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LORETO COLLEGE KOLKATA
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SUBHASREE BASU
December 2024

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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.

SUBHASREE BASU
December 2024

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Public Women, Private Nightmares:

Surveillance, Sensationalism, and the Dystopian Politics of Exposure in Victorian News Media

Manisha Bhattacharya

ABSTRACT

In puritanical Victorian society, sexuality was expected to remain bound within the institution of marriage, serving a procreative and moral function. Since the period produced a large range of legislations, police statistics, parliamentary reports, letters, articles, interview, religious tracts and medical investigations, intending to define prostitution and disseminate a body of 'knowledge' surrounding the notoriety of the profession; it could be considered a period of transition and transformation. Victorian prostitution, when situated within the larger socio-economic structure, facilitated by the Industrial Revolution, the advent of capitalism, and growing urbanization, offered an immensely stifling, constricting, and oppressive dystopian reality primarily for the working-class—impoverished, subaltern women in England during the Victorian reign. This paper seeks to explore the governmental attempts intending to establish and construct normative, legal and moral definitions of prostitution, as represented through political rhetoric, medico-moral perspectives and evangelical assumptions—all enmeshed within some disciplinary measures. However, their lack of statistical transparency and truthfulness demanded an alternative source of knowledge which was generated by British print media, reflected mostly through direct, autobiographical but anonymous accounts of prostitutes and their procurers; published in different periodicals in the latter

half of nineteenth-century. Their first-hand testimonies signified an act of resistance against the systematic structural violence where they used their bodies as capital, in terms of physical labour in the laissez-faire economy. Using Michel Foucault's concept of the politics of surveillance, this article argues how newspapers such as *The Times* (1858), and *The Pall Mall Gazette* (1885) garnered knowledge through an act of knowing and controlling the popular public perception on the discourse, sometimes conforming to the principles of 'sensationalism', but sometimes moving beyond it in order to influence the policy makers for social, administrative, and legal reforms.

KEY WORDS

Dystopian politics, Prostitution, Journalism, Surveillance, Sensationalism.

In the context of industrial advancement, capitalistic expansion and rapid urban growth, prostitution in Victorian England created a dystopian environment of exploitation, subjugation, constraint, and disenfranchisement, especially for the disproportionately burdened working-class and subaltern women. Economic necessity, phallocentric social structures, and despotic state-censorship fostered conditions which reflected the significant tenets of dystopian theory—confinement, moral absolutism, systematic violence, dehumanization, and the collapse of individual autonomy—all converged within the coercive frameworks of oppression. When capitalism reclaimed the urban landscape, the traditional means of survival and sustenance were remodeled; problem of migration resurfaced, with rural women shifting largely to the cities, being displaced into the industrial towns with restraining employment opportunities. They realized that the industrial works created disparity in wealth distribution leaving them underpaid, which also reflected gender bias. Moreover, domestic jobs

landed them in trouble, offering little security and subjecting them to abuse. For many, prostitution seemed to be the only feasible choice that should be adopted for survival where they had to conform to the nuances of market economy and that also pinned them down through moral manipulations. This contradictory situation produced the Victorian paradox where women were included in the industrial workforce, contributing to its economy yet they were socio-culturally vilified.

Nineteenth-century England witnessed an unprecedented growth and intensification of discursive elements; pertaining to female sexuality, body politics, various bodily potentialities, functions, pleasures, and sensations. The century gave birth to an abundance of sexual discourses which embedded the social construction of female sexuality within the contemporary system of knowledge production and power relations. This paper seeks to explore Victorian authority's obsessive preoccupation with the sexual maneuverings and its codification that differentiated 'Victorian sexuality' from the regulated sexual codes of the previous ages, as represented through the journalistic readings of two case studies. Marginalized sexualities and sexual aberrations became subject to intense moral and legal scrutiny, critical analysis and ethical contemplation by the puritanical and patriarchal hegemonic structure. No institution received as much attention, and state control as the profession of prostitution. Hence, using a feminist lens, this study aims to understand the profession in terms of a prostitute's failure to meet the socio-economic and political demands of the Age—to conform to the racial and class structure, and to surrender to the gendered ideals and identity, and how and why she posed a threat to the nation medically, morally, and sexually. In the *laissez-faire* economy, she was treated as a commodified object of male gaze, of inquiry; whereas she stood as a wage worker, a skilled labourer, selling her physical labour in terms of capital; blurring the categories of bourgeois economy as well as challenging the boundaries of bourgeois morality.

The period produced a wide range of legislations ('Disorderly House Act' 1751, 'Vagrancy Act' 1824, 'Metropolitan Police Act' 1839, 'Town Police Clauses Act' 1847, 'Contagious Disease Acts' 1864, 66, 69, 'Criminal Law Amendment Act' 1885), police statistics, parliamentary reports, letters, articles, interviews, religious tracts and medical studies, that attempted to reconstruct the definition of prostitution. Also, the wide circulation of 'knowledge' surrounding the stigmatized profession and its infamy positioned the era as one of profound transition. Victorian prostitution, if analyzed through a dystopian lens, unraveled the tropes of institutionalized bodily regulation and surveillance through the implementation of Contagious Diseases Acts, reiterating dystopian motif of 'biopolitics.'[1] Prostitutes, suspected of sexual contamination, were subject to forceful medical examinations and subsequent convictions, as they threatened the medical health of the soldiers of garrison towns who were crucial to the imperial strength. Thus, it exposed the state's oppressive role in controlling public morality under the guise of public health. Therefore, state machinery's deliberate control of Victorian social order aligned with the dystopian narratives where self-expression and agency were compromised. British news media responded to this practice in order to demonstrate how Victorian society had criminalized the profession through constricting legal measures but it inevitably had to accept them as an integral part of the system because the system itself relied on their existence for functioning.

This would partly be related to the concept of the 'Body Politic' as explained by Lucia Zedner in *Women, Crime and Custody in Victorian England* (1991) wherein men represented the head of the nation; women (the gentlewomen or 'angels in the house') symbolized the heart whilst prostitutes and wretched women reflected the various unmentionable and distasteful bodily functions. A prostitute was viewed as a necessary discursive tool for men; they offered an outlet for satisfaction of male sexual needs and desires, functioning as society's 'safety valve'; but irretrievably tainted by its consummation. She

was the ultimate projection of patriarchy's self-loathing, repulsion, distaste and abhorrence. But despite the disparate Victorian attitudes surrounding the discourse on prostitution, one factor, or one silence, unites them all—the imposed silence on the part of the male agents. Prostitution in late nineteenth-century flourished not as a 'problem' about women, but about men, their sexual demands, and collective masculine power to which prostitution seemed to be an unnatural response. So, with a feminist reading, this paper argues how some of the Victorian periodicals opened up dialogue on gendered spaces and also enabled a form of gendered resistance by bringing the suppressed voices of the anonymous prostitutes (and the brothel-keepers) to the forefront and by giving them a visibility, denied earlier. In doing so, the paper applies a journalistic approach, employing investigative techniques of nineteenth-century reportage where the case studies are used as primary textual evidences in order to offer a broader socio-political and cultural spectrum. The paper will refer to W. T. Stead's "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon", published in the evening issue of *The Pall Mall Gazette*, and relevant letters purportedly written by "One More Unfortunate" and "Another Unfortunate", published in *The Times* since these portrayed how Victorian print media both deconstructed (*Pall Mall Gazette*) and strengthened (*The Times*) the prevalent sexual and moral codes of the epoch.

From a dystopian theoretical perspective, the figure of the prostitute became emblematic of a system that employed disciplinary measures to control her 'body', restricting dissenting voices, and reconstructed the image of the 'fallen woman' as both a scapegoat and symptom of social erosion. Though there was an abundance of narratives focusing on the legislative measures, parliamentary proceedings, religious treatises, medical discourses; the demand of statistical integrity and sincerity necessitated alternative forms of 'knowledge' which British news media sought to provide, specially through direct but anonymous testimonies of fallen women, prostitutes, harlots, street walkers, and pimps or procurers; published in different periodicals like

London City Mission Magazine (1840), *Westminster Review* (1850), *Morning Chronicle* (1851), *The Punch* (1857), *The Times* (1858), *The Athenaeum* (1858), *The Illustrated News* (1858), *The Star* (1868), *The Pall Mall Gazette* (1885), and *The Philanthropist* (1886). As the literacy rate grew higher among the Victorians in nineteenth-century, they had easy access to the periodicals and dailies which exerted a heavy influence on Victorian readers and that contributed to the construction of the public discourse. The journalistic representations of the unseen and nameless lives can also function as a rhetoric that addresses a larger audience, inspires a reimagining of reality, mobilizes public action, and conveys political awareness. Hence, the print media documents the ongoing debates and discussions on the endurance of prostitution over a period of time, shaping and refining public opinion.

William Tait's work *Magdalenism: An Inquiry into the Extent, Causes, and Consequences, of Prostitution in Edinburgh* (1840) re-defined the profession of prostitution as "merely an act; while prostitute is always employed to denote a person who habitually follows the course of conduct implied in successive acts" (Tait 1840, 01). Though a prostitute was still condemned for her 'licentiousness', Tait was more interested in their ways of lives and activities as 'streetwalkers'. Throughout the century, it was continuously recognized that the profession was under tremendous state surveillance and censorship which took different forms and shapes on different occasions at various times. While discussing about the surveillance through news media, this paper would like to take references from Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* to develop the arguments on the modes, means and workings of surveillance as a tactics, as a political tool in order to make the discourse on sexuality permanently visible and pervasive. The phrase 'surveillance' was understood 'as a technology of power that divides, disciplines, observes and categorizes' (Foucault 1979, 144). Foucault's dealing with the idea of surveillance was explained through the 'technologies of observation' (Foucault 1979, 146) to

examine how disciplinary power was implemented in places like 'prisons, hospitals and psychiatric wards' (Foucault 1979, 146). He argued,

> "The examination was the basis of power, the form of knowledge-power that was to give rise to the human sciences—psychiatry, psychology, sociology . . . It was a power to know, power that could extract a knowledge from individuals and . . . extract a knowledge about those individuals who are subject to observation." (Foucault 1979, 150).

This chapter would like to argue how the politics of 'knowing' helped in framing and controlling the institution of prostitution through journalistic representations with a specific focus on *The Times and The Pall Mall Gazette.*

Journalism in the simplest terms is a textual space where authentic, accurate and verified public knowledge gets testified and contested and then printed in a newspaper which can mould public perception in its favour. Anonymity of the writers and the testimonies was ensured; the material of writing was of more importance than the question of authorship till 1860s when individual identity of the writer came to the forefront and was held accountable for their public opinion. Studying how the mechanisms and agents of surveillance get manifested and exhibited through 'sensational journalism' definitely takes us back to Foucault who stated that the system of surveillance 'aimed at knowing, mastering and using' (Foucault 1979, 149). Journalism too is an act of knowing, producing a certain kind of knowledge that creates a specific form of power over the subjects it deals with, as W. T. Stead discussed in two of his essays ("The Future of Journalism" and "Government by Journalism", 1886), "the particular station of the editor offers a position wherein one may purview all of society from high to low. Journalism acted as surveillance as it not only gathered a vision of the public and

subjects out there, but then offered this vision back to the public for its own consumption" (Stead 1886, 664). Stead who pioneered and engineered the concept of 'New Journalism', asked both the authors and the editors to undertake social and moral responsibility, recommended a thorough and unbiased investigation, and a direct association with the readers. Therefore, moving beyond the 'spectacle of the sensational' (ibid.), this paper aims to probe into the complex, nuanced, and multilayered narratives on the discourse that troubled the entire nation at that time.

Victorian Britain had two different segments, known as the 'dual society': West End, a projection of refinement, culture, and elitism; and East End, a picture of poverty, overtly crowded population, and dinginess which forced the working-class women to enter prostitution for survival. Henry Mayhew and Bracebridge Hemyng, in their book *London Labour and London Poor* (1862), categorized the London prostitutes into different segments: 'seclusives',[2] 'dollymops',[3] 'soldiers' women', or 'kept mistress'. Talking about the London prostitution, J.B. Talbot, the 'Secretary of the London Society for the Protection of Young Females and the Suppression of Juvenile Prostitution' observed: "no country, or city, or town, where the evil was so systematically, so openly, so extensively carried on, as in England and her chief city, London" (Talbot 1844, 168). The city police in the 1840s estimated the number of prostitutes in England to be 80,000 whereas London had around 7000 of them. An anonymous prostitute got offended by the numbers and responded with a letter, addressed to the editor of *The Times*, "hurling big figures at us, it is said that there are 80,000 of us in London alone—which is a monstrous falsehood" (*The Times* 24 Feb. 1858).

In 1835-36, Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet, a French physician, was the first medical person to conduct a detailed historical investigation of the 'necessary social evil' in the streets of Paris and documented his socio-scientific analysis in a book titled *Prostitution in the City*

of Paris (1836). Following that observation, William Logan stated in *An Exposure, from personal observation, of female prostitution in London, Leeds, and Rochdale, and especially in city of Glasgow* (1843), among various reasons for women's entry into prostitution, one being their mothers' blackmailing and coercion to increase their family's earnings. William Acton in "Prostitution" (1857) listed 'the absolute neglect of children by parents' as one of the leading causes of prostitution in the city of London. Talbot also provided a statistical report, highlighting that 12000-14000 young maidens had to resort to prostitution for their 'parents' or guardians' neglect' (Talbot 1844, 169). Then William Stead, the supposed pioneer of 'sensationalism' and 'New Journalism', came out with a series of editorials and controversial articles in 1885, titled "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon", serialized in *The Pall Mall Gazette* where he unearthed the notoriety of child prostitution and juvenile pornography. With scandalous and provocative headlines like 'The Violations of Virgin' and 'Strapping Girls Down', 'The Confessions of a brothel-keeper', 'How Girls were Bought and Ruined', Stead's investigative journalism created uproar and ensured that the exposition led to the immediate enactment of the 'Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885' or alternatively called 'The Stead Act' ('An Act to make further provision for the Protection of Women and Girls, the suppression of brothels, and other purposes') which made changes in the parameter of Age of Consent, raising the bar from 13 to 16; and imposed penalty for sexual offences against minor girls. He suggested that adult behaviour based on mutual consent should be a private, ethical practice, not a site on which legislative measures would be enacted and contested. Instead he made a selective list of five burning issues which required legal interventions from the government:

a. "The sale and purchase and violation of children.
b. The procuration of virgins.

c. The entrapping and ruin of women.
d. The international slave trade in girls.
e. Atrocities, brutalities, and unnatural crimes." (Stead July 6 1885, n.pag)

Stead unraveled the darkest and filthiest aspect of the profession which involved the corruption of innocent souls that could possibly destroy their lives, abuse and torment them in the process. What was unfortunate, the unscrupulous British officials were unapologetically ignorant of the matter and they allowed such ghastly business to continue without taking any disciplinarian actions against the perpetrators. Much before Stead's investigation and social experimentation, a legal measure was undertaken; a law ('Metropolitan Police Act', 1839) was introduced in London that led to the suppression of the profession apparently with no visible results. It decreed, anyone sheltering procurers or running sanctioned brothels would be severely penalized under its jurisdiction. This act was implemented with the intention of regulating the immoral vices and perceivable sexual behaviours. So, in order to draw support from the British Parliament, Stead distinguished between 'sexual immorality' and 'sexual criminality' and also denounced those uncouth members of the Parliament who raised objections against its repeal citing personal biases. This sensational case landed Stead into prison for three months. Historian Lucy Brown in *Victorian News and Newspapers* (1985) applauded Stead's honest efforts stating, "Stead was an important figure in newspaper history because he fully understood how to use the instruments he conducted" (Brown 1985, 107).

Stead decided to expose two addicted families who in order to collect money to buy alcohol, sold their daughters into brothels. He chose to make a deal with a former prostitute known to him, named Rebecca Jarrett, who in disguise of a pimp was supposed to find out young virginal girls. Stead deliberately took up this social project in

order to prove to the authority how easily accessible these innocent, 'pure' maidens were who could be disposed of in the sex market, unnoticed. The experiment was so shocking and disturbing that it proved disconcerting to the bourgeoisie. What Stead intended to do was to influence the policy makers. So, Jerrett procured a 14-year-old young maid who lost her father and abandoned by her mother; hence stayed with her sister in the 'house of ill fame' around Marylebone in London. The compelling dealing was almost complete in exchange of five pounds but one of her sisters intervened timely and rescued her from being fallen a prey to the monstrosity. Immediately after, Jarrett got hold of another such naïve girl named Eliza Armstrong or Lily in the same vicinity who was sold off by her own drunken mother, with a confirmation of her sexual purity, also certified by a mid-wife. She was drugged, left unconscious in a brothel; then trafficked to France, and forcibly pushed into the flesh trade—all just for five pounds. Stead narrated a startling experience of an anonymous brothel-keeper who was his acquaintance (mentioned in "The Confessions of a brothel-keeper"):

> The woman was poor, dissolute. The father, who was also a drunken man, was told his daughter was going to a situation. He received the news with indifference, without even inquiring where she was going to . . . The little girl, all unsuspecting the purpose for which she was destined, was told that she must go with this strange woman to a situation. The procuress, who was well up to her work, took her away, washed her, dressed her up neatly, and sent her to bid her parents good-bye. The mother was so drunk she hardly recognized her daughter (Stead July 6 1885, n.pag).

It was believed that daughters who used to live with their biological mothers in the same brothels would likely to follow the latter's path, becoming prostitutes themselves. Stead's informant confirmed that

these young girls used to work as maids initially before becoming sexually ripe at a certain age and then they were absorbed into the business, sometimes without their consent. There were even pimps who used to nurture and feed these girls until they reached twelve or thirteen, and once they were marketable, they had to cater to the male sexual demands, thus establishing the mercantile framework of the time. Michael Ryan in his book *Prostitution in London* (1839) elaborated on this subject taking cues from LSPYF's 1837 report ('Committee of London Society for the Protection of Young Females and Prevention of Juvenile Prostitution') that enlisted a few unique cases where parents mindlessly forced their children into prostitution. The report detailed a case of Leah Davis, a brothel-keeper who mothered thirteen daughters altogether—all prostituted themselves in different parts of the city. Their cowardly father, Ormond was totally indifferent to the situation and readily lived off his daughter's money. The committee exposed many such other cases; in two of them, the death of the paternal figures caused their daughters' ruin. In another instance, a 15-year-old girl was abandoned by her step mother in the streets after her father's untimely demise. The Committee interacted with the said girl in the hospital where she was admitted after being assaulted. The editor of the *London City Mission Magazine* in 1843 noted,

> We heard, on undoubted evidence, of the case of a woman who, when expostulated with for her sin in keeping a bad house, and the feelings of a parent referred to as a motive to induce her to abandon her evil practices replied, 'But all the parents do not feel as you do, for a mother came to me the other day, and asked me to take her three girls into my house. Their ages were 9, 11, and 13' (Logan 1843, 96).

These families belonged to the lowest strata of society and experienced difficulties making their livings in shabby and extremely populated,

unhygienic spaces like Whitechapel and Lambeth in the East End. Mayhew in 1851 wrote a letter to the editor of the *Morning Chronicle* about the unsanitary living conditions of the working-class families: "there were—twenty-three inhabited houses for an acre and seven individuals to each house in the London Dock, which represented 55,500 inhabitants for 8000 inhabited houses in 1841" (Mayhew 1862, 27). The Royal Commission also emphasized that shadowy alleys and the dingy crowded lodging houses functioned as a dystopian setting where survival demanded a continuous negotiation with power and gendered violence which was the major cause for the growth of 'early sexual gestures and vices' (Mayhew 1862, 29). All these social investigations tried to justify that overcrowded dwellings in London slums were one of the significant factors contributing to the rise of prostitution in Victoria period.

Furthermore, Stead was horrified when he realized that the minor children could not even resist the physical assault, being unconscious for most of the times, they could not protest or scream or restrain the perpetrator. Sometimes after being drugged, the young women were coercively given choices of either accepting her fate or being rendered homeless later as their families have already disowned them. While interviewing an anonymous brothel-keeper, she confessed:

> I engaged her to be my little maid at the lodgings where I was staying. The very next day I took her off with me to London and her mother never saw her again . . . If she objects, I scold her and tell her she has lost her character, no one will take her in; I will have to turn her out on the streets as a bad and ungrateful girl. The result is that in nine cases out of ten, or ninety-nine out of a hundred, the child, who is usually under fifteen, frightened and friendless, her head aching with the effect of the drowse and full of pain and horror, gives up all hope, and in a week she is one of the attractions of the house (Stead July 6 1885, n.pag).

If Stead's investigation was taken into serious considerations, the above mentioned description illustrated the most excruciating form of sexual exploitation that a Victorian child had to endure. Again, Stead in his journalistic piece, "A Dreadful Profession", published in "The Maiden Tribute" discussed the tricky role played by the 'mid-wives' in sex-trafficking. Unlike the 'touters',[4]4 the 'mid-wives' used to medically examine the trapped girl, brought by the pimp to assert her virginal purity. They were also asked to abort any illegitimate pregnancy in exchange of lump sum money. Stead scornfully remarked: "this repairer of damaged virgins [was] not a procuress…What she [did was] to minimize pain and repair as effectively as possible the ravages of the lust which she did not create, and which she [could not] control" (Stead July 8 1885, n.pag).

Due to lack of sufficient testimonies, research works on Victorian child prostitution and pornography were of scarcity. Stead was often accused of writing triggering, sensational pot-boilers, probably to push the sale of *The Pall Mall Gazette*; or whether he was genuinely concerned with the underworld nuisances of the Age and wanted to contain its spread to some extent was a matter of contention. Since nobody dared take up this controversial subject before or after Stead, his meticulous analysis on juvenile prostitution must be studied with great care, as justifiably, his critical inquiry marked the advent of early 'sensationalist journalism' in Britain.

On the other hand, *The Times* (1858) brought the voices of the marginalized from the streets to public readership, and helped the prostitutes channelize their frustrations and anger through a textual terrain. Another compelling yet cautionary case study comprising two anonymous letters ("One More Unfortunate" and "Another Unfortunate") sent to the editor John Delane of *The Times* would be discussed and analyzed next. A supposed 'fallen woman' in the disguise of "One More Unfortunate" drafted a letter dated 4th February, narrating her disgraceful condition and brought allegations against the governmental authorities. It was reverted by "Amicus"

who requested her to send in her residential details so that she could be rescued from her fallen state, though it was later found out that her fate remained uncertain. In response, she again wrote back to the editor on 11th February sharing her grueling journey from 'fallenness' to redemption. This communication did not end here, as one more anonymous letter from "Another Unfortunate" arrived on 24th February which refuted the earlier narrative asserting her pride and vanity associated with her fall. She claimed to be a successful courtesan just like Catherine Walters or Skittles who was at the peak of her profession that time, and enjoyed all the male attention; exploiting the system as well as being exploited. This illustration redefined the sentimental and romantic delusion surrounding a suffering prostitute—she might not lament her fall, she might very well enjoy the wealth and fame that came along. She did not endorse any elusive, melodramatic approach to life because of her working-class upbringing. She confessed, "My parents did not give me any education; they did not instill in my mind virtuous percepts nor set me a good example. They were drunk and labourers, who offered me nothing except the freedom to become prostitute" (*The Times*, 24 Feb. 1858, n.pag). She never had any moral qualms, and owned up to her amorality with poise and dignity; she continued:

> I lost—what? not my virtue, for I never had any. That which is commonly, but untruly called virtue, I gave away. You reverend Mr. Philanthropist—what call you virtue? Is it not the principle, the essence, which keeps watch and ward over the conduct, over the substance, the materiality? No such principle ever kept watch and ward over me, and I repeat that I never lost that which I never had—my virtue (*The Times*, 24 Feb. 1858, n.pag).

