Introduction

> "This is the way the world ends
> Not with a bang but a whimper."
> — T. S. Eliot, 'The Hollow Men'

At the end of the first quarter of the 21st Century, our lives are largely defined by the lingering effects of the pandemic, anxieties about climate change, threats of political polarization, fear of actual wars in several pockets of the globe, overdependence on AI, circumscribed autonomy and an overwhelming sense of surveillance. The surge in apocalyptic as well as dystopian themes and narratives in literature, popular media or even fashion is emblematic of the collective imaginary. While apocalypse has been associated with cosmic wars and divine judgement in Judeo-Christian traditions, dystopia has a deeply political ring to it. Derived from two Greek words, *dus* and *topos*, it means a diseased or unfavourable place. Though the word must have appeared earlier, it's the 20th Century where dystopia has gained a wide coinage and signification, mostly as a corollary of totalitarianism and autocracy. Rather than being an antonym of utopia, dystopia exists within utopia; the chaos within order or the discord in harmony. As Gregory Claeys observes in his book, *Dystopia: A Natural History*, "utopia and dystopia . . . might be twins, the progeny of the same parents" (Claeys 2017, 7). As authoritarianism, neo-colonialism and capitalism continue to stifle human society, the artistic imagination conjures disturbing images of future landscapes—bleak, barren and desolate. Speculative Fiction and Science Fiction have been fertile grounds for futuristic, dystopian and apocalyptic narratives—the pathway was ably crafted by figures like Mary Shelley, H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, Samuel Butler, Anna

Bowman Dodd and Edward Bulwer-Lytton in the 19th Century itself.

The rise in SF and dystopian literature in the 20th and 21st centuries is conjoined with the haunting recognition that dystopia or apocalypse can also be *now and here*. In the last century and a quarter, human civilization has witnessed and endured two World Wars, the Nazi Holocaust, several nuclear wars, major ecological and natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic. These have not only upended our understanding of a stable reality but also compelled us to rethink the concept of dystopia. One can not overlook that SF, dystopian fiction and apocalyptic fiction in reimagining the semiotics of the known reality also foreground their strong ties with the world as it exists.

This volume of *Critical Imprints* brings together a range of essays jousting with several aspects of the overarching theme—*Apocalypse Now*. The first three essays in the volume situate dystopia and speculative fiction in the larger discourse of women's writing. Manisha Bhattacharya examines how Victorian news media acted as a tool for both the surveillance and social construction of prostitution, framing the profession through a dystopian lens of dehumanization and state control. Through an analysis of 'New Journalism' and investigative reports like W.T. Stead's 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' and a few anonymous letters, the author illustrates how the press gave a public voice to marginalized women while simultaneously reinforcing moral stigmas. The essay not only contributes to the existing scholarship on Victorian prostitution but also compels us to re-evaluate the figure of the prostitute, constantly under surveillance, as a dystopian subject with little or no agency. Sulagna Chattopadhyay's essay directs our attention to stories written by female authors in early pulp science fiction magazines. In her discussion, she argues that early pulp SF stories by women often offered a critique of masculinist science. She explores themes of evolutionary progress and the ethical dangers of eugenics in the stories to highlight how they also functioned as cautionary tales, balancing

utopian hopes for scientific advancement with a rejection of forced evolutionary changes. Surabhi Jha, in her essay, explores how Bengali Dalit women's literature reimagines human identity through the intersection of posthumanism and subaltern dystopia. The text argues that for marginalized women, dystopia is not a fictional future but a daily reality defined by caste-based exclusion, poverty, and gendered violence. By analyzing narratives by Smritikana Haoladar and Lily Halder, Jha demonstrates how a posthumanist perspective emerges through the depiction of the human and non-human elements such as illness, ecology, and spirits.

The negotiation with posthumanity continues in Diptarkan Bhattacharya's paper as he explores deep seated anxieties about humanity's over-reliance on a techno-modulated world. He has examined three of Ray Bradbury's short stories as cautionary tales which blur the boundaries between biological life and informational circuits, demonstrating how advanced technology and artificial intelligence eventually dominate or replace their human creators. In her essay, Melanie Alexander analyses the apocalyptic and dystopian themes present in Stephen King's 1980 novella, *The Mist*. The author examines how the novella represents a society where rational thought is replaced by paranoia and religious extremism. The mysterious fog serves as a metaphor for human fragility and epistemological failure anticipating the collapse of civilization under unfathomable pressure. Aishwarya Bhutoria's discussion establishes graphic narratives like Genius, LaGuardia, and Ironheart as counter-narratives that disavow Eurocentric perspectives and the "white gaze". Bhutoria has highlighted the use of speculative fiction to address systemic issues such as racialized surveillance, gender inequality, and social displacement in her examination of Afrofuturistic narratives. The intersectionalities of race and gender are also foregrounded as Black female protagonists emerge as powerful leaders in these narratives. The essay by Prem Alean Bag also eschews Eurocentricism to assert how the dystopian genre is a fluid concept shaped by the unique

cultural and historical backgrounds of its authors. He focuses on representative texts from Botswana, Australia, Taiwan, and Russia that articulate specific regional anxieties such as colonial trauma, environmental ethics, and digital commodification. Through this cross-cultural lens, dystopia is redefined as an evolving reflection of a society's most guarded principles and its specific historical scars.

Srijani Dutta's essay identifies dystopia in the artwork of Ganesh Pyne. She has explored how Pyne's unique style was shaped by both European modernism and the socio-political trauma of events like the Bengal Famine and the 1947 Partition. By applying the concept of abjection and the philosophy of the Absurd, the essay illustrates how Pyne's paintings portray human suffering, existential crisis, and the grotesque. The final critical essay by Sangya Pal examines the physical and political implications of the body in Ursula K. Le Guin's short story, 'The Ones who Walk Away from Omelas'. This essay circles back to the argument with which I began—utopia and dystopia are inextricably linked. Pal has established how utopian happiness of the collective is a performative state built upon the literal dehumanization and confinement of a single suffering child. By analyzing the "contract" that sustains this society, the text highlights how the Omelian body serves as a site of both biopolitical control and radical resistance. Pal suggests that those who choose to depart from the city represent a limitless potential for transformation, as they refuse to participate in a system of exploitative joy.

The volume ends with Bhairab Barman's review of Neeraj Ghaywan's 2025 film *Homebound.* Barman has examined the intersecting realities of caste discrimination and communal prejudice in 21st Century India. The film illustrates how frustrating the pursuit of social dignity and institutional protection is for the socially and racially marginalised characters. The COVID-19 lockdown becomes a dystopian reality as the already disenfranchised characters are reduced to expendable migrant workers stripped of their citizenship rights.

The lack of agency which characterised the Victorian prostitute or the Dalit women in Bengal also becomes the predicament of the two central characters and their families, and by extension, their communities in *Homebound*.

I present this volume with the hope and assurance that the insights and interventions provided by the essays will add to the vastly growing scholarship on dystopian and apocalyptic themes in SF and futuristic narratives. As the editor of the volume, I shall derive a sense of accomplishment if the essays pave the way for further research and investigation.

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WORK CITED

1 Claeys, Gregory. *Dystopia: A Natural History: A Study of Modern Despotism, Its Antecedents, and Its Literary Diffractions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.