 21st century, authors started writing about postmodern and contemporary anxieties like environmental collapse, bio-technology, alien invasion and so on—*Never Let me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro talks about the development of clones for organ harvesting and *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy discusses how humans turned to cannibalism after a complete environmental failure.

Throughout the different ages, the genre has remained tied to its spatio-temporal location. By transforming the real-world tendencies to its most terrifying conclusion, this genre stands to evoke the awareness among readers of this generation about the worst possible situation, enhancing both their moral reasoning to look out at the world and their psychological capacity to understand different situations.

REPRESENTATION OF DYSTOPIA BY AUTHORS OF DIFFERENT CULTURES

Cultures from different parts of the world have a dramatic role in changing our understanding of dystopia by altering our imagination of "nightmares" by associating it with lived experience and historical understanding. If the dystopic narratives of the West incorporate technological advancement at the cost of human happiness, fear of losing personal autonomy and privacy, the erstwhile European colonies represent dystopia itself as the legacy of the imperial project—shameless means of extraction of resources, suppression of autonomous selfhood, both historically and in the present, remain central to post-colonial dystopic lenses. For communities like these, the dark dystopian concept is not an abstract futuristic possibility, but it is a cultural and physical displacement due to fear and oppression. Instead of conceptualizing dystopia as a warning, these cultural representations teach us to identify and acknowledge the cultural underpinnings, the resilience and the spirit of survival that oppressed communities demonstrate despite powerful forces that attempt to dismantle everything.

In order to establish this view, four texts from different geographical locations shall be studied in conjunction with the concept of 'dystopia'.

Eclipse Our Sins by Tlotlo Tsamaase

Born in Botswana, Tlotlo Tsamaase is an author and architect. She acquired her degree in architecture from the University of Botswana followed by a degree in Creative Writing from Chapman University in California. She received the Nommo award for Best Novel in 2025 and was also the first Botswana author to be nominated for the Caine Prize for African writing. Her contribution in literature lies in her unique structural patterns. Unlike usual dystopian literature

that focus on external totalitarianism, her works, like *Womb City*, explore the concept of "soul transfer."

The visceral work of African futuristic "climate fiction," 'Eclipse Our Sins' by Tlotlo Tsamaase re-imagines climate change as a moral crisis rather than an environmental disaster. The geographical background of this story is set in a futuristic time, in Botswana, where individuals have committed innumerable "sins," like carbon emission, social injustice, and racism that manifest as pollution to the atmosphere. Tsholofelo, the protagonist, whose name ironically means "hope," embarks on a journey to navigate a world which is suffocating on its own past of abuse. The author's background of architecture helps her create a structurally unique dystopia: she geographically divides her work into a decaying Lower City where people are forced to breed in the concentrated "sins" of previous generations, and an Upper City where a class of privileged elites use their own technology to filter out the pollution from the environment. This is characteristic of technological colonialism, where the privileged class attempts to escape the collapse of Earth by creating their own safe cocoon, effectively trapping others "commoners" in the polluted wasteland.

This eco-horror shows how Earth is frustrated and resentful towards human kind. The protagonist's life is a living testimony to the damage wreaked by the previous generations—over consumption of natural resources and a serious disregard for the ecology. The author establishes a symbiotic relationship between the Earth and the living individuals, providing an antithesis to the idea of nature formulated by Western science fiction that it is a stock of raw resources and a territory to "conquer." The story ends with the terrifyingly beautiful "baptism," where Earth, having been scarred by exploitation and abuse, is finally incapable of carrying and sustaining the human species anymore.

Tsholofelo calls nature and the Earth "Mama." The protagonist is embracing the idea of African futurism by rejecting the Western concept of nature where the latter is a mere passive force. The

protagonist points towards the personal and physical betrayal that the Earth "Mama" has suffered, caused by the human, which is portrayed as "sins" of generations, slowly turning the earth "xenophobic" towards the human species. Finally, the selection of the word "Mama" changes the climatic and scientific phenomena to an emotional tragedy where the mother is betrayed by her offspring and now seeks revenge to save the world.

Instead of creating a sense of dystopia through traditional political means, 'Eclipse Our Sins' develops its sense of dystopia through a moral and biological ecosystem. This "atmospheric" dystopia is created through the literalization of human evil: social injustices (such as racism and greed) are manifested as real, deadly toxins that are breathed back into the bodies of the inhabitants by the Earth. The amplification of the horror in this story is due to the extreme architectural marginalisation of the "Lower City" which is in sharp contrast to the "Upper City". Additionally, the author creates a firm sense of betrayal, where the children are physically punished for the "sins" which they inherited from their previous generation. The diseased human body becomes a manifestation of the degenerating Earth. 'Eclipse Our Sins' presents a world in which the life-giving forces of air, soil, and water become oppressors, leaving no room for hope or promise of a better future

Taronga by Victor Kelleher

A prominent Australian author and scholar with over four decades of experience spanning over numerous genres, Victor Kelleher was born in London in the year 1939. Later at the age of fifteen he moved to Africa where he spent twenty formative years. One of Kelleher's strengths is the capacity to intertwine various genres, for instance, children's literature, fantasy and dystopia are intertwined in *Goblin at the Zoo* and the series, *Gibblewort the Goblin*. Kelleher had a very successful career as he composed dystopian and post-apocalyptic

literature, showing the intricate way in which humans and animals interact with each other in society. One of his most renowned works published in 1986 is *Taronga*. Set in Australia, the novel unfolds after the society has been destroyed by a catastrophic event called "Last Days." The novel explores the life of the protagonist who navigates their way through the zoo and protects themselves from the ones who prey on them, ending with the discovery of the non-existing place named "Eden" which is ruled by a small community.