On the contrary, "One More Unfortunate" did fit in the stereotype of a 'fallen woman', detailing the reasons of her fall through series of

letters. She revealed that she used to work as a governess for an elite upper-class family and was eventually seduced and deserted by her employer which made her feel alienated. Her case could be used as a good moral example of how young adolescent women should not behave. She was so remorseful that she wrote in the 'post script': "I cannot give you my name, having so disgraced it, nor my address, as it is disreputable" (*The Times*, 24 Feb. 1858, n.pag). Her story was a tale of kindness, of Christian atonement for sins by rescuing a fallen woman. However, there were serious concerns regarding the credibility and accuracy of these letters, so, to win over the readers and critics, editor Delane himself clarified on 25th February, "we are not endeavouring to palm off a cunningly executed literary imposter upon our readers" (Wendelin 2012, 97). Interestingly, Charles Dickens, on behalf of his close associate, Angela Burdett-Coutts enquired about the well-being of the woman in question and pleaded with the people to have mercy on her; which again proved the authenticity of these accounts and testaments: "Miss Coutts has asked me to try to find out for her, who wrote the one more unfortunate letter in Times of yesterday. Of course she proceeds on the assumption that it is really written, or prompted by such a person as it purports to originate with" (Storey and Tillotson 1995, 525).

Contrary to Stead and Delane's study, Hemyng and Mayhew documented the confession of a 'common prostitute' in her cockney English dialect, who frequented the East End of the metropolis:

> I was a servant gal away down in Birmingham, I got tired of workin' and slavin' to make a living, and getting a---------- bad one at that; what o' five pun' a year and yer grub, I'd sooner starve, I would. After a bit I went to Coventry, cut brummagem, as we calls it in those parts, and took up with soldiers as was quartered there. Soldiers is good, but they don't pay; cos why they ain't got no money; so I says to myself,

> I'll go to Lunnon and I did. I soon found my level there. (Mayhew 1862, 223)[5]

In the above autobiographical account, the typically illiterate 'wicked woman' reflected her narrative voice and prowess so effectively, and also demonstrated her economical understanding of the market. She resisted any socio-sexual stereotypical analysis of her 'fallenness' that was quite prevalent in the literature and artistic representations of the time, embedded in works of Dickens, Gaskell, Hardy, or D. G. Rossetti, Holman Hunt, Richard Redgrave, Ford Madox Brown, for instances. She was neither a 'kept mistress'; nor a well-dressed streetwalker roaming around Haymarket; nor a miserable, degraded, depraved, and hapless woman, contemplating death by suicide in the Thames. Instead she seemed to be a brave-heart, navigating her path on her own terms, without the melodramatic or sentimental flair of a debased and disgraced temptress who was featured frequently in a negative light in numerous religious tracts of the time. She was not even a fallen victim of male seduction and abandonment, nor an innocent girl drugged and enslaved against her will. Her descent into the profession was conscious and gradual. For her, prostitution was not a question of 'middle-class demand and working-class supply' (Walkowitz 1980, 13) but forging a heterosexual, man-woman relationship of the similar social class. Therefore, her voluntary choice of entering the profession raised eyebrows and defied all the conventional presumptions regarding the discourse that had been prevalent since the early nineteenth century.

What was ironic, men as prospective clients contributed indirectly but significantly to the perpetuation of prostitution as they were complicit participants in the system as consumers. William Acton considered it a vicious cycle of supply and demand where one catered to the other: "Supply, as we all know, is regulated by demand, and demand is the practical expression of an ascertained want. [. . .] The

want of prostitutes grows with the use of them. [. . .] the supply is active, so that we may almost say the supply rather than the want creates the demand" (Acton 1870, 35). Victorians mostly approve of prostitution as 'necessity' and normalized it in order to satiate male sexual libido, and Governmental authority's indifference and lack of administrative intervention also confirmed their passive acceptance. *Westminster Review* (1850) reiterated this observation exposing the negligence of the administration in terms of its prohibition:

> . . . the legislative and executive authorities, seeing it, deploring it, yet confess by their inaction their inability to check it, and their unwillingness to prohibit it, and virtually say to the unfortunate prostitutes and their frequenters—'As long as you create no public scandal, but throw a decent veil over your proceedings, we shall not interfere with you, but shall regard you as an inevitable evil' . . . (Acton 1857, 14)[6]

The profession of prostitution continued to exist in order to mask the economic inequality in wealth distribution system of England, because of which working-class women viewed this profession as a source of alternative revenue. Michael Ryan argued why a profitable and beneficial business like prostitution was 'necessary and unavoidable':

> Prostitution exists, and will always exist in large cities, and elsewhere, because, like mendicity and play, it is a most profitable calling, and a resource against starvation . . . If notwithstanding laws, punishments, public contempt, even gross brutality, and frightful disease, the inevitable consequences of prostitution, prostitutes still exist, is not this an evident proof that they cannot be put down, and that they are unavoidable in society? Remove them from mankind if you can, and all will become profligately licentious (Ryan 1839, 84).

Therefore, it is understandable why prostitution emerged as an ideologically driven narrative and also as a political rhetoric throughout the nineteenth century which ultimately strengthened Victorian glorification of the definitions of womanhood—virtue, moral purity and respectability; when set against the eternalized cultural portrayal of the prostitute. As this paper illustrates, those engaged in the practice have rarely had the authority to define it within public discourse. It was the everyday production of 'knowledge' in British newspapers that played a crucial role in constructing the figure of the prostitute—a woman primarily fashioned through language. The periodicals tried to show how a prostitute's life unearthed a nether world where the individual was confined within such an exploitative structure that enabled her to be simultaneously 'hyper–visible' (as an object of spectacle and surveillance) and 'invisible' (as a subject without autonomy and agency). This 'abject visibility' represented a dystopian existence—always watched, always judged, yet never acknowledged as fully human. Thus, the Victorian discourse redefined the image of a prostitute, not merely as an object of moral scrutiny but as a dystopian subject, both a product and critique of the consumerist economy, as explained persuasively by the periodical narratives.

NOTES

1 Biopolitics is a concept that originates from the work of Michel Foucault (discussed initially in his lecture series, "Society Must Be Defended", 1975-76) which refers to the ways in which the modern state regulates the population through the control of life and the body-through statistics, public health policies, surveillance, and medical discourses.

2 'Seclusives' were divided either into 'Prima Donnas or kept mistresses'; both used to live a life of luxury and navigated the upper strata of society; they were different only on one ground, the former worked independently and the latter had to depend completely on their male suitors/clients for earning.

3 'Dollops' were part-time prostitutes, doing other menial works as well to run families.
4 Known as 'dress-lodgers', they were prostitutes earlier, now old and out of service, they struggle to have a livelihood; they were the young prostitutes' chaperons, they used to solicit customers for them as well.
5 Named, 'Swindling Sal', it was quoted in Hemyng's essay, "Prostitution in London", published in *London Labour and the London Poor,* edited by Henry Mayhew, New York, 1968. IV, p. 223.
6 From *Westminster Review*, "Prostitution", July 1850, quoted by William Acton, ed. 1857, p.14.

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The Dystopian Quest for Perfection:

Evolutionary Anxieties in Two Early Pulp Science Fiction Stories by Women

Sulagna Chattopadhyay

ABSTRACT

Academic studies on the emergence of dystopia in the early twentieth century have tended to focus on canonical works by male authors such as Wells, Forster, Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell. Such studies have failed to accord due importance to a rich but ephemeral and largely subjugated body of work where the dystopian imagination frequently made an appearance: the American pulp science fiction magazines, encompassing the period from 1926 to 1950. My objective in this paper is to address this critical gap by focusing on stories by two authors suffering a double marginalisation in SF history on account of being women writers in the male-dominated space of the pulp magazines. Through readings of Sophie Wenzel Ellis's "Creatures of the Light" (1930) and Leslie F. Stone's "The Great Ones" (1937), both published in Astounding Stories in the early phase of the pulps, I aim to explore how female pulp SF authors negotiated the blurred boundaries of the utopia/dystopia dyad to investigate and interrogate two popular scientific discourses of the time: evolution and eugenics. My paper shall also consider how these female authors, despite working within the constraints of a genre that historically privileged male interests, succeeded in foregrounding issues that were of special relevance to contemporary women, such as gender, marriage, reproduction, and motherhood.

KEYWORDS

dystopia, pulp science fiction, American women's writing, evolution, eugenics

> Man always has been, always will be a creature of the light. He is forever reaching for some future point of perfected evolution . . . It is this yearning for perfection which sets man apart from all other life, which made him man even in the rudimentary stages of his development. He was man when he wallowed in the slime of the new world and yearned for the air above. He will still be man when he has evolved into that glorious creature of the future whose body is deathless and whose mind rules the universe.[1]

When the history of women's participation in the genre of science fiction (SF) is considered, a crucial phase that has long suffered academic neglect is the era of the pulp SF magazines—roughly spanning the period from 1926, when Hugo Gernsback launched the first specialty magazine dedicated exclusively to SF, to the immediate post-war years, when the pulps began to be superseded by the digest format of magazine publishing. Printed on cheap and coarse wood pulp paper with untrimmed edges, the pulp SF magazines were a fundamentally ephemeral form of publication, associated with sensational, lurid stories of action and adventure and frequently denigrated as "the literary trash of the early twentieth century."[2] Although the SF pulps were dominated by male authors and undoubtedly catered to a largely male readership, the common preconception that the magazines were inhospitable to female engagement has been thoroughly challenged in recent scholarship. The extensive archival research of Eric Leif Davin reveals that "*203 different women authors—identifiable as women—published almost 1,000 stories in the science fiction magazines*

between April, 1926…and 1960."[3] Pulp SF was thus, in Davin's words, "contested terrain," with the "dominant male paradigm" of the genre constantly being critiqued and challenged by "outsider groups" such as women.[4]

My paper shall draw on this rich and underexplored body of SF writing to investigate the extent to which women writers of the pulps experimented with the form of the dystopian narrative. Jane Donawerth's pioneering scholarship has already established that "the feminist utopia continued in the pulps even though it virtually disappeared in the hardback book trade from the 1920s through the 1950s."[5] I wish to extend the same line of enquiry to the then nascent genre of the dystopia, the precise contours of which were yet to solidify in critical discourse or in the popular imagination, but the spirit of which manifested in the pulp magazines in the form of certain core anxieties revolving around scientific advancement and its implications for humanity. In the following discussion, I shall focus on two early pulp SF stories by women published in *Astounding Stories*—Sophie Wenzel Ellis's "Creatures of the Light" (February 1930) and Leslie F. Stone's "The Great Ones" (July 1937). Both stories deal with overreaching scientific quests for evolutionary progress and perfection, building worlds that are reminiscent of nightmarish Wellsian visions of the distant future. My readings seek to demonstrate how these texts engage with the intertwined and deeply controversial early-twentieth-century debates on evolution and eugenics to ultimately critique the dystopian ramifications of masculinist science, with all its attendant transgressions of the 'natural' order. I also analyse how these early evolutionary dystopias by women writers relate scientific understanding to socio-cultural issues such as gender, marriage, and reproduction, albeit in politically ambiguous ways. It must be noted that I do not use the term dystopia in this article as the binary opposite of utopia. Rather, I follow Lyman Tower Sargent in conceptualising the fictional dystopia (the bad place) as a cautionary complement to the aspirational eutopia

(the good place), with both serving the common imaginative and political function of utopianism as a "process of social dreaming."[6]

* * *

The question of evolutionary progress—defined by Timothy Shanahan as "gradual directional change embodying improvement"—has been vigorously contested ever since Darwinian ideas began to gain widespread scientific acceptance.[7] It is in fact difficult to talk about evolution without resorting to the language of progress, although the corresponding difficulty of establishing uniform epistemic standards by which progress may be reliably measured has been acknowledged. Darwin makes direct reference to this problem in his *Origin of Species*: "I do not doubt that this process of improvement has affected in a marked and sensible manner the organisation of the more recent and victorious forms of life, in comparison with the ancient and beaten forms; but I can see no way of testing this sort of progress."[8] Darwin remained equivocal about progress in his writings: in the concluding passages of the *Origin of Species*, he asserts that "all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection";[9] whereas in the *Descent of Man*, he qualifies this argument by suggesting that even though "progress has been much more general than retrogression,"[10] it is "no invariable rule."[11] Multifarious definitions of progress emerged concurrently in evolutionary biology—as a movement from simplicity to complexity, from homogeneity to heterogeneity, or as the manifestation of greater differentiation, specialisation, and adaptability. However, progress has never been merely a matter of biology; it has undeniable sociological, cultural, theological, and moral connotations. This was particularly the case in early twentieth-century America, where the notion of individual and collective progress held considerable social currency and fuelled the ethos of the American Dream. Progress could also be communally bolstered by concerted state-sanctioned efforts, such as

through the large-scale implementation of eugenic policies aimed at qualitatively improving human 'stock' by promoting the propagation of 'desirable' qualities and the weeding out of 'undesirable' ones. Progressionist syntheses of this nature were possible because evolution remained, to a great extent, "the science of the popular domain"[12] and was therefore constantly present in the public discourse.

Although the marriage of evolution and progress remained an uneasy one, progress was an attractive utopian ideology to SF writers and feminist thinkers, and both groups enlisted evolutionary (and often eugenic) theories in defence of their respective goals. In fact, as Michael Ruse notes, evolution came to be used by many as "a vehicle for thoughts of Progress."[13] SF by women writers would bring these different worlds together to consider the function of science and technology in facilitating human progress, as well as the ways in which scientific/technological and evolutionary progress may affect or alter the lives of women. It was also at the intersection of evolution and eugenics that dystopian anxieties in SF by women often took root. The two stories discussed in this article recognise that while the 'science' of eugenics co-opted and promised to realise eutopian aspirations of evolutionary progress and perfectibility, it could equally yield decidedly dystopian results. Progress is thus situated ambiguously along the continuum of possibility from eutopia to dystopia, and while the rhetoric of progress is not entirely dismantled, both stories seem to espouse a cautious ideology of gradual upliftment, in stark contrast to the myopic and ethically dubious excesses of masculinist science.

* * *

Although Sophie Wenzel Ellis's SF career was limited to a handful of short stories published in the pulp magazines in the early 1930s, she is notable for being the first female writer to appear in the pages of *Astounding Stories* with "Creatures of the Light." The story presents John Northwood, an up-and-coming young scientist who is

both brilliant and extraordinarily attractive, and Emil Mundson, "the electrical wizard and distinguished scientific writer" Northwood has long yearned to meet.[14] Identified as "the hunchback" and described as "singularly ugly," "deformed," and "hideous," Mundson is deeply fascinated by the prospect of human perfectibility and seeks to induct Northwood into his plan "to populate the earth with a new race of godlike people."[15] Northwood is particularly enticed by Mundson's statement that Athalia, a gloriously beautiful girl, was waiting for him. The two eagerly set out in Mundson's unique solar-powered aircraft, headed at astonishing speed towards a previously unexplored part of the Antarctic enigmatically referred to by Mundson as "the new Garden of Eden." Mundson eventually confesses that he has succeeded in his project to accelerate human evolution, thereby creating Adam—a creature snatched from the unborn future "who has reached the Light too soon."[16] Adam views ordinary human beings as "barbarians" and "worms of the Black Age" and seeks to annihilate them. However, he has one human weakness, Athalia, and he intends to take Northwood to Athalia so that she may recognise his evident superiority and reject Northwood. This sets into motion a Darwinian struggle between the two males with the objective of being chosen by the desired female.[17]

Speculative extrapolations charting future trajectories of human evolution were already common in SF by the time Ellis published "Creatures of the Light," and it may be worthwhile to consider earlier examples to identify recurring tropes. The most enduring image of the man of the future was famously established in H. G. Wells's satirical essay, "The Man of the Year Million" (1893). As man is "the creature of the brain," the essay reasons using the Lamarckian evolutionary logic of use and disuse, the man of the remote future would have a large, dome-like head and an atrophied body, owing to the over-development of intellectual capacities at the expense of the physical.[18] Wells probes the same eventuality through the Martians in *The War of the Worlds* (1898), who are described as "heads—

merely heads," with tentacular appendages.[19] This image proliferated in numerous pulp SF stories in the 1920s and 1930s, and Frank R. Paul's illustrations accompanying the 1927 reprint of *The War of the Worlds* in *Amazing Stories* rendered it particularly memorable. G. Peyton Wertenbaker's "The Coming of the Ice," the first original story purchased by Gernsback for *Amazing Stories*, presents a man who attains immortality and lives to see human beings evolve into creatures "with huge brains and tiny shriveled bodies, atrophied limbs, and slow, ponderous movements on their little conveyances."[20] Clare Winger Harris, the first woman to publish in the SF pulps, presents a comparable scenario in "The Evolutionary Monstrosity," where Ted Marston's laboratory experiments with evolution begin with the uncanny metamorphosis of a house cat into a bipedal, talking creature and culminate in Marston's own transformation into "a phosphorescent tarantula":

> The circular, central part was not a body, but rather a head, for from its center glowed two unblinking eyes, and beneath them was the rudiment of a mouth. The appendages . . . were fine hair-like tentacles that were continually in motion . . . I sensed that the repulsive form housed an exceptional intelligence.[21]

Notably, this grotesque narrative of evolution tended to focus on male subjects, as intellectual rationality has traditionally been considered a masculine principle. Hypertrophied brains and phallic tentacles can only be the attributes of the evolved *man*. No explicit female evolutionary pathway is offered that would accommodate the conventional association of the feminine principle with the emotional faculties and the reproducing body. It follows that intellectual overdevelopment is accompanied by loss of emotion and affect, like Wells's Martians who have "intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic."[22] The evolved man also has a propensity to tyrannise, characterised as he is by an amplified but very human thirst for

power and conquest. The promise of evolutionary progress is thus undermined by the concomitant fear of retrogression and a movement from a socially embedded existence to ruthlessly unemotional, even malevolent, self-interest.

While Ellis's evolved man, Adam, does not conform to this large-headed stereotype, the physical descriptions of Emil Mundson are striking in this regard. Mundson's "ugliness" and physical "deformity" are repeatedly highlighted, and Northwood makes note of his "huge, round, intelligent face" and "great, shaggy head." There is the unmistakable suggestion that Mundson's prodigious intellectual gifts, represented quite literally through his large head, have stunted his physical growth. Mundson's portrayal has much in common with Cesare Lombroso's description of the man of genius, characterised by "smallness of the body," "weakness of sexual and muscular activity," and a host of "almost superhuman characters," including "elevation of the forehead" and "notable development of the nose and of the head."[23] In addition, Lombroso remarks that many historical men of genius were "either rachitic, lame, hunch-backed, or club-footed," and that most were sterile, either remaining bachelors or having no children despite being married.[24] Mundson is thus the representative man of genius, whose insanity is manifested in the excessive delight that he takes in physical perfection. He refuses to cure his hump despite having the means to do so: "If I were perfect, I should cease to be so overwhelmingly conscious of the importance of perfection."[25] Like most other fictional mad scientists, Mundson also remains "sterile," eschewing romantic or sexual relationships while seeking out eugenically superior individuals to vicariously perpetuate his perfect race. He approaches Northwood not only because the latter is exceptionally intelligent and attractive, but also because he is "virile."[26] Athalia's description similarly foregrounds her reproductive fitness: she is "tall, slender, round-bosomed, narrow-hipped" and in "splendid health."[27] Mundson dreams that the children from Northwood and Athalia's eugenic marriage will strengthen the new race that he has

illicitly engendered by "usurping both God's and woman's powers of creation" like his literary precursor, Victor Frankenstein.[28]

The New Garden of Eden is presented as tangible evidence of Mundson's hubristic appropriation of the role of divine creator. It is a verdant tropical oasis situated in the Antarctic, its existence rendered possible by the extraction of the "Life Ray" from natural sunlight. The triumphant language Mundson uses when speaking about his seemingly eutopian accomplishment underscores how he has successfully deployed the tools of masculinist science for the subjugation of feminine Nature:

> ... Nature is often niggardly and paradoxical in her use of her powers. In New Eden, we have *forced* the powers of creation to take ascendancy over the powers of destruction.[29]

Mundson boasts that the Life Ray can rectify the inefficiency of organic creation and evolution by promoting growth and development at a miraculous pace, producing four generations of human beings in a single year. He describes how he has combed the entire world to bring together a number of "perfect couples" whose offspring have become the progenitors of this new race grown in the laboratory. Its members are birthed not by human women but by "the Leyden jar mother":

> The human mother's body does nothing but nourish and protect her unborn child, a job which science can do better. And so, in New Eden, we take the young embryo and place it in the Leyden jar mother, where the Life Ray, electricity, and chemical food shortens the period of gestation to a few days.[30]

Once 'born,' the infant grows rapidly under the Life Ray until (in a few months) it is ready to birth the next generation.

Fitness is a concept that is evoked repeatedly by Mundson, not in the relatively neutral evolutionary sense of reproductive success, but in the eugenically charged sense of superior human stock. Mundson sees himself as promoting "Nature's plan that only the fit shall survive," and this reflects the pervasive belief that if Darwinian natural selection could not ensure progress because of its random and gradual nature, then artificial selection through eugenic breeding must take its place.[31] This viewpoint was further reinforced by the obsessive fear of racial degeneration that plagued Anglo-American thought in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, a fear that Mundson also articulates: "modern science is permitting the unfit to live and to mix their defective beings with the developing race."[32] Multiple studies document the legislative measures introduced across American states to promote the agenda of 'race improvement,' including immigration restrictions, marriage regulations, and the forced sterilisation of individuals deemed 'unfit' for reproduction. Ellis's story imaginatively complements these forms of 'negative eugenics' with Mundson's version of 'positive eugenics'—encouraging the perpetuation of traits deemed superior or desirable. The prodigious rate at which the Leyden jar mother "births" human babies may also be read as a corrective to the presumptive failures of white middle-class womanhood. The prevailing cultural anxiety surrounding race degeneration was partially prompted by falling birth rates among white middle-class families, primarily due to greater economic and professional independence for women and improved access to birth control. Mundson's Leyden jar mother can therefore perform the role that properly belonged to white women but had allegedly been forfeited by them—the role of being breeders of good stock—and it can do so far more efficiently than human women, under the scientific supervision of a male patriarch.

In certain ways, the technological advancements depicted in "Creatures of the Light" fit the parameters of what Jane Donawerth has termed "utopian science."[33] In fact, Donawerth cites the Leyden

jar mother as an instance of "the radical revision, even abolishment of childbirth and its dangers," which she identifies as a common theme in pulp SF by women.[34] In addition, human beings in Mundson's New Eden no longer require sleep, as three minutes under a Life Ray projector can heal and rejuvenate all damaged or diseased cells. Athalia informs Northwood that she was working in a New York sweatshop and dying of consumption when Mundson "discovered" her and restored her to health. The Life Ray has also simplified the process of raising children; as growth is rapid, intensive parental (particularly maternal) care and supervision are no longer required. Education is attained through an astoundingly efficient system whereby the children, powered by the Life Ray, are able to go through entire books in minutes and retain the knowledge gained with perfect accuracy. Finally, eating is no longer a cumbersome process involving a host of domestic chores, as nourishment is obtained via chemical tablets. Thus, the Life Ray makes it possible to imagine a potentially eutopian alternative reality where birth, childcare, and domestic duties are scientifically managed and no longer a biological and socio-cultural burden for women.

Yet the text belies these eutopian prospects by having its central characters express deep ambivalence regarding the operations of New Eden. While Northwood is occasionally thrilled by the apparent perfection that pervades there, he is reluctant to commit himself to Mundson's vision:

> When I marry Athalia, I intend to have an old-fashioned home and a Black Age family. I don't relish having my children turned into—experiments.[35]

Athalia echoes the same sentiment in practically the same words. There is here the suggestion that the tools of science are beneficial only when used within judicious limits. The fact that Mundson

turns childbirth into a system of mechanical reproduction akin to factory production is dystopian not because of the technology used but because the human lives being created in large numbers have no organic childhood and no mothers to mould their minds.[36] The text indicates that such rootless, alienated individuals are bound to channel their superior abilities in destructive directions. This perspective may be illustrated through a closer examination of Mundson's crown achievements in the New Eden—the tellingly named Adam and Eve.

Adam is the creature who has reached the light. With his blond hair, blue eyes, and "godlike masculine beauty," he represents the Nordic model of physical perfection that was highly prized by Anglo-American eugenicists. With his advanced intelligence, he has unlocked the secret of invisibility by thrusting himself into the fourth dimension of time. He is also gifted with parapsychological powers that allow him to communicate via "thought vibration." The narrative refers to him as a "demigod" and a "superman," and he indeed fits the literary type of the '*homo superior*' that would become a prominent trope in SF in the 1940s and 1950s.[37] However, the descriptions of Adam are simultaneously reminiscent of the gothic horror evoked by Frankenstein's 'monster' and his illicit literary progeny. Northwood observes how Adam resembles "a newly-made wax figure endowed with life" and is surrounded by an uncanny "aura of hate and horror."[38] Notably, the superman of early SF is generally no heroic messiah; in Thomas Andrae's words, he is not "the bastion of establishment law and order" or "the avatar of Americanism" that he would later become.[39] He is unemotional and unsympathetic, has little or no regard for traditional human morality, and is therefore quite willing to do what it takes to obliterate the parent species that he seeks to replace, thereby becoming "the evil genius of science fiction cliché."[40] Andrae also analyses how the narrative logic of such tales necessitated a common denouement, with the superman

either dying or being robbed of his power for the 'natural' order to be reinstated.[41]

In his reading of Frankenstein's Creature as a proto-superman, Attebery remarks that there is in Mary Shelley's text "the implication that the Creature could have been the progenitor of a new race, if only Victor Frankenstein had not destroyed the Creature's female counterpart. But the new Adam had no Eve, and so the race was aborted."[42] Mundson is a more benevolent creator than Frankenstein in that he does provide his Adam with an Eve, but this match turns out to be unsuccessful from a romantic as well as an evolutionary standpoint. Adam desires Athalia, while Eve focuses her attentions on Northwood. It is also revealed that the union of Adam and Eve would very likely be an evolutionary dead end, for the new race "would stop reproducing in another few generations without the injection of Black Age blood."[43] This too fits a general pattern in early SF by women writers, which seems to reiterate that masculinist-scientific experimentation with the mysteries of life and creation are doomed to culminate in sterility and/or death. This applies to "Creatures of the Light" in a more literal sense as well, for the mad scientist Mundson, in his attempt to unlock the workings of life and evolution, has merely engendered another mad scientist, who has isolated the Death Ray to destroy New Eden and conquer and rule his evolutionary ancestors. New Eden thus paradoxically betrays its eutopian function and becomes a dystopian enclave, threatening to spread its rot over the entire world and frustrating all hopes of progress.

The story culminates somewhat melodramatically in the inevitable unleashing of the Death Ray, which kills Adam and Eve and reduces New Eden, along with the new race of super-beings it houses, to a pile of ruins. Unsurprisingly, the only survivors are Northwood, Athalia, and a somewhat chastened Mundson, all of whom have been spared due to sheer luck (and the obvious demands of the plot). Adam's dystopian project of worldwide domination and destruction has been successfully thwarted (even as the tremendous

loss of young life that is the cost of Mundson's grandiose project is peremptorily glossed over), and an alternative, ostensibly balanced vision of perfectibility is presented through the union of Northwood and Athalia. While the text must be read as a critique of aggressive eugenic policies and practices, it remains conservative in significant ways. The conclusion implies that while scientific meddling in natural processes is inadvisable, marriages conducted on eugenic grounds with the goal of producing genetically superior offspring are a desirable goal and assist the natural evolutionary progression towards perfection. Ellis also fails to expand traditional gender roles in any substantial way. The only female character who exhibits something of a scientific temper is Eve, but there is no space for her in the world that the surviving characters return to at the end of the text. Her presentation, too, is as the stereotypical temptress or femme fatale, for as Attebery observes: "the master evolutionary narrative which generates the notion of a super male offers no extrapolative path towards superwoman."[44] The text thereby upholds contemporary socio-cultural preconceptions in defining scientific intellectualism as a masculine province, and the narrative's perfect woman, Athalia, is perfect precisely because she is willing to perform the traditionally feminine roles of wife and mother, as opposed to Eve's emphasis on dominance and sexual gratification. Once the latter is expunged from the narrative, the gender-normative hero and heroine can come together to pronounce perfection "the only hopeless state" and to commit themselves to a conventional marital and procreative future.[45]

* * *

A more complex and sophisticated dystopia of perfection is portrayed by Leslie F. Stone, appropriately described by Attebery as "one of the genre's first female stars."[46] Stone's works have stood the test of time better than those of most of her contemporaries, and she is now particularly remembered for consistently engaging with gender

issues in her stories of feminist fabulation such as "Men with Wings," "Women with Wings," and "The Conquest of Gola," the last one having earned a lasting place in the history of feminist utopian literature. This article will focus on one of Stone's late stories, "The Great Ones," which charts another quest for evolutionary progress that catastrophically leads to "gross giantism and imbecility" for the majority of the human race, along with "a wild, insatiable urge to kill."[47] Much like the bifurcation of the human species into the Eloi and the Morlocks in Wells's *The Time Machine,* Stone imagines a distant future marked by an unceasing conflict between the great ones—monstrous humans who have grown over seventy feet tall—and the throwbacks—remnants of modern *homo sapiens* who serve as prey for the all-consuming giants. Stone's giants have key features in common with the evolved superman discussed earlier; they are not only larger and stronger than ordinary humans but also unfeeling and characterised by "soul-stirring evil."[48] However, Stone subverts the expectations of contemporary readers by not extrapolating the future of humanity towards the over-intellectual, large-headed creature with a weakened body imagined in so many other SF texts of the time. On the contrary, the giants are "Brobdingnagian idiots" with overdeveloped bodies and tiny heads:

> For there was something horrible in the sight of those small heads, so out of proportion to those tremendous bodies—heads less than a fiftieth of the height, scarcely more than one foot high from chin to crown!...The backs of their heads were all but flat, without any cranial development at all...[49]

Stone captures here the obsessive contemporary anxiety surrounding the possibility of degeneration—a devolution from a higher to a lower, more primitive order of existence, as opposed to the linear progression towards perfection that evolution was often misconstrued to be. Her dystopian future is particularly horrifying because it

undermines the anthropocentric notion of intellectual superiority that drove much of the Western discourse of progress.

Notably, fears of degeneration and regression to savagery were generally tied to apprehensions surrounding the rapid multiplication of groups deemed to be "unfit." Rickie Solinger explains how public images of "the unfit" in early twentieth-century America included "all nonwhite persons, mixed-race persons, many immigrants whose 'race' was indeterminate, as well as many poor and working-class whites who produced 'too many children.' The 'unfit' also included the blind, the deaf, the insane, the feebleminded, and criminals."[50] Degeneration thus became a convenient justification for the implementation of eugenic policies aimed at purging society of the unfit. Stone, however, subverts expectations again by presenting regression to primitivism as a consequence of rather than a justification for the eugenic project of perfection. This is revealed through a flashback sequence taking readers back to a pivotal juncture during the one-hundredth century, when the world, comprising twelve nations, is governed by the Congress of Science. Fergus V, the ruler of Mediterraneania, is a splendid physical specimen of the one-hundredth-century man, "with handsome, regular features, sturdy body, long limbs, thoughtful mien, intelligence—and great height."[51] His extraordinary features are a result of centuries of careful selective breeding, with all "undesirables" eliminated through sterilisation, and with the best features of all races bred together to produce an ostensibly perfect super-race. Extraordinary growth has been brought about through a "scientific regime" involving "synthetic concentrates of bone-and-body-building elements."[52] In some ways, this speculative future parallels Wells's *The Food of the Gods and How It Came to Earth* (1904), where the introduction of a dietary stimulant dubbed Herakleophorbia IV into the food chain yields a race of giant men committed to unfettered growth: "We fight not for ourselves but for growth, growth that goes on for ever. To-morrow, whether we live or die, growth will conquer through us. That is the law of the spirit for evermore."[53]

The world of the one-hundredth century is, to all appearances, a eutopian world. The Congress of Science has "created perfection out of chaos": cities are clean and resemble parklands; the wilderness is a cultivated garden; factories, mines, and machines are situated underground and remotely operated; and all elements of nature, including the weather, are perfectly controlled.[54] As in the previous story, there is pride in the masculine-scientific mastery over (feminised) nature that drives this narrative of progress and perfection. However, Stone plants key elements of unease that prompt the reader to challenge this seemingly eutopian ideal. The chief agent of this discomfiture is Prince Toms, Fergus V's twin brother—with one striking difference. If Fergus is the quintessential *homo superior,* Toms is one of "the midgets, throwbacks of their smaller-statured ancestors that made an unwelcome appearance from time to time."[55] Merely six feet tall, Toms is a scientist whose rigorous empirical studies have uncovered a terrifying truth: "with its very aim for perfection, the Congress has created only stereotyped stagnation—and worse."[56] Toms strikes the reader as an exemplar of balanced scientific rationality—a role that is also partially played by Northwood in "Creatures of the Light." However, Stone goes a step further in making Toms sympathetic to the alert reader; his is a voice from the margins due to his diminutive stature, which causes his own brother to label him a "freak." Donawerth has noted that even though female authors of pulp SF frequently used male narrators or male perspectives in keeping with the larger conventions of the genre, they tended to favour "male narrators who are not 'normal,' who do not share the values as defined by other males of their society." As a result, "women readers are not asked to identify with normative male values, and are offered, instead, narrators who stand outside of their societies."[57] Toms plays this crucial resisting role in a story where female characters are noticeably absent, and this very absence casts further doubt over whether the society being presented may be deemed eutopian in any meaningful sense.

The readers' reservations intensify when Prince Toms reveals to his brother that although the human body is constantly growing, the human brain is not growing in the same proportion, and this lack of balance is a significant threat to the survival of the species. Stone, like Wells, is drawing on the branch of evolutionary science that correlated intelligence with brain size, cranial capacity, and cortical convolutions; although she simultaneously distances herself from racist ideologies of craniometry by attributing the shrinking brains of the evolved humans to indiscriminate eugenic interference in human reproduction and growth. (In contrast, many craniometrists would actively advocate such interference in the interest of white racial purity.) Toms warns Fergus of the devastating consequences of the Congress of Science's project of perfection: "Man has lost his initiative! No new idea—excepting this one—has been born for twenty centuries."[58] The inevitability ahead is feeblemindedness—a popular term in American eugenics that designated "a wide range of mental deficiencies and . . . tendencies toward socially deviant behavior"—and eventual insanity.[59] Eugenic policies would thus lead to the very same attributes that contemporary American eugenicists were so keen on eliminating from the social fabric through legally sanctioned sterilisation. Such a trenchant critique of eugenics is rather uncommon in the context of early twentieth-century utopian literature and SF by women. We also learn that much like those deemed "feebleminded" in America, "throwbacks to normalcy" such as Toms are sterilised, effectively spelling the doom for humanity. In fact, Toms is executed on the orders of Fergus, his protesting voice silenced to uphold the status quo.

The narrative proceeds to trace the trajectory of human evolution over thousands of centuries, as Prince Toms's prognostications prove to be accurate. Human bodies continue to increase in size even as the skull remains stationary. Innovation dies; man forgets the use of tools and machines; homes fall into disrepair; communication systems break down; the eugenic board collapses; cities are abandoned; and

the vast majority of people are rendered feebleminded. The story thus underlines the untenability of masculinist-scientific fantasies of limitless growth. The throwbacks who are born immune to the disease of their race are the exceptions to the norm: they retain some semblance of the intelligence of *homo sapiens* but are pushed into agricultural settlements and ultimately to a precarious troglodytic existence as the cannibalistic giants begin to hunt these "dainty, tasty morsels."[60] This, here, is a primordial fear at the heart of degeneration theory: the fear that cannibalism can no longer be consigned to the realm of the savage, animalistic other, but is rather a repressed impulse at the heart of the civilised western subject. Stone also underlines how the violence of eugenics is a vicious cycle, with the throwbacks destroying all overlarge offspring and banishing parents who persistently produce such offspring: "They, the despised, were now seeking race purity. Without knowing their past, they were disfranchising the giant."[61] Moreover, as in "Creatures of the Light," the 'mad science' of eugenics inevitably ushers in sterility and death, and like many of her female peers writing in the tradition of *Frankenstein*, Stone attributes this to the denial of the feminine principle in such unnatural scientific endeavours. Many of the giants literally kill their mothers during parturition. The narrator also describes how fertility rates among the giants eventually begin to fall, not only due to their rampant killing of their own mates but also the propensity of the mothers to occasionally devour their own young in a morbid travesty of the procreative and nurturing impulses associated with femininity. As Alice Waters argues, Stone, in her "feminist critique of eugenics," represents "the almost complete betrayal of the maternal as the most monstrous of the behaviors of the future humans," violating "the female instincts of community and family."[62]

Stone's story is closer to the modern understanding of dystopia than Ellis's, because her dystopian world, rather than being the individual project of a mad scientist, is precipitated by a totalitarian

institution like the Congress of Science. Moreover, Sargent mentions that the "critical dystopia" is characterised by the presence of "at least one eutopian enclave" or "hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia."[63] Stone keeps this possibility open through her presentation of the settlement of Lunda, which falls short of being a eutopian enclave due to the relentless threat of the giants, but which keeps a kernel of hope alive by centring an alternative set of values: family, community, and cooperation. The tribe has a rudimentary existence in a second iron age, hunting and fishing with crude weapons and crouching in caves during the intermittent attacks of the great ones. However, as Waters notes, the throwbacks "do not necessarily function along traditional gender divisions."[64] While men hunt and women farm, the narrative also mentions older men supervising children, and weavers and skin workers of indeterminate gender caring for sleeping infants. The story ends with the 15-year-old son of Gorg, one of the tribesmen, proposing a method of ridding the world of the already dwindling race of giants. Gorg is exhilarated at this idea, and at the end he lies in his cave "dreaming of the greatest hunt of all"—"For it is by dreams such as these that man, so to speak, has pulled himself upward by his boot straps!"[65]

* * *

A final question to consider is whether, in critiquing the quest for perfection, stories such as "Creatures of the Light" and "The Great Ones" become more appropriate examples of anti-utopia rather than dystopia. Sargent uses the term anti-utopia to describe works that "attack either utopias in general or a specific utopia."[66] Anti-utopians posit themselves against the teleological theories of progress and perfectibility that are conventionally associated with utopian thought by arguing that absolute perfection is an unrealistic ideal and that all blueprints for the establishment of a perfect society are bound

to fail. Moreover, any utopia that is hypothetically realisable must inevitably be static, for the concept of perfection necessarily forecloses the possibility of transformation. Both these objections are, however, based on problematic presuppositions, as Sargent explains in the following passage:

> Perfect, perfection, and their variants are freely used by scholars in defining utopias. They should not be … there are in fact very few eutopias that present societies that the author believes to be perfect. Perfection is the exception not the norm … Without the use of the word perfect, part of the logic of the anti-utopian argument disappears.[67]

Thus, critiques of perfection are not necessarily equivalent to critiques of the utopian impulse, and both Ellis and Stone deftly negotiate the polarities of utopia and anti-utopia by interrogating overarching blueprints of perfection while retaining imaginative space for progress through gradual, balanced ideologies of positive change. For instance, even as Ellis cautions against the hubris of the male scientific enterprise, she does not entirely disavow the eutopian possibilities of science. The text suggests that fictional inventions such as the Leyden jar mother and the Life Ray have the potential to be beneficial on a larger scale, particularly for women. Likewise, Stone's narrative concludes with an explicitly eutopian dream of progress, constituting a "counter-narrative of resistance" to the dystopian future that the characters inhabit and creating the scope for utopian anticipation.[68] The stories by Ellis and Stone may therefore be fruitfully read as early thought experiments in the dystopian mode, encouraging renewed scholarly engagement with women writers in the pulp SF magazines in ways that do not reduce them to a prefatory comment or a footnote in the history of utopian literature.

NOTES

1 Sophie Wenzel Ellis, "Creatures of the Light," *Astounding Stories of Super-Science* 1, no. 2 (February 1930): 200, https://archive.org/details/Astounding_Stories_of_Super_Science_1930/asf1930-02/page/n53/mode/1up.
2 David M. Earle, *Re-Covering Modernism: Pulps, Paperbacks, and the Prejudice of Form* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 6.
3 Eric Leif Davin, *Partners in Wonder: Women and the Birth of Science Fiction 1926–1965* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006), 5.
4 Davin, *Partners in Wonder,* 17.
5 Jane L. Donawerth, "Science Fiction by Women in the Early Pulps, 1926–1930," in *Utopian and Science Fiction by Women: Worlds of Difference,* ed. Jane L. Donawerth and Carol A. Kolmerten (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 137.
6 Lyman Tower Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1 (1994): 9, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20719246.
7 Timothy Shanahan, "Evolutionary Progress?" *BioScience* 50, no. 5 (May 2000): 452, https://doi.org/10.1641/0006-3568(2000)050[0451:EP]2.0.CO;2.
8 Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 272.
9 Darwin, *Origin of Species,* 395.
10 Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), Volume I, 184.
11 Darwin, *Descent of Man,* Volume I, 177.
12 Michael Ruse, *Monad to Man: The Concept of Progress in Evolutionary Biology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 283.
13 Ruse, *Monad to Man*, 82.
14 Ellis, "Creatures of the Light," 199.
15 Ellis, 202.
16 Ellis, 206.
17 Darwin acknowledged that in the vast majority of species, while males typically compete with one another for sexual possession of the female, the latter, "though comparatively passive, generally exerts some choice and accepts one male in preference to others" to optimise reproductive success. See: Darwin, *Descent of Man*, Volume I, 273.
18 H. G. Wells, "The Man of the Year Million," *Pall Mall Gazette,* 6 November 1893, 3.
19 H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds,* in *H. G. Wells: The Great Science Fiction* (London: Penguin UK, 2016), 495.

20 G. Peyton Wertenbaker, "The Coming of the Ice," *Amazing Stories* 1, no. 3 (June 1926): 237, https://archive.org/details/AmazingStoriesVolume01Number03.
21 Clare Winger Harris, "The Evolutionary Monstrosity," *Amazing Stories Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (Winter 1929): 76, https://archive.org/details/Amazing_Stories_Quarterly_v02n01_1929-Winter/mode/2up.
22 Wells, *War of the Worlds,* 377.
23 Cesare Lombroso, *The Man of Genius* (London: Walter Scott, 1891), 6, 7, 14-5.
24 Lombroso, 7, 13.
25 Ellis, "Creatures of the Light," 211.
26 Ellis, 202.
27 Ellis, 208.
28 Jane Donawerth, *Frankenstein's Daughters: Women Writing Science Fiction* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), xx.
29 Ellis, "Creatures of the Light," 207. Emphasis mine.
30 Ellis, 213.
31 Ellis, 202.
32 Ellis, 202.
33 Donawerth, *Frankenstein's Daughters*, xxvi.
34 Donawerth, "Science Fiction by Women in the Early Pulps," 140.
35 Ellis, "Creatures of the Light," 212.
36 Ellis, 213.
37 The term "homo superior" was coined by Olaf Stapledon in his novel *Odd John* (1935) to designate the next stage in human evolution.
38 Ellis, "Creatures of the Light," 198, 208.
39 Thomas Andrae, "From Menace to Messiah: The Prehistory of the Superman in Science Fiction Literature," *Discourse* 2, Mass Culture Issue (Summer 1980): 85, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41389055.
40 Andrae, "Menace to Messiah," 88.
41 Andrae, 88.
42 Brian Attebery, "Super Men," *Science Fiction Studies* 25, no. 1 (March 1998): 63, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4240674.
43 Ellis, "Creatures of the Light," 210.
44 Brian Attebery, *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 82.
45 Ellis, "Creatures of the Light," 220.
46 Brian Attebery, "The Conquest of Gernsback: Leslie F. Stone and the Subversion of Science Fiction Tropes," in *Daughters of Earth: Feminist Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Justine Larbalestier (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 50.