The author, in his work, portrays the post-apocalyptic condition of Sydney, a barren wasteland where once children with promising futures flourished. Ben, the 14 year old central character, becomes the medium of connection between the human world and the animal kingdom. He escapes from the brutal scavenger, navigating his life through the last days of civilization. Finally, after fleeing from the decaying suburbs of Sydney, Ben arrives at Taronga Zoo, a place that once represented great hope for youth, now reduced to a militaristic, micro-dystopia. The very simple walls and bars that once separated the animals from humans have now become the new dividing membranes of civilization, creating a new and terrifying form of social order (Insiders) where the animals exist to be used as weapons against any Insiders who threaten their continued existence as well-fed cattle of the new world order.

The animals and their ability to communicate/display emotions confuse the commander, named Molly, who uses them as a source of security in controlling the antiseptic, clinical violence of the zoo. Ben develops ties with Rajah and Ranee, the two Siberian tigers whose feral, ancient awareness serves as the only connection with known reality in an increasingly disintegrating planet. The author demonstrates the humans desire to classify and dominate by the design of the zoo. As the protagonist, Ben, grows throughout the novel; he soon learns that his telepathic gift of communicating with animals is not an instrument of operation, but a means to cooperate and cohabit. And with his growth, he is able to look beyond the

veneer of civilization and understand how humans have exploited the raw power of nature for centuries.

The narrative deals with the outbreak of a brutal war between the desperate 'outsiders' and the ultimate "utopia" within the walls of the zoo, proving how illusory notions of security and human goodness are. At the end, Ben allows the cages to be opened. By letting the tigers out of their cages and running away into the wild Australian bush, he chooses an unknown wild freedom instead of the perfected cruelty of human-run dystopia. The zoo, which was initially a safe haven for animals, ended up becoming an outpost for military operation after the fall of society. Here, the animals have been manipulated to instil fear among the general population and also to control them. While the "Outsiders" have a horrific social order, the "Insiders", thanks to the animals, maintain privileged positions with the comfortable and steady supply of resources. It is established that humans have the instinct to control, categorise and weaponise the outsider even on the verge of extinction. The deadliest beast, after all, is not the tiger in a cage but the power wielding human who controls and manipulates the animals.

Taronga, by Victor Kelleher, is an example of speculative realism that employs an elaborate array of literary devices to create a poignant sense of despair throughout the text. One of the most sinuous metaphors in Kelleher's work is the "cage." The cage is a constant reminder of the physical and psychic confinement experienced by both humans and non-human animals; it is intricately tied to the extended metaphor of the cage as a central element in Kelleher's story. The two tigers, Raja and Ranee, demonstrate symbolically through their actions an inherent contrast between the corrupt leadership of the paramilitary and the animals themselves.

The Membranes by Chi Ta-wei

Chi Ta-wei is a famous Taiwanese novelist and LGBTQ+ rights activist.

Chi Ta-Wei was born in the year 1972 and gained recognition in the 1990s when Taiwan's literary condition had undergone a significant metamorphosis after the martial law was lifted. Chi currently teaches Taiwanese literature at National Cheng Chi University. His famous novella, *The Membranes*, was published in the year 1995 and then translated into English in the year 2021. The story takes place in the late 21st century, in an underwater utopia and the story explores the theme of cyber identity, commercialisation of memory and body modification.

The Membranes has a complex storyline that addresses issues of anxiety, mechanization through technology, and the excessive commercialization of human life. The story takes place in a futuristic world where the upper strata of the earth is no longer habitable due to the depletion of the ozone layer, forcing mankind to live underwater. A city has been created underwater named T City. Momo, the main character, is a famous skin designer and her work with artificial skin or "membranes" is one of the focal points of the novel. Human beings are subjected to a grotesque but necessary form of biopolitics where the individual's body is no longer natural but designed and curated by a large corporate house. In this world people are isolated not only from the rest of the world but also from each other. The protagonist's job is to create artificial skins for human bodies. This narrative highlights human dependency on technology, as they are forced to live under water wearing artificial skin to survive. The body modification assists in underwater survival but robs individuals of their autonomous selves and also goes against the law of nature. It is ultimately revealed that the protagonist's entire life is just a computer simulation. Her entire existence including her complicated relationship with other characters and the mysterious surgery from childhood, performed to collect corporate data on memory and identities, is a collation of data that was bought and sold and manipulated by the corporation. Through a homosexual protagonist, the novel explores how capitalism has exploited the

most vulnerable members of society. The fact that the protagonist's consciousness was transferred into data, making her a digital puppet, serves as a powerful commentary on the ways in which technology can be used to control and manipulate individuals in the future.