47 Leslie F. Stone, "The Great Ones," *Astounding Stories* 19, no. 5 (July 1937): 79, 77, https://archive.org/details/astoundingv019n05193707/page/n76/mode/1up
48 Stone, "The Great Ones," 77.
49 Stone, 76.
50 Rickie Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power: A Short History of Reproductive Politics in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 90.
51 Stone, "The Great Ones," 78.
52 Stone, 78.
53 H. G. Wells, *The Food of the Gods and How It Came to Earth* (London: Gollancz, 2017), 209.
54 Stone, "The Great Ones," 77-8.
55 Stone, 78.
56 Stone, 79.
57 Donawerth, "Science Fiction by Women in the Early Pulps," 147-8.
58 Stone, "The Great Ones," 81.
59 Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 78.
60 Stone, 87.
61 Stone, 85.
62 Alice E. Waters, "Hoping for the Best, Imagining the Worst: Dystopian Anxieties in Women's SF Pulp Stories of the 1930s," *Extrapolation* 50, no. 1 (2009): 68, https://doi.org/10.3828/extr.2009.50.1.6.
63 Lyman Tower Sargent, "In Defense of Utopia," *Diogenes* 53, no. 1 (February 2006): 16, https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192106062432.
64 Waters, "Hoping for the Best," 69.
65 Stone, "The Great Ones," 89.
66 Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," 8.
67 Sargent, 9-10.
68 Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, "Introduction: Dystopia and Histories," in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination,* ed. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (New York: Routledge, 2003), 5.

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Posthumanism and Subaltern Dystopia in Select Bengali Dalit Women's Writings

Surabhi Jha

ABSTRACT

This paper explores Bengali Dalit women's life-writings through the intersecting frameworks of dystopian critique and posthumanist methodology. It argues that the caste system itself constitutes a form of lived dystopia—marked by structural violence, ecological precarity, and gendered exclusion. By analyzing selected texts such as "The Sahib Ghost" and "College Life," the paper highlights how these narratives foreground embodied suffering, relational subjectivity, and the entanglements of human and non-human life. Rather than depicting passive victimhood, these writings become powerful acts of resistance that challenge dominant definitions of humanity rooted in caste, patriarchy, and anthropocentrism. The analysis proposes that such texts imagine alternative futures grounded in community, ecological co-survival, and affective resilience. In doing so, they contribute to an emerging vision of Dalit posthumanism—one that does not reject the category of the human but seeks to radically reconfigure it. Life-writing thus becomes a critical site for reclaiming voice, asserting agency, and articulating counter-cartographies of survival in a world shaped by multiple forms of dispossession. Ultimately, this paper suggests that Bengali Dalit women's narratives offer vital pathways for rethinking dystopia as a present reality and for envisioning more just and inclusive futures.

KEYWORDS

Dalit life-writings, Bengali Dalit women, subaltern dystopia, posthumanism, embodied resistance, posthuman feminism, alternative futures.

INTRODUCING POSTHUMANISM AND SUBALTERN DYSTOPIA

In contemporary art and literature, dystopia no longer belongs solely to the realm of speculative fiction, it increasingly reflects the fractured, unjust, and ecologically unstable world we already inhabit. From climate collapse to authoritarian regimes, the dystopian imagination now mirrors the lived realities of violence, displacement, and existential precarity. For Dalit women in India, particularly in Bengal, dystopia is not a distant fantasy but a daily experience shaped by caste-based exclusion, and gendered subjugation. Their life-writing becomes a powerful medium to archive this embodied dystopia, where survival itself is a radical act. In an era marked by ecological devastation and cultural apocalypse, such narratives invite us to rethink human identity and agency. Posthumanism, with its emphasis on the co-belongingness of the human and non-human, offers a vital framework to imagine alternative modes of survival that challenge the Brahmanical-patriarchal order and forge relational, interdependent ways of being.

> Posthumanism is defined by Pramod K Nayar as a "radical decentring of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines" (Nayar 2014, 2). Hence, posthumanism may be understood as a philosophical

> perspective that fundamentally reconsiders the nature of subjectivity. It views the human not as an isolated, self-contained entity, but as part of a dynamic assemblage that co-evolves with machines, animals, and other non-human agents. In doing so, it urges a broader, more inclusive definition of life and emphasizes the need for heightened ethical and moral responsibility toward non-human life forms in an era where the boundaries between species are increasingly fluid. According to Nayar, posthumanism carries a clear political stance because it questions the hierarchical structuring of life forms that leads to their domination, exploitation, and even annihilation. He argues that posthumanism is not merely a theoretical framework but a deeply political one. It critiques how anthropocentrism has historically created a hierarchy of life forms—placing the white, able-bodied, heterosexual human male, and in the South Asian context, the Brahmin, at the top. This structure marginalizes others, including animals, nature, subjugated humans, and even machines. Such a hierarchical worldview legitimizes violence, exploitation, and the erasure of both non-human and 'less-than-human' entities within human societies—such as women, Dalits, and indigenous communities. By foregrounding these critiques, one can align posthumanism with decolonial, feminist, and ecocritical politics, demonstrating its potential to dismantle entrenched systems of power and exclusion.

Dystopia, as defined by Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash in their edited volume *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility* (2010), refers to a utopian vision that has failed or serves only a privileged few. As they put it, dystopia "is a utopia that has gone wrong, or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society" (Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash 2010, 1). Dystopia exposes sites of rupture and fragility within society. Concepts like

utopia, dystopia, and chaos are not merely imaginative projections of the future or reflections on the past, they also function as practical tools through which individuals attempt to reinterpret their present circumstances and envision alternative, attainable futures. Often associated with "fearful futures where chaos and ruin prevails" (Claeys 2016, 5), dystopia represents a vision of societal collapse marked by disorder, oppression, or despair. By placing 'subaltern' characters at the center, dystopian narratives highlight the lived realities of those routinely marginalized or silenced within dominant socio-political frameworks. These narratives resonate strongly with contemporary structures of inequality, offering critical insights into systems of oppression and the possibilities of resistance from the margins. This intersection becomes especially potent in the context of Dalit women's autobiographical writings in Bengal, which have emerged as a powerful mode of self-articulation, protest, and memory-making that challenges both patriarchal norms and caste-based exclusions. Writers like Kalyani Thakur Charal, Manju Bala, Chuni Kotal, Smritikana Haoladar, and Lily Halder document lives shaped by everyday humiliations, and cultural erasure.

This paper examines how Bengali Dalit women's life-writings articulate a form of subaltern dystopia rooted in caste oppression, gendered marginalization, and material deprivation. Through a posthumanist lens, the paper re-reads these narratives as complex, embodied accounts of relational existence that challenge the limits of liberal humanist discourse. Focusing on two representative texts—Smritikana Haoladar's short story "The Sahib Ghost" and Lily Halder's autobiographical narrative "College Life"—the analysis reveals how bodily illness, ecological surroundings, and everyday acts of endurance converge to construct alternative ways of being within structures of systemic exclusion. These texts suggest that the dystopian condition functions as an everyday reality for Dalit women, where the distinction between the human and the nonhuman continually dissolves under the pressure of caste hierarchies and material deprivation. Reading

these life writings through the frame of *Dalit dystopia* makes visible the intersections between posthumanism and caste experience, where survival itself becomes an act of resistance and redefinition. The paper thus positions dystopia as both a representational and conceptual bridge linking Dalit existence with posthumanist reimaginings of life, agency, and interdependence.

CASTE, SPECTERS, AND SUBALTERN DYSTOPIA IN SMRITIKANA HAOLADAR'S "THE SAHIB GHOST"

Bengali Dalit writer Smritikana Haoladar, known for her incisive portrayal of caste and gendered realities, explores these intersections in her short story "The Sahib Ghost," translated by Sipra Mukherjee, where a haunting narrative of caste, colonial legacy, and marginalization unfolds within the everyday landscape of an Adivasi village. The story is set around an Ambedkar Birth Anniversary celebration, where the narrator, along with other invited guests, visits the village to deliver speeches and perform Dalit songs. The group stays at the home of an Adivasi sardar, a household illuminated not by electricity, but by cow-dung fuel. This detail, seemingly mundane, reveals the entangled lives of humans and non-humans—cows, cowherds, fuel, and labor—in conditions of deep poverty. Within this ecology of survival, the boundaries between human agency and animal labor gets blurred. It helps us see this coexistence as a marker of a subaltern mode of life that resists anthropocentric norms and speaks to alternate systems of value and care.

The village itself carries the violent imprint of colonial exploitation. The Adivasis had originally been brought from Ranchi as indentured labourers for the indigo plantations- a recurring site of extractive, racialized labor under the British. The historical figure of Biswanath Sardar, who led a rebellion against this system, was executed within the plantation premises, marking the land itself as a site of resistance and erasure. A pond nearby is believed to be haunted by the ghost

of a 'Sahib,' said to prey on village women only, connoting a spectral continuity between colonial violence and gendered subjugation. The spectral presence of the sahib haunts both the geography and the genealogy of the village. While presented as a supernatural concern, this belief functions as a mechanism of dominance—an example of how patriarchal structures weaponize myth and fear to enforce spatial boundaries on women. In doing so, the story reveals a gendered dystopia, where social norms are reinforced through the internalization of cultural narratives that restrict women's freedom under the guise of protection. The ghost, then, becomes a metaphor for the invisible but pervasive forces that regulate women's bodies in caste-bound, rural societies—constructing a lived dystopia where mobility, autonomy, and safety are denied to them.

In her book *Posthuman Feminism* (2022), Rosi Braidotti discusses how, within the posthumanist convergence, the notion of 'man' as the central, dominant figure of the human species is fundamentally decentered. She writes, "Exposing anthropocentric arrogance and the violent exploitation of non-human others is a core value for posthuman feminism, which joins forces with, but also goes beyond, the critique of humanism" (Braidotti 2022, 105). Braidotti argues that in response to the intensifying pace of contemporary life, posthumanist feminism brings together ecological consciousness and technological engagement with a strong commitment to social justice. It reaffirms the perspectives of those historically excluded or marginalized—the subaltern, the dehumanized, the sexualized, the racialized, and those reduced to 'naturalized' others. This decentering is especially relevant when examining how patriarchal systems sustain their dominance by positioning man at the top of social and ontological hierarchies. In this short story, the myth of the ghost that targets only women becomes a tool through which this hierarchy is reinforced. Here, the non-human figure of the ghost is not simply a supernatural element but a cultural mechanism used to discipline the movement and autonomy of women—particularly those from Dalit

or Adivasi communities, who are already relegated to the margins as 'sub-human' or less-than-fully-human. This story evinces how patriarchy employs both myth and the non-human to preserve its authority, making posthumanist critique essential to understanding the gendered dystopia embedded in such narratives.

A striking element of the narrative is the physical appearance of the Adivasi family hosting the visitors. Though socially considered lower caste, the family is described as unusually fair-skinned: "so fair; with sharp noses, and eyes like the blue sea!" (224). The narrator speculates that their grandmother may have had a sexual relationship—consensual or coerced—with a white man, possibly the 'sahib ghost' himself. The legacy of this encounter lives on, not only in skin colour and rumoured ancestry, but in the collective memory and shame of the community. Their fair appearance and prosperity do not spare them from caste-based discrimination. Despite their efforts, they are unable to secure the construction of a school in the village. The figure of the 'Saheb' holds particular significance in this context, and Anand Teltumbde's perspective as an Indian scholar and human rights activist offers valuable insight. He explains that the term 'Saheb' was originally used "for an Englishman but later used as an honorific, for natives who were educated, westernized and placed in bureaucratic authority. It denoted someone far above the masses, one who was endowed with authority and power. It was the icon of the saviour." (Gordin, Michael D., Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash 253). In view of Teltumbde, the Saheb figure is imagined as a liberator—someone who would lead the people out of bondage toward progress, provided the masses rallied behind him. However, in the story under discussion, this imagined role is subverted: though the person referred to as 'Saheb' makes efforts to uplift the community by attempting to establish a school, he receives no support due to his lower-caste identity. Even wealth, land, or physical traits associated with upper-caste or colonial privilege cannot shield them from the stigma. As the narrator laments, "Not

riches, not land, not the colour of your skin, nothing could erase that poisonous identity" (Chatterjee and Mukherjee 2021, 226). This line underscores the dystopian essence of caste: it is a deeply entrenched, inescapable structure that governs social perception and access to resources, regardless of material progress. In his book chapter titled "Making and Unmaking of the Marginal Subject: How a Dalit Migrant Remembers the Nonhuman," Samrat Sengupta emphasizes the relational worldview held by Dalit communities, observing that, "Dalit subjects live with other nonhumans in a shared sense of precarity" (Sengupta 2025, 37). Sengupta observes that the human and the nonhuman exist in a dynamic relationship of mutual becoming and unbecoming—marked by closeness and conflict, comprehension and mystery—rather than maintaining the human's traditionally superior ontological status. This observation finds powerful resonance in "The Sahib Ghost," where the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman blur within a shared landscape of vulnerability and survival. Viewed through the dystopian lens, Haoladar's narrative unfolds in a world already marked by decay and dispossession, where the jungle, clay and hurricane lamps, cow-dung fuel, cows, a haunted pond, and a beloved milk-white horse coexist with human lives. The story's ecology of coexistence evokes a dystopic environment shaped by the spectral and the material, where life itself is sustained through precarious interdependence. In a society riddled with hunger, poverty, colonial residue, caste hierarchies, gendered violence, class divides, and illness—in short, an apocalyptic social reality, centering the human only reinforces entrenched violence and exclusion. The posthumanist lens here enables a radical reorientation, shifting attention from the autonomous subject to relational modes of being that challenge anthropocentric privilege. "The Sahib Ghost" thus reveals that human identity, particularly for Dalit and Adivasi communities, emerges through entanglements with nonhuman agents—land, animals, ghosts, and collective memory. Reading the story as a *Dalit dystopia* underscores how survival itself becomes

an act of resistance within a collapsing moral and ecological order, compelling a rethinking of humanist ideals and their exclusions.

BODIES IN CRISIS: ILLNESS, CASTE, AND THE POSTHUMAN IN "COLLEGE LIFE"

Bengali Dalit writer Lily Halder, whose autobiographical narratives lay bare the textures of everyday oppression and endurance, explores a more intimate form of dystopia in "College Life," translated by Debi Chatterjee. Here, dystopia does not manifest through grand political collapse or futuristic decay but through the quiet, relentless weight of caste, poverty, and bodily suffering. The text begins with a moment of shared vulnerability: Lily and her brother Bablu are both afflicted by chickenpox, their illness coinciding with the news that their grandmother, suffering from diabetes, is gravely unwell in the village. Lily's visit to her uncle's home in Kanchan Nagar, a resettlement colony in Burdwan allocated to refugee families, offers a brief glimpse of ecological beauty that contrasts sharply with the hardship in the rest of her narrative. The land is lush with bakul trees, flowering shrubs, and even sightings of peacocks in the forest nearby. The scent of bakul flowers fills the air, and the Damodar River flows in the background, a world where the human and non-human co-inhabit space in quiet interdependence. This sensory detail is not incidental; it becomes significant when viewed through a posthumanist lens. Nature is not romanticized here but acts as a silent, resilient presence alongside the human figures struggling for survival. The environment becomes part of the fabric of the Dalit experience. The serenity of the landscape is soon interrupted by tragedy. Bablu is diagnosed with a brain tumor just days after their arrival. Illness signals the fragile boundaries of life in marginalized communities where emotional and financial support are scarce. Arko Chattopadhyay in his recent book *Posthumanism: Politics of*

Subjectivity (2025) comments that, "Most of the human body is comprised of nunhuman phenomena and life- forms like bacteria, viruses and proteins. This bio-environmentalist conception makes us think about the fact that the 'human' is nothing but a cultural name for the corporeal" (Chattopadhyay 2025, 7). Bablu's illness, first chickenpox and later a brain tumour, embodies this posthumanist understanding of the body as a site of entanglement with nonhuman agents. His gradual deterioration underscores the vulnerability of the human body, and the subaltern dystopia. The body in this narrative is not a sovereign entity but one that is constantly shaped, invaded, and defined by both biological and socio-political forces, reinforcing the idea that 'the human' is never purely human, but always already entangled with the nonhuman. After being diagnosed with a brain tumor, Bablu stays in the hospital for two months. The family's inability to afford medical treatment forces them to turn toward faith as a last resort. Lily recounts that their father placed great trust in the sanctity of religious ritual, believing that "the holy water from the prayer pot at his home is to be drink, all ailments would be cured as per the father's Gurudev." Her mother, desperate and powerless in the face of Bablu's worsening condition, begins administering the holy water to both Bablu and the ailing grandmother, Thakuma. Lily offers a striking observation:

> "We were witness to how poor families took recourse to religion for survival!" (Chatterjee and Mukherjee 2021, 359).

This line exposes the systemic failure of institutions—medical, economic, and social—that leaves the marginalized with no choice but to rely on spiritual hope in place of tangible care. When Bablu is finally discharged from the hospital, it is with the expectation that medicine will accompany his recovery. Yet reality is far crueler. The father, due to the crushing weight of poverty, does not buy

the required medicines. The family lacks even sufficient rice to feed everyone. In such a context, holy water becomes the only available "remedy." This situation encapsulates a form of social dystopia in which care is replaced with ritual, medicine with belief, and recovery with resignation. As Bablu's condition deteriorates, he gradually loses his eyesight. George Lundskow in his book *The Sociology of Religion: A Substantive and Transdisciplinary Approach* (2008) says how throughout history, religion has provided a response to the deep uncertainties of human existence. He writes, "Ancient in history, religion seems at once like a grand monument to humanity's greatest aspirations and an edifice to our profoundest horrors. From religion rises hope, liberation, and purpose, but also cruelty, war, and destruction." (Lundskow 2008, XI) By engaging with religion's teachings and participating in its rituals, individuals find meaning in life where otherwise there might only be emptiness and despair. Religious beliefs represent the collective values of society; because they emerge from shared social life rather than individual experience, they are often perceived by individuals as timeless and transcendent truths. In this story, Bablu's father's reliance on Gurudev's holy water rather than medical treatment reflects how deeply religious authority can shape decision-making, especially among those facing poverty and limited access to healthcare. His faith in spiritual remedies over science is not merely personal but emerges from a broader social condition where economic hardship leaves people vulnerable to the comforting promises of religious figures. For many like him, religion becomes a coping mechanism—a way to create meaning and hope in the face of helplessness. In such moments, individuals develop emotional and spiritual connections that transcend the tangible world, cultivating a sense of the supernatural when material remedies are out of reach.

As Lily navigates the world of higher education, caste follows her into the classroom. She hears whispers among her peers about the

Scheduled Caste stipend she receives, a reminder that her identity is constantly under surveillance, her merit questioned, her presence in the college space marked as conditional. Lily's decision to work as a salesgirl to support her family financially underscores how survival is a collective, embodied labor in Dalit lives. Reflecting on her place within the family structure, she feels: "In families boys are needed. There is no value of the survival of ugly, dark-complexioned, lanky girls like me" (360). This painful self-assessment is not just personal; it is culturally constructed. The social dystopia Lily inhabits is not only external but internalized. Lily's internalized sense of worthlessness arises from a social order that privileges masculinity, fair skin, and wealth, while marginalizing women, those with dark complexions, and the economically deprived. The postanthropocentric perspective, along with posthumanist feminism, offers the potential challenge these deeply embedded discursive hierarchies.

Bablu, despite his will to survive, ultimately dies—an outcome of neglect, and poverty. His death, like his illness, is a slow erasure caused by lack of access to medicine, food, and care. From a posthumanist perspective, these narrative lays bare the precarious materiality of the Dalit body, where survival depends not only on biology or willpower, but on the surrounding assemblage of non-human agents—medicine, food, religious objects, family labor, and institutional absence. These forces come together in ways that determine life and death, healing or decay.

Lily's struggle with tuberculosis further intensifies the text's portrayal of casteed dystopia. When Lily herself is diagnosed with TB, she clutches onto a volume of Tagore's essays—a striking juxtaposition between the rarefied world of canonical literature and the gritty, starving reality of her own life. The act of reading becomes both a form of solace and resistance, a means to retain dignity and pursue intellectual growth even as the body weakens. Despite her illness, Lily manages to obtain injections and three months' worth of medication,

but these efforts exist in stark contrast to the basic lack of food. Her relatives advise her to eat nourishing meals to aid her recovery, but she painfully admits she can scarcely manage one square meal a day. The situation worsens when Lily's father is also diagnosed with TB. In a quiet, almost tragic act of sacrifice, she gives him the same medicines she had collected for herself through a relative. Aaron Bradshaw in his book chapter "Posthuman(izing) Biomedicine" writes,

> …truth is not a future consensus reached when we know what is really happening behind-the-scenes of illness and disease, but an ongoing manifestation of our pragmatic engagements with the world, in which both the world, ourselves, and our microbial others are constantly reconfigured. (Bradshaw 2023, 39)

Bradshaw's perspective becomes particularly relevant in this context, as recognizing non-human actors like microbes, bacteria, and environmental factors in the experience of illness helps bridge the gap between lived bodily realities and a posthumanist understanding of health as shaped through human and non-human entanglements. This view sees illness as not simply residing within individual bodies, but as distributed across the entangled material agencies of humans and non-humans. The human body's entanglement with tumor, diabetes, TB, and chicken pox challenges the notion of an autonomous, self-contained subject and instead highlights the need for an ethics that recognizes survival as unstable, shared, and shaped by both human and non-human forces. Yet even in this atmosphere of decay and despair, Lily turns toward creativity and self-articulation. She begins to write and publish, and this activity rekindles her desire to learn: she feels the need to read more books to write better. This moment is quietly transformative. Her body, though deteriorating, becomes a site of meaning-making rather than passive suffering. She reclaims

agency through language and literature, asserting that intellectual life is not the privilege of the well-fed or upper-caste, but a space that can be re-entered through sheer will, even in dystopic conditions. From a posthumanist perspective, Lily's survival is sustained not by humanist institutions, but by an assemblage of textual encounters, bodily endurance, illness, food (or its absence), and family relations. Her experience redefines what it means to be human—not as an autonomous, rational subject, but as a being radically shaped by vulnerability, interdependence, and the persistent will to imagine otherwise.

Lily Halder's "College Life" powerfully illustrates how human existence, especially for the caste-marginalized, is mediated through a precarious assemblage of injections, brain tumors, and unpurchased medicines. The body is not autonomous but deeply dependent on material conditions—food, treatment, familial labor, and access to aid. In this dystopic world, where poverty dictates life and death, even the most basic medical care becomes a luxury. Yet, amidst this collapse of institutional support, books emerge as quiet companions in crisis. Tagore's essays in Lily's hands are more than reading material—they are an anchor of thought and imagination when the body fails. Nature, too, offers fleeting moments of respite. The scent of the bakul tree, the rustle of leaves, and the presence of peacocks become sensory fragments of comfort—non-human presences that provide a temporary escape from social cruelty. In a world ravaged by the blindness of casteism, patriarchal devaluation, and religious fatalism, Halder's narrative invites a posthumanist reading—one that sees survival not as a triumph of the human subject, but as an entangled, fragile negotiation with ecology, illness, and inherited oppression. Posthumanism here does not transcend the body but returns us to it—exposing its vulnerabilities while also expanding our understanding of relational, embodied endurance within an apocalyptic social order.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS ETHICS OF CO-SURVIVAL?

> Rosi Braidotti argues, "Posthuman feminist and other critical theorists need to resist hasty and reactive recompositions of cosmopolitan bonds, especially those made of fear" (Braidotti 2018, 690).

Braidotti suggests that instead of seeking a single universal model, it is more productive to cultivate multiple, interconnected forms of alliance, community, and human composition—diverse ways of becoming-world together. She emphasizes the need for emotionally engaged and relational frameworks to comprehend the emerging power structures that define contemporary existence. Social categories such as caste, race, gender, age, and ability still determine who is seen as fully human. While global crises affect everyone, the experience of such crises is neither uniform nor impartial; it is shaped by entrenched social hierarchies and exclusions. As Braidotti reminds us, acknowledging collective vulnerability must not obscure the structural inequalities that determine who counts as fully human. Within this context, Bengali Dalit women's life-writings provide a vital ground for exploring the relationship between dystopia, Dalit experience, and posthumanism. These narratives do not depict dystopia as a speculative vision but as a lived and ongoing condition born of caste, gendered violence, poverty, and ecological fragility.

Approaching these life writings through a posthumanist framework does not impose an external theory on Dalit texts; it helps illuminate how they already embody a posthuman ethics from within marginality. Their engagement with bodily suffering, nonhuman presences, and ecological interdependence reveals an alternative understanding of humanity—one grounded in vulnerability, endurance, and connection rather than mastery or hierarchy. A Dalit posthumanism thus reimagines the human as relational, plural, and co-constituted within networks of caste, ecology, and community. Bengali Dalit

women's life-writings transform dystopia from a static image of despair into a dynamic mode of witnessing and reimagining. They expose the dystopic textures of everyday existence while envisioning new ethical forms of co-survival. Through these acts of narration, the Dalit woman becomes both the chronicler and the re-creator of her world, proposing futures where human and nonhuman, body and environment, memory and resistance converge to reshape life beyond the boundaries of caste and exclusion.

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Are Humans Enough?

Decoding Posthuman Subjectivity in Ray Bradbury's *The Veldt, There Will Come Soft Rains and Marionettes*, Inc.

Diptarkan Bhattacharya

ABSTRACT

Ray Bradbury's stories were ahead of his own time. They envisioned posthuman spaces before the term was discovered. Posthumanism is a critical method of looking at the challenges that divide the traditional anthropocentric views of humans at the center of the world. Posthuman subjectivity sees the self as a dynamic and adaptable entity being remade through the interactions of humans and technology. Through a discursive analysis of his three stories, the article decodes the posthuman subjectivity in his stories that blurs the line between reality and virtual reality.

KEYWORDS

posthuman, virtual reality, Anthropocene, nonhumans

Posthuman subjectivity initiates a new way of looking beyond traditional human-centric definition by integrating non-human elements. It rejects the anthropocentric views that humans are the center of existence. As P. K. Nayar says, "view Posthumanism studies cultural representations, power relations and discourses that have historically situated the human above other life forms, and in control of them." (13) This distinctively explains an entity identified as 'humans.'

According to P. K. Nayar, posthumanism directs its strategic concepts through two visible strands stemming from very different views of the human, today. The first one through pop posthumanism of cinema and pop culture that defines the techno-modifications of the human, arguing that technological, biological modifications will improve the 'human.' The second strand of posthumanism might be termed as 'Critical Posthumanism.' It calls to attention more or less the humans, machines and the organic body. As Katherine Hayles says—"The posthuman implies not only a coupling with intelligent machines but a coupling so intense and multifaceted that it is no longer possible to distinguish meaningfully between the biological organism and the informational circuits in which the organism is enmeshed." (35) In our world where technological systems open up a vast array of multifaceted ideas, over reliance on such systems end up disrupting the pure human experience. Posthumanism is characterized by a loss of subjectivity based on bodily boundaries. For example Kazuo Ishiguro's novel '*Never Let me Go*,' Priya Sarukkai Chabria's novels '*Generation-14*,' '*Clone*,' Manjula Padmanabhan's novels '*The Island of Lost Girls*,' '*Escape*,' '*Harvest*' (play) all define a cloned subject producing itself from being other as self. Charlie Brooker's renowned series '*Black Mirror*' focuses on a posthuman subject that obliterates the bodily function while entering into a complete array of non-human entities. Posthuman subjectivity defines the concept of a traditional, autonomous human being as a heterogeneous and fluid entity shaped from interactions between nonhumans, technologies and environments. It always questions the boundaries of heterogeneous subject whose self-definition continuously shifts to a much more fragile existence. This perspective critiques the idea of Anthropocentricism by looking into a more complex, process-based form of self. It is seen as an indefinite process of becoming, a dynamic creation which is influenced by technology and evolving environments. By depending on a techno-modulated utopia the human self completely erases itself and places it as a

posthuman other. The artificial intelligence lures as the locus of Anthropocene. Posthuman subjectivity questions that mediated space where traditional humanism becomes a posthuman subject.

Ray Bradbury through his ideas incorporated the techno modulated world of today long time ago. His short stories and novels deal with fantasy, science fiction, horror mystery and apocalyptic notion of destruction caused by the over nudged scientific temper. For example in "*The Martian Chronicles*," "*Mars is Heaven*," "*Dark They Were and Golden-Eyed*," deals with themes relevant to posthumanism. He critiques the over usage of cold war of technology with the scientific temper. He often uses tropes to examine humanity's relationship with machines and how the later topples the former by replacing it. His stories are less explored where he devises the concept of posthumanism. The paper critically explores Bradbury's three stories "*The Veldt*," "*There will Come Soft Rains*" and "*Marionettes, Inc.*" through a discursive association with posthuman subjectivity. "*The Veldt*" published on September 23rd, 1950, issue of *The Saturday Evening Post* appearing as "The World the Children Made". Bradbury through a science fictional usage gives us a glimpse into the world of cold mechanics of technology and the psychology of people. He showcases the dichotomy between artificial intelligence and anthropocentric activity where the former one diminishes the later. The story centers around the family of Hadley's who are a techno modulated family.

The whole house is controlled by the machines. Their children Peter and Wendy obsessed with the nursery charts into a world of virtual reality thus bridging a gap between the illusory and rational mind. The nursery room acts as a posthuman space through which the children's desires and fears are catered to. It shows how the posthuman subjectivity becomes a breeding ground of toppling the human activity through techno modulated systems. The story examines this idea by showing how advanced technology affects interpersonal interactions and human psychology. The nursery

becomes the virtual reality that places itself as a centrifugal force without human coordination. At one point, the nursery becomes the parents of the children by diminishing the natural world and its perceptions. Despite being meant to be a source of amusement and comfort, this technological marvel ultimately brings the family to ruin. Bradbury initiates a metaphor of a cautionary tale through this story about the dangers of living in a hyperconnected world where technology mediates our everyday experience. The posthuman space thus circumvents the children's life by a fear of aggression and violence. When George and Lydia decide to close the nursery permanently in order to follow and adapt to the natural lifestyle, the children's aggressive way of conduct resurfaces a violent underpinning:

> "Will you shut off the house sometimes soon?"
> "We're considering it."
> "I don't think you'd better consider it any more, Father."
> "I won't have any threats from my son!"
> "Very well." And Peter strolled off to the nursery.
> (Bradbury, Stories; Vol-1)

The nursery exerts an imaginary power over the children in such a way through which they could be controlled. By the end of story when we see the dreadful violent death of their parents, the whole technology and machination assimilate with the children. The posthuman places artificial intelligence as the real self where the children become a mere pawn in the hands of an automated system. The whole techno-modulated system succeeds in diminishing natural perceptions while placing it with an automated one. This represents posthuman anxieties about the loss of human control and unforeseen risks of intelligent machines gasping life to the fullest.

"There Will Come Soft Rains" was published in 1950 in two different versions—a short story in Collier's magazine and a chapter of the fix-up novel "The Martian Chronicles." Written as a chronicle

about a lone house standing intact in a Californian city that has been obliterated by a nuclear bomb and later destroyed in a fire caused by windstorm, the title is from a 1918 poem of Sara Teasdale published during the Second World War and Spanish flu pandemic. Like "The Veldt," this story focuses on a stand alone house heavily guarded and controlled by robotic equipments. The story starts with a robotic voice stating date, time and the year from which it is conceived that Bradbury uses a dystopic trope of giving us a cautionary tale.

> "Today is August 4, 2026," said a second voice from the kitchen ceiling "in the city of Allendale, California." It repeated the dates three times For memory's sake. "Today is Mr. Featherstone's birthday. Today is the anniversary of Tilita's marriage. Insurance is payable, as are the water, light and gas bills."
>
> (Bradbury, Stories; Vol-1)

Bradbury explores the concept of posthuman subjectivity by personifying a techno-modulated house. The whole plot centers around a post-apocalyptic world where humans are extinct and technology with its modulated system has taken the place of humans. They have created a new civilization by artificial intelligence, robotic stratagem and techno-modulated utopias. The posthuman question thus arises at this point at what cost does the artificial stratagem replaces humans. Later on it is known that the whole family has been obliterated after a nuclear holocaust where the whole city is glowing under the radioactive material. The whole family turned down to ashes stands in their former way during the nuclear attack. The house seemingly unaware of human extinction continues its daily routines demonstrating a self-absorbed subjectivity persisting even after its creators are gone. It creates a blurred line between what is deemed as reality and virtual reality. The house preoccupies human instincts such

as paranoia, anger, self-protection thus toppling itself from the edges of being an inanimate object. Its self-absorbed, repetitive actions driven by programming represent a form of posthuman subjectivity.

The story gives us a cautionary outlook on unchecked technological advancement that usurps human frailty thus replacing human with its unchecked activities. It highlights the indifference of both nature and technology to human existence. But ultimately through the symbolic assertion of the windstorm in the story, Bradbury uses nature as a stronger tool that destroys the techno-modulated house at the end of the story. He demonstrates the arbitrariness of technology by the self-reflexiveness of nature where nature stands as a strong tool irrespective of the stronger posthuman world. Bradbury uses Teasdale's poem to comment on the arbitrariness of techno-modulated life where the binary of human and non-human are too futile to represent itself.

Marionettes, Inc." published in March 1949, in *Startling Stories* conjures the conflict between humans and machines through their dependence on technology. Brailing replaces himself with a humanoid named Marionette that looks like him in every manner to restrain himself from his wife and his married life. Smith, his friend wants to replace himself just like Brailing to to evade his marriage restrain himself from his wife. On the contrary his wife replaces a lookalike humanoid of herself thus restraining Smith from her married life. The title "Marionettes, Inc" itself draws on the metaphor of Marionettes as robotic double who replaces the subjectivity from the humans to itself. The robotic double places itself as humans and entraps the humans on the foreground of humanoids:

> "You won't mind waiting a moment, will you? I have to make a phone call."
> "To whom?" Brailing Two frowned.
> "No one important"
> "To Marionettes Incorporated? To tell them to come and get

> me?" "No no nothing like that!" He tried to rush out the door
> A metal firm grip seized his wrists. "Don't run!"
>
> (Bradbury, Stories; Vol-1)

There emerges a strict blurring of lines between the human and non-human entity where the former one gets dominated by the later one. Brailing Two, the double humanoid of Brailing traps the real Brailing, in the cellar thus foregrounding the humans and establishing itself as the ultimate human. Like the nursery in "The Veldt," Marionettes fully exercises its uncontrollable power over Brailing that confirms the issue of unchecked technological advancement:

> "Marionettes are made to move, not lie still. How would you like to lie in a box most of the time?"
> "Well—you wouldn't like it all. I keep running. There's no way to shut me off. I'm perfectly alive and have feelings."
>
> (Bradbury, Stories: Vol-1)

The posthuman space arises at this point where Brailing Two and Smith's wife Nettie replace themselves with a robotic double. They are far removed from becoming more than an adaptable entity. The human self becomes decentered while the robotic double becomes the fundamental locus of the civilized world. Bradbury prompts us through a cautionary tale to think about the dangers of unsupervised and unmonitored usage of technology.

The posthuman subjectivity creates a duplicity with a non-human entity creating chaos through a techno-modulated world. So, a definitive question arises that are humans enough. Posthumanism arises out of the fact that humans can evolve at a faster rate with the help of machines, but unfortunately technology and advanced scientific temper try to replace humans with non-human entities as the ultimate human. Bradbury discloses the reality of posthuman

spaces through a nightmarish future by putting a cautionary tale. The three stories that the article discusses within the parameters of posthuman subjectivity gives us a thorough reality check on our own technology mediated posthuman future. By an excessive dependence on technology and its appendages, we are reclaiming humanist anxieties under the prototype of a posthuman subject. We are often reminded of our own frailties by such authors who offer us a looking glass to perceive our techno-modulated utopias.

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Monsters in a Shrouded World: A Critical Study of Apocalyptic Themes in Stephen King's *The Mist*

Melanie Alexander

ABSTRACT

A terrible thunderstorm lashes a quiet New England suburb, leaving in its wake an impenetrable mist and the beginning of the world's end. In *The Mist* (1980), Stephen King brings the apocalypse to the doorstep of his protagonists' lives. This paper is a study of *The Mist* within the framework of apocalyptic fiction. As the characters struggle to survive outer monsters, psychological stress begins to wear on inner group dynamics. Boundaries shift when civility and civilization fall apart. Paranoia and eroding social morality cause fractures within the group. This paper will look into the ethical dualism that often arises in apocalyptic crises and how such warring ideologies are an added threat to survival in a dystopia. The essay will attempt a critical textual analysis with an emphasis on existential crisis, dystopian symbolism, eschatological frenzy, and human resilience in the face of insurmountable odds. *The Mist* (1980) is a deeply complex study of dystopian themes that lays bare the fragility of social constructs in the face of incomprehensible existential threat. Various points in the narrative force one to think: is there any hope left, at the end of all things? It will be the aim and focus of this paper to examine if the novella provides a conclusive answer to this question.

KEYWORDS

Apocalyptic fiction, dystopian symbolism, ethical dualism, existential crisis, monsters, human resilience, hope.

In the aftermath of a terrible heatwave, a quiet North England suburb falls prey to a series of terrible thunderstorms. When the storm passes, however, the mist lingers and the residents of this idyllic haven soon find themselves thrown headfirst into horrors they can neither see nor fathom. This is Stephen King's 1980 novella, *The Mist*: an eclectic mix of apocalyptic themes set within the frame of psychological and Eldritch horror. While *The Mist* is only one among King's many apocalyptic narratives, it represents a distinctive experiment that combines psychological horror with dystopian allegory. The author has repeatedly returned to the theme of apocalypse. In *The Stand* (1978), the end of the world is caused by a breach in a medical facility and the subsequent spread of a severely mutated flu virus. Cell (2006) is another novel by King that is built around the frame of a digital apocalypse, focusing on a New England author's race against time to save his son from "The Pulse", a corrupted phone signal capable of turning users into murderous, non-human zombies that form the "flock". In *Under the Dome* (2006), a classic alien invasion tale, King relies on science fiction to create a localized dystopia with the threat of full-scale destruction looming large over the plot. Later, in *Insomnia* (1994), an elderly couple must face an unlikely adversary in Fate itself to prevent a cataclysmic disaster; *Desperation* (1996) is the story of a small desert town that is turned into a hell scape through the ministrations of the Eldritch demon haunting it and in the short story, *I am the Doorway* (1971), an astronaut comes back to earth as the human spyglass for an unknown alien race planning an invasion. The author's apocalyptic world building is fascinating. His dystopias are rich with their own lifeforms and ways of life: twisted, violent and otherworldly antagonists act as overlords in the ruinous wastes of fallen worlds.

Within this larger body of work, *The Mist* stands out for its claustrophobic setting, its incomprehensible monsters, and an emphasis on the collapse of human rationality. This paper examines how King constructs the apocalypse through a mix of external threats

that are put into motion through the internal breakdowns of known structures of power, belief, and morality. Through a critical analysis of the text situated, the discussion will evaluate how the setting of the Federal supermarket is a microcosm of failed governance, how cult psychology thrives within dystopian environments, and how King subverts typical alien invasion themes from pop-culture, thereby complicating ideas of good and evil.

A dystopian world embodies what Amis had called a "new map(s) of hell".[1] Dystopias overthrow the known and accepted order of human civilization, replacing it with a reality that is grotesque and unstable. A select few wield power over the hapless multitudes and jealously hoard what little remains of the earth's meagre resources. This is the basic skeletal frame of these stories. Over the years, the literary dystopia has evolved. There is the totalitarian dystopia seen in George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, and Margaret Atwood, characterized by fascist regimes, totalitarian dictatorships and brutality on oppositions. There is scientific apocalypse and dystopia: from H.G Wells' invading Martians in *The War of the Worlds* to the cold, desolate wasteland witnessed by the Time Traveller in the eponymous 1895 work, to Frank Schätzing's parasitic "yrr" in *The Swarm* (2004), to Herbert's hostile and inhospitable world of Arrakis, in his dystopian saga *Dune*. *The Maze Runner* trilogy, *The Hunger Games* trilogy, and the *Divergent* series are newer, relatively younger takes on dystopian fiction. As humanity's priorities change, so does dystopian fiction. Our present crises are reflected in these works: like our futures, the literary apocalypse is not set in stone. Yet, despite the diversity with which authors—and King, in particular—have approached apocalyptic fiction over the years, we can trace, in all of these texts, a few recurring themes. For the present discussion we will be looking at seven themes that are definitive of the genre and feature most prominently in *The Mist*: namely, the novella's apocalyptic framework; the setting as a microcosm of human civilization; the monsters inhabiting the mist; the ideological conflicts that arise within a

dystopia; the overwhelming sense of paranoia and existential crisis permeating the text; the rise of eschatological madness and frenzy; and finally, the theme of human spirit and resilience as witnessed through the accounts of the last survivors.

Foremost in this study, is King's use of the apocalyptic framework in the novella. *The Mist* is an expansive take on the psychological and social ruptures that affect people in a crisis, and there can hardly be a crisis more pressing than the end of the world. The work is a fascinating exploration of a wholly man-made apocalypse, achieved through the plot's incorporation of the cryptic "Project Arrowhead". The entire story is narrated to us as a flashback from the perspective of the protagonist, David: writing about his experiences at an abandoned gas station. The choice of the intimate first-person narratorial voice and David's meticulous recording of the incidents that have happened to the residents of this small English town serve to personalize the apocalypse to us: by sharing in his confusion and fear, we are made vicarious participants to all that he and the Long Lake civilians have endured. From David, we learn that only four days have passed since "the storm that seemed to signal the beginning of it all".[2] From his story, it becomes clear that the mist was preceded by a seemingly normal if very severe, geological occurrence. We are told that a terrible heatwave had persisted in this Northern England suburb for over a month, eventually culminating in a series of vicious thunderstorms. On the surface, this is a relatively innocuous natural phenomenon. The mist that lingers over Long Lake in the storm's aftermath doesn't, at first, resemble anything unnatural. King's use of the mist as the harbinger of the apocalypse is ingenious. As far as geological phenomenon go, a mist conceals and obscures, leaving just the slightest veneer of visibility behind. This has great significance to the novel's building up of the apocalypse. The mist is a metaphor for the frailty of human civilization, especially when forced into a cataclysm we are ill-equipped to understand or handle. At first sight, David and the other residents of the Lake simply dismiss it

as a natural phenomenon: impenetrable, but nothing to be feared. However, its sinister nature is quickly revealed; first, through the sense of unease it evokes in the people seeing it and later, through more ferocious, direct violence.

The mist does not fully make an appearance until the third segment of the story. Once it does, it moves in on Long Lake with the startling swiftness of a catalyst at work:

> "It came on, eating up the blue sky and the fresh black hottop with equal ease. Even twenty feet away the line of demarcation was perfectly clear... It happened so quickly. The blue sky disappeared to a wide swipe, then to a stripe then to a pencil like. Then it was gone. Blank white pressed against the glass of the wide show window."[3]

The sudden, swooping way the mist descends on the town is neither geologically explicable nor natural. In fact, its arrival is akin to a predator's. Even before we understand that this mist is an otherworldly phenomenon, its unsettling sentience is palpable. The people who have come to the supermarket, including David and his young son, Billy, hesitate to walk out into the lingering semi-darkness. Their intuition is not wrong in warning them. The apocalypse, in *The Mist*, is not only brought to the characters' doorstep, but it acts with ruthless efficiency. As soon as the mist has solidified its presence in the supermarket parking lot, the chaos begins. A woman starts to scream, followed by a terrified man running out of the Federal Foods. This initiates a mini stampede and a few panicking residents run out into the mist, only to be briskly killed. We never see their deaths; David only describes their distant screaming. The death of Norm, a bag boy, is the first one with eyewitnesses in the form of David, Ollie, Myron and Jim. However, neither of the men are believed by the rest when they try to explain that "something from the mist"[4] has killed Norm. Much later, Norton's group decides

to venture outside. They tie themselves like a human chain with a laundry rope and leave but are viciously attacked by something unseen. What is left is a bloodied, bitten-off rope. The concealing nature of the mist makes it an apocalyptic event of truly unforeseen proportions. What appears to be a local incident soon reveals itself as an apocalypse that relies on stealth to bring about destruction. Concealment is the spine of *The Mist*'s storytelling: the heart of its dystopian vision. We never fully realize what exactly the mist holds in itself, just as the remaining survivors, even at the novella's end, never truly realize that the mist is no localized event. It has, quite possibly, spread across the world, wreaking havoc. Glimpses are all that we get of this apocalypse, and they are horrifying enough to make us share in David's crippling anxiety at the thought of what other terrors a new day might bring. The concealment brought on by the mist does more than hide the monsters; it destabilizes perception itself, literal and moral.