Chi Ta-wei is ironically proleptic in anticipating a world where personal data is collected and used for commercial purposes, development of artificial intelligence, mostly without knowledge or consent of individuals. The novel highlights the dangers of a society that values profit over people and offers a jarring picture of a future where the boundaries between reality and simulation are punctured.

In *The Membranes*, author Chi Ta-wei uses a complex array of postmodern literary elements, especially the metaphor of the "membrane," to explore different kinds of relationships in human society in an underwater capitalist setting. From physical skin and digital screen to the sociological boundaries of existence, the title *The Membranes* refers to the different aspects of the living experience in a febrile society mediated by hyper-capitalism.

Additionally, Chi Ta-wei's clinical and detached authorial style is indicative of the impersonal environment within T City, providing an experience of alienation similar to that experienced by the central character. By employing the concept of "cyborg" and the use of metaphorical language, Chi Ta-wei demonstrates how the concept of gender and identity can be questioned through performance arts, suggesting that "soul" is simply the next layer of stored data. The narrative structure also incorporates intertextuality by alluding to philosophical and queer theories like *The History of Sexuality* and *Gender Trouble* by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler respectively. This assists in the identification of the protagonist as an example of "brain-in-a-vat" thought famously discussed by Hilary Putnam, thus providing commentary on surveillance capitalism. Ultimately, the combination of these elements results in the depiction of a world that blurs the line between organic and manufactured, having

resulted in the creation of a corporate-controlled boundary called the "membrane."

The Living by Anna Starobinets

Anna Starobinets is a famous Russian author, journalist and screenwriter. Born in Moscow in 1978, her career started as a journalist for major publications like *Russky Reporter* and she later shifted to writing fiction. One of the leading figures in contemporary Russian speculative fiction, she loves to blend the elements of psychological horror and science fiction. Her work explores the "unreliable reality" of the modern world, portraying how technology and social structures slowly strip away individuality and identity. *The Living* is a dystopian novel with a terrifying digital ecosystem.

Placed in an unknown future, the novel is set against a rigid population capacity, not exceeding three billion. In this fictional world, biological death has been replaced by software in a global server—when an individual dies, their consciousness is archived until there is a vacancy for a new birth. This is ironically reminiscent of reincarnation but within technological reach which ensures that the number of souls remain permanent. Individual identity is entirely consumed by the new system as the facilities provide a constant state of force connectivity. Here human privacy is impossible and unachievable because every individual lives through the shared experience of someone else.

In the story, this numerical equilibrium is disrupted by the birth of Zero, a child born without the legacy code or recycled soul. Zero is found to be causing glitches in the technological system, as he is not consciously connected to an existing numerical code. Eventually, the protagonist discovers that the souls are also susceptible to corruption—repeated reincarnation of forced data has caused corruption. The recycling process starts failing and the archived souls

increasingly get corrupted as the authorities desperately focus on retaining them. The author paints a post-human condition where humanity has traded its morality for digital immortality.

The novel offers a trenchant critique of the 21st century's progress towards digital life. The author argues that the characters are no longer truly alive—they are merely self sustaining data dependent on machines for perpetuation. The text propels the readers to think how terrible it is for death to disappear. Corruption begins when the society tries to trade their survival for the individual soul.

Dystopia as the antithesis of Sir Thomas More's "utopia" has evolved to address contemporary politics, changing nature of selfhood, post-apocalyptic struggle between nature and man and technology and its implications. The texts discussed in this essay represent a larger body of literature that engages with the loss of the human experience, however difficult or painful it might have been. This essay has explored how cultural specificities influence dystopic writings in its reading of four selected works belonging from four different parts of the globe: *Eclipse Our Sins* by Tlotlo Tsamaase (Botswana), *Taronga* by Victor Kelleher (Australia), *The Membranes* by Chi Ta-Wei (Taiwan), and *The Living* by Anna Starobinets (Russia). The primary focus of this article has been to demonstrate that "dystopia" is not a universally concrete idea but a fluid construct that is shaped by unique anxieties, values of the author, and historical contexts. The essay brings together, through cross-cultural lenses, texts and contexts from different parts of the world—Chi focuses on how identity turns into commodity in a technologically driven East Asia; Starobinets expresses post-Soviet anxieties of forced collectivism; Tsamaase talks about another version of hegemonic colonialism; and Kelleher explores and breaks down the hierarchy of human and nature relationship within the Australian landscape. From digital to environmental collapse, one can conclude that the ideology of "dystopia" serves as a very versatile medium for expressing culture

specific fears, affirming the fact that our visions of the future is inflected with cultural nuances and dystopia is hydra headed with our fears and anxieties taking many distorted forms.

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