The mist here is more than a meteorological or supernatural phenomenon. Rather, it is a symbol of epistemological rupture that conceals not only the monsters but also blurs clarity of thought, rational discourse, and ethical reasoning. Vision, both literal and metaphorical, is occluded through the opaqueness of the mist, forcing the characters into reactive, irrational acts of panic and violence. David reflects, "The blue sky disappeared to a wide swipe, then to a stripe…then it was gone. Blank white pressed against the glass of the wide show window".[5] This concealment destabilizes meaning itself: what is real, what is moral, and what can be survived are all hidden from sight. The mist thus becomes an obfuscating agent that destabilizes human certainties and accelerates paranoia among the people trapped within the Federal. By blotting out the sun, a source of physical light and symbolic vision, the mist suppresses logical reasoning, thus paving the way for the eschatological frenzy characteristic of apocalyptic environments. This aligns with literary traditions depicting mist and fog as liminal spaces where spatial

mapping collapses, creating Jameson's "unreality" of the apocalyptic imagination.[6]

The setting of the novella is crucial to King's apocalyptic world building and it makes up the second part of our discussion. An adversary as formidable as the mist, the story's restrictive setting acts as nightmare fuel for the characters. It provides a false sense of safety, increases psychological trauma, and keeps the characters trapped in a bubble of paranoia and helplessness. Apocalyptic fiction is characterized by the introduction of a world greatly altered from what we are accustomed to. Limited or no access to technological/scientific facilities—or its complete seizure by the dominant power faction—is a given. This is followed by a scarcity of basic amenities like food, water and healthcare. Survivors are often forced into situations that will make them fight over these limited resources, thus leading to the sense of moral dilemma that pervades in such a novel. Dystopian settings thrive on moral ambiguity and deterioration, and *The Mist* is no different. Long Lake, that forms the setting of the frame story, is a quiet, isolated suburb in England. The natural environment here is harsh and punishing. It suffers through a terribly difficult summer and, immediately after, is lashed by a series of dangerous thunderstorms. Moreover, it is cut off from the mainland and this isolation makes its ambience unnerving. The human community too, according to David, is close-knit but small-minded, bearing a fierce suspicion towards outsiders and new settlers. Long Lake lacks any of the idyllic charm and serenity one would associate with such a locale. In the aftermath of the storm, fallen trees, live wires and flooded streets ensure that there is decreased access to communicative services. Travelling to the mainland becomes extremely dangerous once the mist has settled in. The frame setting—which, in a different work would have been the perfect getaway—acts as a barrier between the survivors and their access to help. As the mist slowly reveals its unearthly horrors, the story moves into the secondary setting: Long Lake's singular supermarket, the Federal. The symbolism of

this setting extends further when we consider the ironic weight of its name. Naming the grocery store "Federal" is central to King's critique of institutional breakdown. While it initially stands as an emblematic site of nourishment and local social exchange, the supermarket degenerates into paranoia, communal fanaticism, and violence. By choosing the name "Federal", King demonstrates the fragility and unreliability of state authority and civic order. Parallelly, the Federal becomes a distorted miniature of governance itself: moral and legal systems are replaced by mob rule, and authority is embodied through charismatic zealots taking the place of rational leadership. As with other apocalyptic microcosms of King's fiction, what appears to be a sanctuary for the remaining survivors soon devolves into a crucible of mistrust and ritualistic violence. This reveals how established order and governance—whether institutional or local—fails in a crisis of apocalyptic levels. Moreover, the irony of the Federal's name gains greater resonance upon considering the federal character of the project that sets the wheel rolling for the novella's apocalyptic action. "Project Arrowhead,"[7] is the story's pivot: a *federal* military experiment that likely precipitates the catastrophe. It is crucial to note both the Federal as well as the federally sanctioned Project Arrowhead to understand how King condenses the dystopian world into a miniature version of itself through the supermarket as well as how institutional carelessness acts as a catalyst for an apocalyptic event.

The Federal features nearly throughout the entirety of David's flashback, and it is where we, the readers, and the characters alike, first witness the coming of the mist. The name of the place—the Federal, evoking explicitly polity and governance—immediately makes it an ideal microcosm for Long Lake, and for civilization, at large. With roughly eighty people stranded inside, the Federal becomes the perfect amalgamation of a diverse and heterogeneous human society. People from all walks of life find themselves stuck as unlikely allies in an unexpected crisis. Apart from David and

Billy, we see the retired schoolteacher, Mrs. Reppler; a new resident, Amanda Dumfries; the store manager and store hands; David's friend and a Federal employee, Ollie Weeks; the "Flat Earthers"[8] led by David's neighbour, Norton; two young soldiers; and, the overzealous antiquity storeowner, Mrs. Carmody, to name a few. As attempts to go out—either out of ignorance, or to get help—result in quick, merciless deaths, these people, who have known each other all their lives, soon understand that their brief grocery runs have now turned into a nightmarish period of confinement. The Federal has been described as a mirror for human society, but King intends it to be more of a fun-house mirror: what we see is a warped version of our reality. Confronted by extreme psychological stress and unfathomable horrors, the survivors grow increasingly suspicious of one other. In their desperation, many turn towards the occultist rhetoric of Mrs. Carmody. The internal situation of the Federal only worsens as the novella progresses. David recounts how his efforts to leave the supermarket are repeatedly thwarted by from Mrs. Carmody, right until an attempt, by her cult, to ritually "sacrifice" Billy and Amanda forces Ollie to shoot her. By the time David and a small group of defectors have managed to escape, the Federal has fully turned into a miniature replica of the destruction and madness outside.

The Federal is well-stocked and well-guarded. With a precious reserve of food and water, and a connected pharmacy, it can even be seen as a modernized war bunker that remains, mostly, untouched by the monsters. None of the mist's creatures ever infiltrate the supermarket, only attacking those who leave its apparent safety. David, and those with him, face an impasse: leaving the supermarket means risking the monsters outside, but staying inside is to inevitably run out of the store's limited resources, or, worse, to fall prey to the increasingly violent behaviour of the cultists. In an apocalyptic scenario, the Federal or any place like it, can only represent an *illusion* of security: false and fleeting. Though the mist has cut off visibility from the rest of Long Lake and beyond, the Federal remains

the only place we can truly see. The supermarket and its temporary inhabitants remain entirely on display for us and, presumably, for the creatures in the mist. In this, the Federal is almost reminiscent of the Tralfamadorian zoo:[9] a simulation of human civilization for aliens to watch, with none of the prelapsarian joy experienced by Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse Five.* The Federal is the dystopian counterpart of the zoo on Tralfamadore: the people being watched here are prey in a cattle-pen. The setting of the Federal enables us to witness, on a smaller scale, the complete collapse of civilization as we know it. If the supermarket reflects a collapse of social cohesion and order, the federal venture Project Arrowhead reflects a collapse of responsible state power and the aftereffect of scientific recklessness. The Project itself is never discussed beyond the speculations and rumours that the townsfolk have heard about it. An air of notorious secrecy surrounds it like a second mist: the two soldiers at the supermarket hang themselves fearing they might be tortured into revealing insider information, further revealing the insidious nature of this government experiment. However, the novella makes it clear that it was government interference with the natural order of King's horror multiverse that quite possibly created a rupture in space-time and opened a gateway to an alternate dimension inhabited by bizarre and hellish lifeforms.[10] This implication, that Project Arrowhead may have been responsible for the unnatural events in the plot, is made by Ollie after he and David have discovered the soldiers' bodies: "Some people claim they were messing with high-intensity lasers and masers. Sometimes I hear, fusion power. And suppose... suppose they ripped a hole straight through into another dimension?".[11]

The secrecy around this federal project and the element of anxiety surrounding the soldiers' suicides reflects the opaqueness of the mist. Further, it drives home how institutional hubris and secrecy can result in the loss of innocent lives as collateral damage. Together, the supermarket and Project Arrowhead operate as the dual symbols indicting the federal state: the same power that unleashes

the apocalypse is entirely incapable of containing it

This collapse of order is accelerated by the presence of the alien life form within the known reality of our world: a collapse orchestrated by otherworldly creatures. Just like the setting of the story, the monsters of the mist are a vital factor contributing to the dystopian theme. David talks about how the delicate, uneasy calm within the Federal snaps like a taut thread with the first appearance of the "pink bugs".[12] Though relatively more harmless than the other monsters, the mere sight of the bugs vanishes any sense of normalcy the survivors were clinging on to, replacing it with total "pandemonium".[13] Although these creatures are the active perpetrators of the apocalypse in *The Mist,* their arrival on our planet is entirely caused by man-made actions. Moreover, while they are active threats to human life, the mist's life forms primarily operate on instinct, not malice, making them an intriguing antagonistic force.

In the Hebrew Bible, the apocalyptic is written as a "foreign entity"[14] brought about by outer forces. Murphy goes on to write that "…apocalypses resulted from a complex interplay of foreign and domestic elements",[15] which is what happens in *The Mist.* The monsters are alien lifeforms, inhabitants of an alternate dimension. They find themselves in our world as a result of human experimentation with the forbidden.

At this juncture, it is useful to situate King's approach to the extraterrestrial entity alongside more familiar alien invasion narratives in popular culture. Jameson views the presence of the alien lifeform as highly significant to the dystopian genre.[16] Hollywood narratives have primarily relied on depiction of aliens as intellectually advanced, superior and coherent beings: these are stories where the defeat of an extra-terrestrial adversary reaffirms national unity and human resilience to overcome insurmountable odds. However, unlike cinematic alien invasions such as *Independence Day* (1996), *Arrival* (2016), *Life* (2017) or even Marvel's *Avengers* franchise with its vast repertoire of alien life forms and cultures, King's monsters are

not conquerors possessing intent or ideology. On the contrary, he actively resists such closure. Most of the monsters in his bibliography comprise of eldritch, trans-dimensional beings that *are shaped by their sheer incomprehensibility.* In *The Mist*, the creatures described embody what Card terms as "Varelse":[17] the truly alien. A being whose anatomy, psychology and motives cannot be comprehended. This incomprehensibility destabilizes the humanized narratives of resistance against alien invaders. Similarly, while films like *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) or *War for the Planet of the Apes* (2017) dramatizes the apocalypse as a spectacular conflict between equally titanic forces, with massive stakes involved, King strips away spectacle of the dystopia by situating the apocalypse in the banal setting of a supermarket in a small suburb. In doing so, he subverts the genre's cinematic tropes: there is to be no cathartic victory, no heroic saviour rescues David and his son from the Federal. All that the novella offers is a slim possibility of survival and ambiguous hope, thereby offering a realistic portrayal of life within an apocalyptic system. King's alien invasion is a critique of anthropocentric narratives of triumph over external forces of disruption, suggesting the inevitability of chaos in the dystopia. The mist and its monsters are a meditation on fragility and moral collapse. The apocalyptic novel, like its counterparts from the science fiction genre, is " . . . shrouded in some of that same mist that surrounds the aliens, whose own improbable unreality is their only possible representation"[18] (Italics added). In *The Mist,* the monsters are unknowable on two levels: the mist hides them from sight and their own strange, unearthly anatomies make them impossible to comprehend. While David speaks of them being like "nothing that ever walked the earth",[19] horrible things out of a lunatic's nightmare, the monsters' behaviour throughout the story remains oddly similar to earthly predatory fauna. David's account goes on to talk about how, in some cases, these creatures seem to lack understanding of the planet they find themselves on. If we refer to King's prior fiction, it can be deduced that the monsters that

feature in *The Mist* are quite possibly Todash beings.[20] In Stephen King's literary universe, the Todash Space(s) is called the "Macro verse". Not a separate dimension by itself, the Todash is the vast endless void occupying the gaps between alternate dimensions. It can be used to traverse through different realities and is depicted as a dark, threatening space that traps those who have fallen into it without knowing the way out. Filled with monsters, demons and the varied dead, the Todash is a space that truly signifies Eldritch incomprehensibility. It was expanded upon in King's *Dark Tower* universe, which is inspired by Robert Browning's ballad, *When Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*. The Todash, with its bizarrely hellish landscape and lifeforms, has formerly appeared in *The Dark Tower* series, *The Talisman* (1984), *Black House* (2001) and *From a Buick 8* (2002). The latter is an extensive exploration of the Todash, through its use of a Buick that is actually a doorway to this alternate dimension. The creatures that this Buick occasionally throws out—including a one-eyed and legless bat-like being, a misshapen fish, and once, a six-foot tall monstrosity with tentacles in place of its head—all bear similarities with the creatures described in *The Mist*. Contrarily, inspite of its hideous appearance, the tentacled creature does not initiate any form of violence, primarily exhibiting a passive curiosity towards it surroundings until attacked by a police. When it is finally found and battered to death by a group of terrified policemen, its bewilderment and terror at its fate affirms that the Todash beings, mostly, function on baser animal instincts.

As instigators of the end of the world, the creatures that King includes in *The Mist* form a nightmarish menagerie going far beyond what he has explored of the Todash in prior works. In order of how they appear in the story, there is the massive creature that kills Norm, and which we do not see beyond its giant tentacles.[21] There are the flying pink bugs and a flock of "albino birds"[22] that resemble pterodactyls and feed on the former. There are the black and yellow spiders, "the size of a big dog(s)",[23] that David's group runs into on

their trip to the pharmacy. A shadowy red creature, with the claws of a lobster and anatomy of a scorpion,[24] dismembers Ollie towards the end of the novella. As the small group of survivors drives towards the mainland, they encounter a giant green "dragonfly"[25] and finally, a six-legged monster so incomprehensibly gargantuan that it is simply called "Behemoth", or the "Thing".[26] Described as being the size of a cliff, the Behemoth collectively summarizes the Eldritch nature of the apocalyptic mist and its living nightmares. David writes: "There are things of such darkness and horror—just, I suppose, as there are things of such great beauty—that they will not fit through the puny human doors of human perception".[27] The Todash creatures' lack of comprehension about our planet mirrors our lack of understanding about theirs. Their greatest strength comes from the mist's cover and their own bizarrely dangerous physiologies, but even so, they are not invincible. Mrs. Reppler is successfully able to kill a pink bug with regular bug spray. The episode of the albino birds hunting the bugs further establishes that these creatures are part of a biological order similar to the food pyramids of earthly ecosystems. They are primarily seeking to survive on this new planet and ensure species continuity among their own. Their violence is clumsy, and often awkward, lacking any evidence of being calculated attempts at human extinction. To them, the stranded human beings are simply prey: no more and no less. Juxtaposed together, the unpredictable danger posed by the Todash is as terrible as Mrs. Carmody's suggestion of sacrificing Billy to the monsters as expiation. As the dystopian reality starts eating away at the vestiges of right and wrong, human panic and the need for self-preservation take precedence. There is a complete abandonment of social morality and this becomes as stark a threat to the survival of Long Lake's remaining residents as the monsters. The mist causes a rupture in the microcosmic society at the supermarket and divides the stranded group into polarized factions, thus giving rise to two key features of apocalyptic fiction: socio-ethical dualism and eschatological frenzy. This breakdown of moral

categories reflects King's broader interrogation of ethical dualism across his apocalyptic fiction.

King complicates ethical dualism by showing how the desperate need for survival disrupts conventional definitions of righteousness and wickedness. As already discussed, the monsters, grotesque as they are, act on instinct rather than malice: they are predators and the humans within their reach form easy prey. Moreover, unlike the stereotypical Hollywood extra-terrestrial, they do not belong to any moral, intellectually superior order: they are simply products of an alien ecosystem that recognizes only base instincts. In contrast, Mrs. Carmody and her cult demonstrate how human beings, under immense apocalyptic strain, willingly abandon morality and discard adherence to civilized codes of behaviour. Her call for "blood sacrifice"[28] how fanatical righteousness can mutate into a form of evil greater than the alien other. As Gammie observes, ethical dualism in apocalyptic literature pits the "righteous versus the wicked"[29] in a climactic confrontation. Again, King destabilizes this binary: in his dystopia, wickedness emerges from the supposed godly and righteous. Ethical dualism in *The Mist* therefore collapses into ambiguity: morality is no longer a matter of divine alignment and justice, but rather hinges on the element of human choice situated within a massive crisis.

As a phenomenon that smothers clarity, the mist is also a literary symbol for the loss of logical reasoning in an apocalyptic setting. By presenting it as a supernatural occurrence, King is able to portray the mist as possessing some level of mind control: it is able to awaken primal and atavistic impulses in human beings, alongside inducing a strange lethargy in them. Through prolonged exposure to the mist, the survivors start acting erratically: David, who is married and shown to deeply love his wife, engages in sudden and unprovoked sexual intercourse with Amanda, who he barely knows.[30] The encounter leaves them both shaken and confused, and David talks about how the mist seems to have created a sense of numb

complacency in everyone. There are six suicides. Worst of all, the increasing paranoia of the people causes them to grow dependent on Mrs. Carmody, whose prophecies turn increasingly violent with the passing of the story. By literally blotting out the sun—a source of light and vision—the mist causes a collapse of good sense. Dystopian environments are marked by a breakdown of existing power structures and their replacement by new hierarchies of (dis) order. Social propriety does not have a place within the apocalyptic framework: survival is the topmost priority. In *The Mist*, unlike many dystopian works, the survivors do not seek strength in unity, nor reach a consensus on the plan of action for survival the apocalypse. Instead, the revelation of the monsters and the tense atmosphere within the Federal eventually establishes a new pecking order, marked by mistrust, bigotry and violence. One group, consisting of David, Amanda, Ollie, Mrs. Reppler and Billy, proposes to try and escape from the Federal to seek help outside. The other, much larger group, are led by the zealot, Mrs. Carmody, who positions herself as a Messiah figure and calls for a sacrifice to appease the monsters. This difference is perspectives is a danger to the survival of both groups, but ultimately, not unexpected. Ethical dualism has always been acknowledged and utilized in dystopian works, dating back to the Bible, where it was divided into the cosmic, the eschatological and the ethical. According to John Gammie, ethical dualism is "an opposition between two classes or groups of human beings: the righteous versus the wicked; the godly versus the impious".[31] In King, the Biblical good versus evil argument is a paradox. Dualism becomes highly complicated because of the moral ambiguity that characterizes King's fiction. The "godly", in King, possess totalitarian power and exercise ideological extremism. Moreover, he depicts the innate impossibility of correlating power and justice within a dystopia. Similar paradoxes occur in his other novels. In *The Stand,* for example, the all-powerful Randall Flagg is an incarnation of the Devil. Those choosing to join him are rewarded with a life of excess, even as the other side,

led by the visionary Mother Abigail, must suffer the consequences of having chosen piety in a dying world. In *Cell*, ethical dualism is compromised by the "Raggedy Man", another Satanic overlord, and the overwhelming numbers of his undead "Flock". Our awareness of right and wrong grows hazy with the downfall of our civilization; the definition of what is morally "correct" becomes blurred by the mist. While she is initially dismissed as a batty old woman by most, more survivors are drawn by Mrs. Carmody's fanatical ravings with the story's progress. She speaks incessantly of an Old Testament apocalypse that can only be "sated"[32] through human sacrifice. She is the first to presume the mist to be dangerous, even before any lives have been claimed by it: "Don't go out there," Mrs. Carmody said in her best gore-crow voice. "It's death to go out there".[33] With the arrival of the pink bugs, the growing number of deaths, and the terror spreading among the survivors, Mrs. Carmody soon gains a cult that is desperately holding onto her every word. David reasons that fear psychosis and mob mentality allow Mrs. Carmody to manipulate the situation further. She exploits the fact that these people are "…eager to grasp at almost any straw. Maybe even the black comfort of a Mrs. Carmody".[34] Her leadership, however, is not an organized attempt of escape or rescue. Rather, thriving on the power that the ideological differences between the survivors has bestowed her with, Mrs. Carmody establishes herself as a totem god over the side governed by fanaticism, occult superstition and fear-mongering. Her madness ultimately drives her to try and sacrifice Billy and Amanda to the monsters, and at this point, it becomes clear that she will not stop unless she is killed. Human morality teaches us that murder, even of a person as vile and horrible as Mrs. Carmody, is essentially a crime and an unethical act. Mrs. Carmody's death[35] at the hands of Ollie Weeks—a religious extremist from the "bad" side, killed by a man belonging to the novella's "good" group—shows how the apocalyptic fiction of King views ethical dualism as being more than a simple good versus evil conflict. Conflict itself, King seems to be

saying, is a moot point in the twisted literary world of *The Mist*. Ollie's choice is merely between the greater of the two ills: killing Mrs. Carmody himself or allowing Billy to be taken by the cult. Once the apocalypse has wiped out all existing social structures, there are no plausible definitions left for either good or evil, ethical or unethical.

The Mist blurs the lines keeping human beings in check, including those that protect us from our own darkness and capacity for evil. Even religion, which is a beacon of hope for many in their everyday lives, becomes warped in the shadowy darkness of the apocalyptic mist. Characterized by ideological frenzy, rather than comfort or stability, religious zeal is what causes the final collapse of all law and order in *The Mist*. Eschatology is depicted in King's dystopian horror with the same ambiguity as ethical dualism. Religion and religious ideologies embody a grey, if not completely black, area. Traditionally, the association of eschatology with the apocalypse dates back to the Torah and the Bible. As per Abrahamic beliefs, religion and the apocalypse are inextricably tied together because the former is a harbinger of hope and the path to the eternal salvation of humanity. In the Bible, we have the stories of Noah—who survives the Great flood—or, of Lot, who is able to escape the ruin of Sodom and Gomorrah. In the Book of Revelation, we have St. John's account of witnessing the end of the world, and later, the establishment of God's kingdom, the "New Jerusalem", on earth.[36] Theological apocalypses testify that those who obey the word of God will receive salvation, while the disobedient, like Lot's wife or the people who take the mark of the Beast,[37] will suffer eternal damnation. An all powerful, all-knowing God presides over the Biblical end times, and in King's fiction, this role is assumed often, and with deviant tenacity, by figures who are either morally grey, or outright evil. Power corrupts and if a god is "all powerful, He can't possibly be all good and if He is all-good, He can't possibly be all-powerful".[38] Frederick J. Murphy writes that power struggles in crises are appealing

to readers: "Apocalypses concerned with politics can allow readers to perceive their struggles with evil rulers as a part of a larger struggle between good and evil forces".[39] Moreover, this power struggle has great relevance to the eschatological focus of apocalyptic novels: "All apocalypses involve eschatology, bur some forms of apocalypticism have a strong(er) eschatological focus".[40] The victory of good, like it is written in the Gospels, symbolizes hope, renewal and new life. In The Mist, however, the closest one gets to victory or renewal, is survival. The mist and its creatures are not of this world. As an alternate reality entirely independent of our world and its beliefs, it has no room for any conventional, Biblical definitions of eschatology. In the insane dystopia of *The Mist*, religion represents madness, and eschatology wears the horrific mask of fanatical ritualism.

The theological end of the world witnesses the rise to power of the Ten-Headed Beast. The Beast symbolizes tyrannical authority, persecuting the followers of God and branding its own followers with its mark.[41] The story of the Beast mirrors real-life dystopian situations. Likewise, many of King's apocalyptic antagonists bear a resemblance with the theological Beast, including their fashioning of themselves as faux-Saviour figures and their cults of fanatical believers. These characters, and regimes, like their real life counterparts, thrive off cultist popularity. The political jingoism and adulation that popularized Hitler and Mussolini in the war years is a perfect example of how the tyrannical rise with the downfall of civilization. In terms of eschatology, the modern apocalypse becomes a zone where pagan ritualism and atavistic frenzy replace Christian morality. King's dystopian antagonists situate themselves as dark saviours in a parody of organized religion: there is the instance, in *The Stand,* where the Satanic Flagg strings up naysayers on telephone poles, in crude mockeries of the Biblical crucifixion. In fact, these novels exemplify how religion often acts as a *deterrent* to good sense in an apocalyptic crisis, fuelling panic rather than offering salvation. Unlike the Bible,

religion does not assure safety, nor piety life: Mother Abigail, who stands in direct opposition to Flagg, is not beyond mortality. Nor are the four men who walk to Las Vegas as a final resistance against this Antichrist oppressor. Flagg, on the other hand, is a non-human entity. He simply cannot die. The nuclear warhead, that wipes out his followers, merely destroys his present vessel, forcing him to flee in search of a new one. There is no linear way of determining the "victory" of good, in eschatological terms,[42] in a modern apocalyptic story. Like Flagg, Mrs. Carmody posits herself as a Saviour figure in *The Mist*: not divinely ordained, but self-proclaimed. An intolerant zealot, her brand of religion is a convoluted mix of occult superstition, Mormon conservatism, and religious extremism. Initially appearing as a slightly eccentric and irritating individual capable of no real harm, Mrs. Carmody soon becomes a formidable force by manipulating the stress and fear present within the Federal's atmosphere. The ongoing assault by the mist's monsters turns her rhetoric into an infectious plague: blinded by their lack of understanding about the mist or its beings, the survivors turn to "Mother Carmody"[43] for help. The number of people willing to listen to her crazed sermons increases as the mist completely blots out what little remains of visibility and, with it, all common sense. The human dependence on religion as a crutch, even a dark religion, is reflected in the following she amasses within a single day:

> "She was tireless, apparently. And she was indeed talking about human sacrifice again, only now no one was telling her to shut up. Some of the people who had told her to shut up yesterday were either with her today or at least willing to listen—and the rest were outnumbered".[44]

Mrs. Carmody calls the mist a "will of God",[45] claiming that it is only through a sacrifice that they can all be saved. She goes on to say

that "un-believers"[46] like the Flat Earthers, are the true cause of this apocalypse. Later, this spiel extends to David and those who wish to leave the supermarket, with her insisting that a sacrifice from among them will save the rest. It is difficult to ascertain if Mrs. Carmody's "God" is the jealous and punishing Jehovah of the Old Testament, or some outer Eldritch force, especially when she mentions the "Old Gods"[47] and says that the mist is a consequence of their wrath. She is right in her deduction of the mist as an alien phenomenon, but one can hardly see in her a "Mother" figure, given her willingness to kill an innocent child. In fact, as her calls for sacrifice and bloodshed grow more vehement, one struggles to look at her and see *anything* but an already unstable woman worsened by the crisis she finds herself in. Her proclaimed religion offers nothing but blood and shallow reassurance. This is proved by her own death at the hands of Ollie after she orders that Billy and Amanda be seized, tied up, and thrown out defenceless into the supermarket parking lot. As readers, we cannot feel any sympathy for her, given the tyrannical manner in which she has terrorized those who refuse to join her dark congregation.

Eschatology, in *The Mist*, stands for complete psychological collapse. Mrs. Carmody's religious beliefs embody suspicion and violence. Her presence makes the supermarket equally dangerous to stay inside, especially for those who refuse to join her. Her "cult" chooses to stay back in the Federal after her death, showing that believing in her madness has effectively doomed them all to slow but certain deaths. As a cruel enforcer of ritualistic religion, Mrs Carmody's role, within *The Mist's* dystopian frame, is not to help avert the apocalypse, but to further the destruction caused by it. There is no eschatological hope to be found at the altar of her wrathful god, Eldritch or Biblical: the one who, she claims, has unleashed the apocalypse on Long Lake. This forms the conclusive section of our paper: is there any hope to be found in *The Mist*? Does the novella, at any point, reward the

human resilience to survive insurmountable odds?

At the end of *The Mist*, we are no closer to finding concrete answers about the apocalypse or the full extent of its impact. The final section, titled simply as "The End", commences with the death of Ollie, leaving behind only four survivors—David, Billy, Amanda and Mrs. Reppler—who escape the supermarket unscathed. Leaving the Federal behind is the last we see of Mrs. Carmody's cult and the drive to New Hampshire quickly reveals that the mist has enveloped the entire mainland. As they struggle to navigate their way to a silence of safety, David and his group encounter more of the Todash creatures and never run into other survivors. Even though the entire apocalyptic incident happens over a span of four days, *The Mist's* storytelling captures the seemingly endless passage of time that marks any calamity: from the coming of the storm to the novella's ambiguous ending. *The Mist* is a record of an apocalypse, *in medias res*, and as the story switches back to the present, with David coming to the end of his flashback, it becomes clear that there will be no conventional ending to this tale: "There is no "And then they escaped from the mist into the good sunshine of a new day"; or, "When we awoke the National Guard had finally arrived"; or, even that great old standby: "It was all a dream".[48] David never finds his wife, Stephanie, and seems to have accepted the fact that she has not survived. With the characters still completely in the dark about Project Arrowhead and the lengths to which the mist may have spread, the story has no certain or hopeful conclusion: only the chance of one. Given its open-ended climax, this chance is what serves as hope in The Mist.

Leaving the enclosed safety of the Federal, escaping Mrs. Carmody, driving safely to the gas station in New Hampshire are all chances taken by the protagonist to look for a way out. All of these chances lead up to the single radio transmission that David hears, right before the novella's end, at the gas station: "Hartford". This radio transmission is *The Mist's* version of chance and hope coalescing

to represent the irrepressible human will. David is so unsettled at receiving this tiny sliver of hope that he begins to wonder if it was not entirely his imagination:

> "I listened for an hour but there was no more. If there was that one word, it came through some minute shift in the clamping mist, an infinitesimal break that immediately closed again. One word".[49]

This single word, "Hartford", becomes a possibility of escape from an impossible situation. *The Mist* depicts hope as a fragile and fleeting portal within the space of absolute horror created by the Todash infiltrating into known reality.

In contemporary dystopian stories, hope is not signified by the intervention of divine heroes. No Saviour can help Winston's will from being broken and a Messiah does not come to Offred's aid. If help does come—as it does for the children in *Lord of the Flies*—it comes from a broken and war-torn world, a different kind of hell. In King's apocalyptic stories, the endings always possess a mood of ambiguity and apprehension. *Cell* never tells us if Clayton's attempt to neutralize the effect of the "Pulse" on his catatonic son is successful. Johnny's sacrifice in *Desperation* can only keep the trans-dimensional entity, Tak, temporarily sealed. Flagg, at the end of *The Stand*, is shown to have reincarnated in a different body. Even in *The Mist,* it is never revealed if Hartford offers safety and resistance or has been overrun by the monsters. Yet, a thread of hope persists and holds all these dystopian realities together. Such, King seems to be saying, is the impossible nature of human hope. Fragile, but unending, it seeks renewal at the end of all things. At the end of his story, David says that he has made the choice to travel to Hartford, if only to find safety for Billy. His decision is a tribute to the indomitable human spirit, and the novella ends on this note of tenderness and resilience:

"I'm going to kiss my son and whisper two words in his ear. Against the dreams that may come, you know. Two words that sound a bit alike. One of them is Hartford. The other is *hope*."[50]

On the treacherous journey that awaits them, hope is the only thing that can help these characters navigate through the mist and its many horrors. This hope is not otherworldly or divine. It is painfully and wholly human. Perhaps that is why it might live to see the light of another day, even within the dystopian darkness of *The Mist.*

NOTES

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3 Ibid., 57-58.
4 Ibid., 88.
5 Ibid., 58.
6 Frederick Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future : The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London, New York: Verso, 2005), 80, https://files.libcom.org/files/fredric-jameson-archaeologies-of-the-future-the-desire-called-utopia-and-other-science-fictions.pdf.
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29 John G. Gammie, "Spatial and Ethical Dualism in Jewish Wisdom and Apocalyptic Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93, no. 3 (1974): 356-85, https://doi.org/10.2307/3263385.

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A Study of Afrofuturistic Storytelling in Selected Post-Apocalyptic Graphic Narratives

Aishwarya Bhutoria

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to dissect three graphic narratives—*LaGuardia* by Nnedi Okorafor, *Ironheart* by Eve Ewing and *Genius* by Marc Bernardin and Adam Freeman, with the objective of underscoring futuristic representation of the conventional Black womanhood. It is intriguing to view the instrumental interface between race as well as gender and the amalgamation of past, present, future to develop a Black counter-narrative. Mark Dery in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* elucidates the term Afrofuturism as a speculative fiction that dwells upon African-American themes and life in the twentieth century world. These comic books critique the Black future while emphasizing on the making and remaking of Black female bodies. The alternate reality that these works create, alleviates the marginalized from the status of marionettes to the masters of their own (Black) narratives. The extraterrestrial presence and intelligence is crucial to discuss as the alien, Letme Live, in *LaGuardia* becomes a force unsettling the oppressive superstructure. Lauren Olamina's 'hyperempathy' in the doubly dehumanized world of Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (set between 2024 and 2027) provides a contextual ground for the paper. The conventional apocalyptic scenarios are excluded as societal collapse and dystopian reality are highlighted in association with the themes of displacement, migration, resistance and identity. The counter-narratives established by these

texts have global resonance, as the normative is re-worked by re-imagining Black identity in a speculative framework.

KEYWORDS

Afrofuturism, Graphic narrative, hyperempathy, identity, post-apocalyptic

> Nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.
>
> — Gloria Anzaldúa

> Reality, after all, is merely something that resounds in minds already trained to recognize it as such.
>
> —Wahneema Lubiano

Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993) considered the "racial ideologies" (16) as the source of (mis)interpretation of Black characters in American literature. The Black characters are diminished to the status of fetish; history and critical thinking being eliminated to accommodate qualities that enhance the image of the white characters. Donald Bogle in *Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*, deals with the stereotype of stereotyping Black characters and evoking a sense of terror in the apparently sophisticated society. This paper studies the future of Black womanhood and the (im)balance of race and representation in dystopian graphic fictions. Patricia Hill Collins in "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought" talks about the unique nature of the Black women's concern as they "experience a different world than those who are not Black and female" (747).

RACE, GENDER AND RESISTANCE IN AFROFUTURISTIC STORYTELLING

Mark Dery considers Afrofuturistic texts as a parallel to the twentieth-century techno culture; defining it as "speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of twentieth century technoculture, and, more generally, African American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future." (180) The heteronormative ideology in black representational practices perpetuates the marginalization of black women. Afrofuturism goes beyond the Eurocentric perspective and presents the Black female subject as an integral component of Black future. *Genius* (2014) by Marc Bernardin and Adam Freeman, *LaGuardia* (2019) by Nnedi Okorafor, and *Ironheart* (2023) by Eve Ewing provide an intriguing view of the interface between race as well as gender and the amalgamation of past, present, future to develop a Black counter-narrative with the objective of underscoring futuristic representation of the conventional Black womanhood.

The alternate reality generated by the graphic narratives are marred by prejudices of the author. Afrofuturistic texts can be produced only by Black authors, specifically those who do not seek the white validation. Afrofuturism is a means to repossess the lost history and create a counter-narrative. Nigerian American writer, Nnedi Okorafor, developed the concept of Africanfuturism, similar to Afrofuturism, entirely situated in African history and representation breaking away from the white gaze.

Afrofuturism is the "intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation" (Yaszek 2006, 45) however, the science fictions of America present an absence of race equilibrium as they are incapable of comprehending and underscoring the future of various communities in America and the authors mirror their present prejudices on the future that is to develop into a dystopia.

It follows a non-sequential approach, thereby destabilizing the present and regenerating the future. There is an amalgamation of speculative future and racial studies in Afrofuturism. This leads to a "...reclamation of race that reflects ideologies of Blackness. There is a power in taking and claiming the 'original' framework then deploying it in new ways." (Nelson 2002, 9)

The Post-Soul culture extends the meaning of Blackness, providing transformed Black identity and multiplicity of narrative, with recognition and representation in an ever evolving political, economic, social and cultural space. The rise of Post-Soul culture changed the traditional tropes associated with Black women's representation. Afrofuturism provides a strong sense of black autonomy and disregard for predetermined gender roles. It negates the white gaze; Black females and their representation is transformed by female authors who present a post-apocalyptic picture of the African world filling in the hitherto unbridgeable gulfs in history.

The dystopic future is a reflection of the present living condition of the Blacks which is marked by class, race and gender related issues. The white perception produces distorted judgements based on racist ideologies which Judith Butler in "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia" (1993) deliberated over, she writes-

> ...racist interpretive framework to construe King [Black man] as the agent of violence, one whose agency is phantasmatically implied as the narrative precedent and antecedent to the frames that are shown. Watching King, the white paranoiac forms a sequence of narrative intelligibility that consolidates the racist figure of the black man: 'He had threatened them, and now he is being justifiably restrained.' 'If they cease hitting him, he will release his violence, and now is being justifiably restrained.' ...his palm turned away from his body, held above his own head, is read not as self-protection but as the incipient

> moments of a physical threat. (16)

The repeated and ritualistic production of blackness is a concern raised by Frantz Fanon in "The Fact of Blackness" (1967)—

> In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty. I know that if I want to smoke, I shall have to reach out my right arm and take the pack of cigarettes lying at the other end of the table. The matches, however, are in the drawer on the left, and I shall have to lean back slightly. And all of these movements are made not out of habit but out of implicit knowledge. A slow composition of my self as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world-which seems to be the schema.... Below the corporeal schema I had sketched [there is] a historico-racial schema. The elements I had used had been provided for me... by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories. I thought that what I had in hand was to... construct a physiological self, to balance space, to localize sensations, and here I was called on for more. (111)

Fanon demonstrates further that the command to 'look' is associated with both the act of seeing and pointing out what is to be seen. This is an integral component of powerful superstructure and the racist episteme—" 'Look, a Negro!' It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile. 'Look, a Negro!' It was true. It amused me." (112)

The power of visual language is underscored in the selected texts to comprehend the lived experiences of the African-Americans as well as Africans because their realities appear as dystopic. The Black

writers create texts that reflects their reality and critiques the bleak future that it reflects. Isiah Lavender in *Race in American Science Fiction* speaks about the systematic erasure of Blackness from several narratives and yet the lingering threat from the Black (in absentia) being implicitly indicated. Adilifu Nama, similarly, in her work *Black Space* (2008) has commented on "structured absence" (2) of Black female bodies in speculative post-apocalyptic fictions.

The Post-depression and Post-World War America saw a steep rise in comics, newspaper cartoons and graphic fiction which seamlessly integrated itself into the fabric of a disillusioned American society seeking hope, escape and entertainment. Comics became an instrument of propaganda, using allegory to reflect politics, illustrating the binary of good versus evil. Superheroes represented the concept of American exceptionalism which was considered worthy of emulation. These comics simultaneously provided a broad arena for the unvarnished representation of Black females' debilitation. Comics based on Black girlhood and womanhood was brought to the forefront by Jackie Ormes in her work *Torchy Brown in Dixie to Harlem* (1937), where the central protagonist was seen in voguish costumes (there were several additional costumes provided with the Torchy paper doll). She migrated to New York and became independent, she worked at a Dance Club to sustain herself, thereby dismantling and highlighting the misogynistic attitude of society. The exigencies of having Black female artists' involvement are highlighted by the absence or skewed rendition of black female bodies by White artists in the post-apocalyptic future. The innate anti-Black and anti-woman stance vitiates their existence.

The attitude of American pulp fiction writers in the 1930s considered Blackness and race associated concerns as contagious. The term 'zombie' gained prominence during the same time and its origin can be traced to West African languages; ndzumbi means corpse, in the Mitsongo language. The black bodies were equated to zombies (walking corpses) ascribable to the Haitian folklore of

Vaudou witnessed by White imperialists during America's occupation of Haiti between 1915 and 1934. Vaudou became a site of resistance and a means of identity preservation to counter the exploitative masters' coercion. The skin tone associated with civilization is white, giving it a sense of absolute superiority through an antagonistic representation of black.

SOUSVEILLANCE AND THE MARGINALIZED GAZE

In Marc Bernardin and Adam Freeman's *Genius,* the role of a female black as a leader of her community is highlighted. The graphic narrative presents a dystopian future where Black girlhood evolves into womanhood. The parochial patriarchal superstructure pushes the protagonist, Destiny a seventeen-year-old girl, to the fringes, "Towards an Interdisciplinary Field of Black Girlhood Studies", vehemently states—"black girls are largely presumed to be illegible at the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and age". (Owens 2017, 118) *Genius* employs the concept of sousveillance, a term coined by Steve Mann, which contradicts the idea of surveillance. In her instrumental work *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, Simone Browne elucidates, "'veillance' is a neutral form of watching, while surveillance is about power". (8)

Destiny does not accept the position of a victim, rather uses her marginalized status as an advantage. She counters the Los Angeles Police Department's (LAPD) surveillance on the Black community by employing guerrilla techniques thereby re-writing the connotations of Black female empowerment and resistance. The hitherto inaudible and invisible girl becomes a capable leader of her community. The Black gaze is seen as transformative and emancipating. A text as potent as *Genius* is Octavia Butler's (a Black female writer) *Parable of the Sower* which delineates the life of a teenage black girl, Lauren Olamina. She develops her own belief system called Earthseed. This philosophy is the upshot of economic disparity, climate crisis and

gender segregation created by a hyperempath or sharer, Lauren. She believes that every animate and inanimate existence on this Earth are seeds that can be planted on other planets and extend life in the post-apocalyptic world. She believes "God is change" (Butler 1993, 73) and "change is part of life" (Butler 1993, 25); transformation, therefore is the only constant force in her narrative set in 2020s wrecked American society.

Lauren Olamina's hyperempathy in the doubly dehumanized world of Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (set between 2024 and 2027) provides a contextual ground for the paper. The conventional apocalyptic scenarios are excluded as societal collapse and dystopian reality are highlighted in association with the themes of displacement, migration, resistance and identity. Hyperempathy is a situation that both Destiny and Lauren suffer from; this makes their position as female leaders precarious. Black girl's leadership is beautifully integrated into these narratives from a post-black and Afrofuturistic perspective. Destiny becomes the leader of the revolution however; it is intriguing to witness how she holds her position and wields her power within the boundaries of patriarchal hegemony as well as racist supremacy.

The South-Central Siege conducted by Destiny was an act of resistance that operated on sousveillance, which is considered as unethical and a villainous plot. She comprehends the way surveillance functions and then attacks the existing loopholes. Destiny's sousveillance becomes "a form of reflectionism, which uses technology to confront bureaucratic organizations." (Mann 2002, 333) Reflectionism is an instrumental component of appropriating the hegemonic tools to create a sense of chaos in the superstructure. Blackness, therefore, "exists as a site through which surveillance is practiced, narrated, and enacted. Surveillance is an act of anti-Blackness." (Browne 2015, 53) The amalgamation of racial stereotypes with surveillance (disciplinary actions become a necessary concomitant) generates inordinate injustices. Destiny retaliates with

force against the Los Angeles Police Department, as she had witnessed the atrocities performed by them on her neighbors. She secures the lives of her community members by getting involved (she has to put herself as a bait, and become the gang leader's girlfriend) with a menacing gang to consolidate their forces in her struggle against the bureaucratic forces. She kills the officers who tried to trespass into their space, this is her fierce response to the perpetration of systematic violence on her neighbors. The first volume of *Genius* raises a question —"What if the greatest military mind of our generation was born to a people who are already supremely conditioned to wage war, who know nothing but violence from birth and must continually adapt to new predators in order to survive?" (1)—the answer to this question lies in the creation of Destiny.

Destiny is equally subjected to surveillance however; she outplays her oppressors. Her status as an orphan and a girl makes it difficult for her to unify the oppressed community, with her assertive and acerbic attitude she is able to become the substitute leader (after killing the gang leader who was her boyfriend). This ascendancy of good over evil ensures that she initiates the sousveillance however, it is significant to realize that our understanding of Destiny and her destiny comes from the surveillance conducted by the authority. Her image is a controlled representation of her existence never underscoring her potential. When we read the text, we unravel the nuances of her personality which is otherwise varnished or tarnished as per the requirements of officers. The anonymity of Suspect Zero is created to present a gender-neutral space however, the constant use of the pronoun 'he' nullifies the efforts. Destiny is not suspected as the Los Angeles Police Department assumed that they were in the search of a male culprit, because of the stereotype of stereotyping, violence and power are naturally being associated with a man.

Bernardin and Freeman employ the gendered racialized clichés to Destiny's advantage. This is an explicit case of racialized surveillance which is influenced by gender role performance. The technology and

the cogs (Agent Grey and Los Angeles' Police force) in the wheel of the hegemonic system erase the existence of a Black girl or woman as a leader. This occurs due to their pre-conceived notion which defines "what is in or out of place." (Browne 2015, 16)

The internalization of gender norms is evident in Agent Grey's response to a woman (Destiny who is perceived as a rebel) dressed in formal suit. He cannot fathom her courage and resourcefulness in disguising as an IAD agent to retrieve some information. Her scabrous palm becomes the sole clue that Agent Grey gets to recognize her real identity. Grey, as a representative of hierarchical structures underlines the incapacious attitude of society which sets the extremities that women are supposed to conform to. The Black female body is further strangled due to race segregation and Destiny becomes a disconcerting element as she cannot be accommodated within the acceptable representation of Black womanhood.

THE TERRESTRIAL OTHER AND THE 'EXTRA'TERRESTRIAL

In Nnedi Okorafor's *LaGuardia*, the binaries of Black/White, human/non-human, Our/Other, civilized/uncivilized among others, becomes extremely crucial. There is extraterrestrial presence and intelligence used in the text as the alien, Letme Live, becomes a force unsettling the oppressive superstructure. This presence highlights the idea that, Zakiyyah Iman-Jackson elucidates upon in *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Anti-Black World* (2020), Blackness is not necessarily included in 'the human' thereby shattering the Eurocentric opinion of humanity. A sense of anchorage is established as the other (extraterrestrial being) comes in contact with the other (Black woman). Their interface lacks the presence of the supreme human, the white men, yet they navigate this hybrid existence in the dystopic speculative future with grace.

Black woman and the extraterrestrial being are dismantling the normative structure in *LaGuardia*. The space is threatened by a

probable (re)colonization by the Florals. The co-existence and confrontation of the alien species, Floral and the female protagonist, Future demonstrates the alien identity and space they adapt to. Future deals with citizenship issues in the United States of America due to her Nigerian origin and a baby (who is partially an alien).

Race in American Science Fiction attempts to explicate the relationship between the two 'others':

> While otherhood is not exactly a new term, its meaning for science fiction is innovative because it attempts to change how racial difference is viewed by exposing the history and practice of discrimination operating inside and outside the genre simultaneously while also studying ways writers have used science fiction to expose and combat racism.… Otherhood begins with thinking about race along the black/white binary. With this type of thinking, we can locate the historical consciousness embedded in science fiction in imagined events juxtaposed with real events in the space-time continuum.… These relationships express meanings of otherhood that map racial discourse in science fiction and that can represent a variety of differences in relation to science, technology, and culture. Otherhood is capable of creating a cultural fluidity, a flexibility of insight, between historical reference and imagination of the future of race. With concepts of otherhood, we can examine degrees of black marginalization in science fiction (i.e., blackground). (Lavender 2011, 8)

The alien others and racial others negotiate with the civilized white. Nnedi Okorafor's works have a nuanced understanding of the racialized gender hierarchy and the strategies of subversion that she employs is aimed at unraveling the entrenched disparity in society. Her view of history, is influenced by the Western perspective, as a process of evolution that determines the conditions of the past out

of which the present grows and future gets built. This provides the foundation for her speculative post-apocalyptic fiction.

The superstructure of patriarchy contained, consumed, commodified as well as calumniated women and they were peripheralized in the social, political and economic matters. The binary of domesticated/demonized (i.e. Eve/Lilith, lamb/hyena) is pervasive in the text. The hierarchical nature of race and gender, that has remained unquestioned is indicative of the acceptance of male domination as the status quo. Okorafor adds the question of national identity as well. "It would seem, then, that continual encounters and struggles with the 'other' are the hallmark of true Western experience." (Lavender 2011, 8)

Future is carrying a partially alien child and the space she inhabits becomes crucial for her survival; therefore, she decides to leave Nigeria and moves to USA. She believes that citizenship laws would protect her. There is a strong xenophobic attitude in the Nigerian society and Citizen (Future's husband) is consumed by it. A peculiar yet scientifically validated event occurs when Citizen is exposed to Floral species pollens through an exposed wound, when he bought a new flower, these pollens transform his DNA and when Future is impregnated by him there is an amalgamation of human and non-human DNAs creating an alien baby. Future gives birth to a hybrid child and the process of otherization becomes twofold, her position as a black woman and a mother to an extraterrestrial being. This amalgamation puts Future in a precarious position. The Floral that transformed the human DNA named itself Letme Live as all through the narrative it is trying to survive in the foreign space.

Nnedi Okorafor in the comic draws from true events that have happened at the LaGuardia Airport—"It was literally the airport. I just had multiple incidents there where I felt very alien [...] I felt rage many times in the LaGuardia airport. In a row. I travel a lot, and there was a time where I came through that airport multiple times, and a similar incident kept happening, especially with my hair, that was really frustrating." (Riesman 2019)

HYPERSEXUALIZED REPRESENTATION AND SPECULATIVE RESISTANCE

Riri Williams, the eponymous protagonist in Eve Ewing's *Ironheart* is an archetypal black girl who is shaped by Ewing's personal experiences. Marvel comics have played an influential role in framing perspective towards Black girlhood/ womanhood. The depiction of a Black girl written by a Black woman who has been through near circumstances ensures that her defiance is manifested in her protagonist's refractory disposition.

Through the character of Riri, Ewing has raised questions against the prejudice of society about the ageing of women, this is a move aimed at thrusting and stifling the women into parental roles to ensure their gradual dissociation from education and empowerment. The construction of the black female superhero image can be understood through Black iconicity. Black iconicity aims to underline the heterogeneity of Black experiences which thereby leads to the reduction of their marginalized and criminalized existence. The gaze on Black women is manipulated by Ewing and this inaugurates a sense of Black autonomy. The presence of masculine tropes, protective and possessive, in a female disrupts the system making them susceptible to violence and incarceration.

Riri appears as both vengeful and vulnerable. She is diametrically opposed to the collective expectations of being docile, virtuous and shaped according to man's will, therefore becomes an embodiment of the transgressor who is a misfit in the misogynistic society. In her actions and passions, she resembles a woman who strives to be the equal of man. She is bold and authoritative, does not accept being deprived of an identity, alienated from history and relegated to tradition. She cannot be diminished to a passive object who is always acted upon and never acting for herself.

Ewing has been considered misogynistic due to the reluctance to take radical positions on the egalitarian feminist politics of

contemporary times and some critics considered her work as a commitment to individualism and resistance to feminist collectivity. This is subverted in a way because Ewing ensures that her black female protagonist outmaneuvered those who could possibly subjugate her. There is certain misogyny in the way Riri is construed and perceived by the audience and there is an inherent contradiction of women's own participation in the oppressive structure.

Riri Williams' first appearance was in *Invincible Ironman Vol. 2* created by two white male artists-Brian Michael Bendis and Mike Deodato. She possesses extraordinary intellectual power especially as manifested in the creation of her own armor implying similitude with Tony Stark (Iron Man). The image of Riri Williams and eventually Ironheart was hyper-sexualized, this is the product of the male-dominated simulated world. The sexist representation of women, which re-enforces R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, as hypersexualized being with disproportionate anatomy and revealing costumes (bare midriff, swelling breast, extended torso) is assigned to the stereotype of stereotyping women.

The commodification of women's bodies is a result of the male gaze which borders on voyeurism; the influence of the skewed gender dynamics being disseminated from this visual representation could be comprehended from G. Gerbner's "Cultivation Analysis: An Overview" which is instrumental in the study of Cultivation Theory. The use of visual language possesses significant potential to influence the readers' or viewers' perception. George Gerbner in Cultivation Theory underscores the reflection of the virtual world on the real life. The media derived content promotes hypermasculinity and parochial perspectives as justifiable relegating women to the margins invisible and inaudible; visibility of certain women conveniently coerces them into the space of exploitation and commercialization.

The *Ironheart* comics are designed with a narrative and the visual language becomes the means of expressing the narrative,

however, it is intriguing to witness that a significant portion of this narrative caters to the chauvinistic hyper-masculine male audience by exhibiting muscular men armed with ammunitions while women are at several places amortized as mere catalysts, aides (precisely a sidekick) or damsels in distress. This foregrounds how the graphic narrative conditions the youth to internalize conventional gendered ideology and their straitened view of gender role, performance and behavior. It is imperative to examine these contents to ensure that the perspective of the black female central protagonist is brought into consideration. There has been a steady acceleration in inclusive and representative portrayals of black female characters. There are several realistic representations that interrogates and resists her sexualized status.

CONCLUSION

The Post-apocalyptic speculative science fictions are an apparatus that stimulate the subversion of normative structures. African-American themes and life in the twentieth century world in these comic books critique the Black future while emphasizing on the making and remaking of Black female bodies. The counter-narratives established by these texts have global resonance, as the normative is re-worked by re-imagining Black identity in a speculative framework.

The Post-Soul Aesthetic, is seamlessly integrated with Afrofuturism, as it embraces the diversity (thereby the authenticity) of Black identity. The futuristic representation of the conventional Black womanhood in visual language is intriguing due to the intricate interface between race as well as gender and the amalgamation of past, present, future to develop a Black counter-narrative. The alternate reality that these works create, alleviates the marginalized from the status of marionettes to the masters of their own (Black) narratives.

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Cross-Cultural Representation of Dystopia

Prem Alean Bag

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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Death, Dystopia and Darkness:

Reading Abjection in Ganesh Pyne's paintings

Srijani Dutta

ABSTRACT

The modernist artists usually experiment with different styles and forms in order to project the uncertainty, crisis, existential crisis, and fragmentation of bodies and the spiritual death of their contemporary era. Ganesh Pyne, one of the famous Modern Indian Painters heavily borrowed the ethos and tone from the works of the European Modernist masters' while depicting them in his distinct style. His style is often marked by absurdism and several figures in his paintings are grotesque, distorted and dark. The distorted figures seem to be rooted in a dystopic reality. This essay tries to read the politics of representation of death, dystopia and abjection in Ganesh Pyne's paintings.

KEYWORDS

Dystopia, death, grotesque, absurdism, abjection

The richness of Indian art compels us to read and revisit paintings in conjunction with the socio-political and artistic milieu they are products of. A deviation from the Ravi Verma School of painting where European realism was integrated with Indian iconography, the experimental art of Gaganendranath Tagore (cubist paintings,

social caricature, use of Japanese techniques) and many others from the Bengal School of Art. An inheritor of the reactionary and anti-colonial Bengal School, Ganesh Pyne also drew on Rembrandt's use of chiaroscuro and Paul Klee's simplicity. This essay attempts to locate the absurdist traits in Ganesh Pyne's paintings in response to his changing social and political scenario. This essay aims to establish how he contributes to a new aesthetic of creation in Modern Indian Art. This essay also attempts to read Ganesh Pyne's depiction of absurdism and abjection in his paintings. In doing so, the essay will read his paintings in conjunction with the literary works of the representatives of the Absurdist movement like Beckett and Pinter.

A far cry from the excesses of Romanticism, Ganesh Pyne's paintings invoke absurdism, violence and dystopia. Violence and abjection exist as two sides of the same coin. Abjection can be termed as the outcome or the result of violence. According to Julia Kristeva, abjection is a feeling that is caused by blood, dead body, pus, wastages etc. It is a sensation where there is no proper law, meaning and reason. The demarcation between subject and object creates the environment of abjection. When someone sees a dead body, the sight can awaken a deep feeling of terror, nausea and abjection in the spectator's mind. Similarly, Ganesh Pyne's paintings potently evoke abjection in the mind of the readers. The darkness in his paintings sets an intensely dystopic landscape foretelling apocalypse. The stench of death looms large over his paintings creating a subtext of fear and annihilation. In the dystopian settings of his paintings, human figures co-exist with animals and birds. His paintings attract the readers with their hypnotic charm and surreal tendencies. The characters are painted as solitary figures, like the creator himself. One can find a subtle romanticism integrated with dark, poetic melancholia in his paintings highlighting certain nuances of the narratives and myths chosen.

In Modernist paintings, the body is often a metaphorical site

reflecting the psychological sufferings of the human mind. In addition to being influenced by European masters like Rembrandt and Paul Klee, Ganesh Pyne's artistic consciousness was formed by World War II, the Bengal Famine of 1943, the Indian Independence Movement and the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. The grotesqueness of his figures is not of the body but of the circumstances—the body mirrors the turbulence and the grimness of the reality in which the human figures are forced to survive. He creates a new aesthetic of the grotesque that exists alongside his characteristic romantic melancholia, surrealism, poetic mysticism and fantasy. The poignant symbol of death inflects his world—existential, nihilistic and absurd in nature. The absurd, dislocated characters search for meaning in the purposeless world resulting in dystopia. Ganesh Pyne's paintings such as 'The Prince', 'Moon and the Horns', 'The Pond', 'Fisherman', 'Raktakarabi' produce a sense of terror in the minds of the spectators.

Absurdism is a socio-cultural-psychological movement that deals with the existential crisis and philosophy of being. It shows the misery, suffering and the absurd, bizarre condition of human existence. It attempts to question the root cause of human suffering in a purposeless world. Everything is marked by the sense of nothingness. In absurdist plays, notions of fragmented selfhood and failure of communication pervade. In Pyne's 1979 painting, 'The Cobbler', the mechanization of human life and a deep sense of monotony are foregrounded. Poverty becomes an undercurrent in this ultimate picture of a drudgery ridden, monotonous life. Even in the "Bird" series, the vulnerability of the birds is amplified and they are placed at the mercy of an unfeeling or even cruel external force. Pyne's paintings remind us of Beckett's Waiting for Godot, where time seems to be suspended and nothingness permeates the text. Pyne's paintings premise themselves on silence, daily grind and meaninglessness.

While the resonances of European art is discernible in Pyne's art,

his use of Indian mythology, folklore and history is also prominent. He used his canvases to represent cultures and practices from the subcontinent. However, in these too, the sense of gloom and desolation are unmissable. In the painting 'Death,' the face of a creature, spectral and pale, conjures a sense of something terrible. In this painting, the creature destabilizes the binary between self and other and the image becomes a mirror where we see our reflection. The sense of uncanny is overwhelming because there are other shadowy distorted figures around the central figure of Death. If dystopia refers to an imagined space/ society that is chaotic, barbaric, lawless and fearful, Pyne's paintings do not point to a disorderly future but recognises the dystopic in his own time period. Having witnessed cataclysmic episodes like the Bengal Famine and Partition, his consciousness locates acute suffering and despondency in and around him. The 'Bird' series portray the bird as an uprooted and displaced being with a destroyed nest. The background is grey and black. In the painting 'Hanuman', the burning red eyes and the emaciated face is in contradistinction to the conventional representations of this Hindu god. Fear and terror become the attributes of Hanuman as he is transported from a mythical time to the dystopic present. The painting "Apu" illustrates the disconnect between man and nature. The innocence of the child is in contrast to the bare branches of the tree. The falling leaves communicate a gradual sense of loss as the child's piercing eyes look at us. In the painting 'Rider on the Threshold', the lifeless, puppet-like figure sits on a toy horse. Though the rider holds an arrow, one can hardly perceive the warrior figure as anything more than a dummy. The warrior's power is an empty one implying the modern man's lack of agency and power over society and life. A similar helplessness colours paintings like 'Lamp and The Effigy', 'Ape and the Flower' and 'Skeleton'. The painting 'Skeleton' depicts the anxiety and misery of human existence and death becomes the overwhelming reality in all these paintings.

Concurrently, paintings like 'Rama', 'Hanuman', 'Duhsala', 'The Sage', 'Panchali', 'Lakshmi Emerging' draw on characters from Indian mythology but they have lost the glory and reverence of their former selves. The play of familiar and unfamiliar is also contingent on Pyne's use of colours—dark and dismal. His paintings thematically remain 'Indian' but stylistically borrow heavily from 'European modernist'. In offering a new aesthetic of abjection, Pyne not only "raises the ghosts of the past" as declared by the actor, Barun Chanda, in the documentary on the artist but also forebodes apocalypse.

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"You can only be the Revolution": The Utopian Embodiment of the Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas

Sangya Pal

ABSTRACT

One of Le Guin's "more complex" works, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" occupies a curious position in the way in which it is typically poised between simple utilitarian critique and literary utopianism. However, positioning Le Guin in such a restrictive climate is counteractive to her revolutionary notions of being and transforming. I wish to present that by making the text an analogue of its context, Le Guin's approach resists political and literary codification. The space is fraught with social contestation, and unsettles hegemonic acceptance of institutional cooperation. Le Guin intensifies an element of social concern, and her generic reliance presents in a way of observation and probability without overt attack. The authorial intent of submerged subversiveness sublimes the body as a site of utopian performance, of discontent, of possibility of transformation. Through the depiction of a coagulated body society followed by identifying seceding individuals, Le Guin poses a challenge to societal codification and attempts at generic classification.

KEYWORDS

Ursula K. Le Guin; Utopia; Science Fiction; Biopolitics; Utilitarianism

"Nur das Denken, das wir leben, hat einen Wert."
(Hermann Hesse, 1921)

Mary Stuart was five going on six when she was spirited away to France. At eighteen going on nineteen, she returned to her russet of people, retaining the Gallic grace and gaud. Having moved from castle to castle like a pawn, Mary, Queen of Scots, was forty-four, going on the scaffold at Fotheringhay Castle in (reportedly) scarlet, satin *red* shaded by velvet black. Of all the contests, a linguist may say the accounts vary through attribution rather than reference: satin is a lighter fabric than velvet, and a difference is provoked in the feeling of the colour rather than the colour itself. This qualitative difference is, as Kastan writes, "as much conceptual as it is chromatic."[1] It hovers in between, as between the sea and the Eighteen Peaks half encircling her bay wavers Omelas like a Fata Morgana.

As the swallows soar through the sky, Omelas's gentle fog washes over us with all her mauve, blue, green, grey, silver, and gold. Alongside, we are also introduced to another colour peculiar to Omelas: that of skin. Unlike the aforementioned pigments, it is difficult to synthetically tube flesh. Thus, it aptly serves its purpose to colour the guiltless, cautious joy wrought by the inhabitants of Omelas.

Mary Stuart was an infant of six days when she became the Queen of Scots. With too many knives pointed at her back, her body had to be garbed and guarded immediately. Omelians[2] have to face no such quandary—they are free to run about nude as they've done "without monarchy and slavery, [...] the stock exchange, the advertisement, the secret police, and the bomb."[3]

Their "freedom" is reflected in their corporeal form (nude for

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The quotation in the title is from Le Guin's novel *The Dispossessed*. The full quote reads: "You cannot buy the Revolution. You cannot make the Revolution. You can only be the Revolution. It is in your spirit, or it is nowhere."

Hesse's quotation, as translated by Damion Searls, reads, "Only a thought we've lived has any value."

some) and actions (braiding hair, flute playing, etc.). Thus, their body is representative of their utopia.

To formulate further, one shall recall two critics, Ruth Levitas, who writes that utopia is an expression of a "desire for a different, better way of being"[4] and Lyman Tower Sargent, who theorises that humans, while idealising, dream of a "radically different society than the one in which [the] dreamers live".[5] This essay seeks to emphasise and conflate two aspects: the "radically different" and the "way of being," thereby a "radically different way of being." In particular, Le Guin astutely manipulates personal and civic issues to problematise the body in her work. The utopian potential and challenge emerge in and through bodies and act as a stimulus for active social transformation. In "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (hereafter, "Omelas"), this essay studies the layered application of this "radically different way of being": it is the general populace of Omelas on one level; the child's radically altered expression in the cellar serves as another.

Finally, the most stark "radically different way of being" is embodied by the individuals eponymous with the title of the short story: *the ones who walk away from Omelas*.

OF AUTHORITY

A seminal work in the field of literary utopianism, "Omelas" was first published in 1973. In 1975, it was included in Le Guin's short story collection *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*. The sixties and seventies are particularly interesting in Le Guin's oeuvre due to a marked shift in societal attitudes and in Le Guin herself. This was a period marked by civil shifts, active counterculture, and the emergence of the marginalised in mainstream society. While in retrospect the political success of this period may be debated, Le Guin's writings now acquire a new flavour. Her early works, which at various junctures she terms "romantic"[6] and "almost womanless",[7] start to

transition into "something harder, stronger, and more complex".[8] In conversation with Héléne Escudié in 2002, Le Guin notes how this time period was one where she was "reeducated," where she "had to learn how to write as a woman, and [...] had to fight a lot of [her] own training and prejudices." It is at the near end of the sixties that the questions of gender, marginalisation, "otherness," appear in her works such as *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), *The Tombs of Atuan* (1970/1), *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971), *The Word for World is Forest* (1972), "The Day Before the Revolution" (1974), *The Dispossessed* (1974), and the one in our interest, "Omelas." Following Le Guin's "more complex" narrative, "Omelas" juxtaposes a cautiously gratified multitude with one desolate creature, the child in the cellar room. There is a contract in place in Omelas: the polis's "happiness" is dependent on the misery of this lone child confined in a cellar room of one of the resplendent buildings.[9]

A thought-provoking short story, "Omelas" is curious not only from the circumstances presented to us but also from *how* it is presented. The nameless narrator, all in dignified privacy, gives us an evaporating view of Omelas, moving from the resplendent Green Fields to the russet cellar room. It is, by no means of assertion, an omniscient narrator capable of giving us a "bird's eye view" of Omelas: they[10] present primarily one aspect, the "contract." The narrator may also be said to be located in the society they are speaking of.[11] They present themselves as a part of society but simultaneously withdraw themselves by not explicitly subscribing to the Omelian system of happiness. By maintaining this approximate distance and not cooperating with the Omelian system, they undermine its political authority to a certain degree. The narrator's contestable non-identification with the Omelians, therefore, makes them a figure as wavering as the polis of Omelas.

Herein arises a tension between the narrator and the author, who are not congruent. The work's "duplicity" is of intrigue for there is a distinction between the authorial intention and that of the narrator,

underscored by Le Guin's label of "psychomyth."[12] In the foreword to *Wind's Twelve Quarters*, she defines "psychomyth" as "more or less surrealistic tales, which [...] [take] place outside any history, outside of time, in that region of the living mind which—without invoking any consideration of immortality—seems to be without spatial or temporal limits at all." This "outside" spatiotemporal limits serves the narrator, who, as this literary construct existing in the "living mind," exceeds the readers' bounds of time and space. This tension is furthered when it's written, "They were not less complex than us." Here is a reference point for the reader to identify with, the "us." Throughout the tale, the authorial voice seeps through the narrator's voice.

The author, in this "hovering" position, is able to create a safe distance: she parses facets of her milieu to topical elements of concern and writes in a manner that eludes overt criticism.[13] The Omelian "psychomyth" primarily erupts as an abstraction of the social "utility monster" (one may gauge from Le Guin's engagement with William James and *The Brothers Karamazov*). Certain works of SF which focus on a consequence of an action or attempt to prove (a practical application of theory) may be better categorised as "thought-experiment[s]." Le Guin's own "psychomyth," unlike a "thought-experiment," is not an attempt at proof. While both involve the exploration of the implications of a hypothesis without "spatial or temporal limits" but with delimitations of concern, the "psychomyth" functions imaginatively. The lack of geo-spatial specificity lends it abstraction, but it distils into itself and highlights topical social concerns.[14] The "psychomyth," in this context, may be read as a response to "a specifical and independent sort of emotion" which would "make us immediately feel [...] how hideous a thing would be its enjoyment when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain."[15] Through such means of equivocation, critical examination is presented in a palatable form, "[f]or the best of these modern writers [...] have the knack of imparting knowledge, and

even inspiration, without once making us aware that we are being taught."[16] Therefore, the "duplicitous" commentary enables one to elude literary and political authority.

OF CONTEXT

Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets, where the muttering retreats upon seeing the child. The Omelian system relies on this social "contract" with "strict and absolute" terms: "there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child." The ground for the very foundation of Omelas is lucid: the contract, whereby the security of happiness is dependent on the perpetual misery of a lone child; as William James would term it, a "bargain." One shall resist casuistry and refrain from indulging in the debate of consequentialism or deontology pertaining to the "moral" facet of the contract. Despite the referential points, Omelas does not subscribe to the notions of morality familiar: it is estranged from *our* space.[17] The fissures created in the text allow us to contemplate the mould of this contract; nonetheless, Omelas is "no place" known to us and cannot be emphatically circumscribed into the moral framework of the reader/s. Hence is the contract: "they all understand that their happiness, [...] depend[s] wholly on this child's abominable misery."

As long as the child remains disparaged in the cellar, the happiness of Omelas shall be sustained. Generally true of all social contracts (and hence also a space of feminist, race-conscious critiques) is that beyond the contracting parties, there are externalities, that is, those who aren't included in the contract but affected by it. Therefore, from the perspective of the contracting parties, the child is an externality in the bargain. "It"[18] is a third complacent party, one without any direct influence on "its" own conditions or induction into the contract.[19]

Furthermore, there seems to be no sovereign, no "arbitrator" in the natural sense of the word, to enforce the contract.[20] It seems to echo

the Rousseau-ian understanding of the social contract, where "the real foundation of society" is individual persons forming a collective will, a new "body." Individuals cooperate with this general will; it is something commonly and collectively conceded. When studying the Omelian body society, one can identify individuals, such as the flute-player, the youths in the race, the children, the elderly, the ones who walk away, but upon closer inspection it reveals a self-created social life: despite being perpetuated by individuals, the body society is a collated site of performance.

In this regard, as an externality, the child in the cellar is dehumanised to the point of non-identity. In Le Guin's words, "The most defenseless kind of human being is a child, [...] and so they are the abomination of cruelty." Children's individuality is curtailed, particularly because they do not have access to autonomy as adults perpetuate. Richard Courtney, in his *A Dramatic Theory of Imagination,* states that young children's imagination is directly expressed in action. This merits the recognition that a child gains autonomy through the faculties of memory and the power to imagine. Utopian societies often reveal to employ biopolitical control to suppress individual imagination: the individual poses a threat to this cooperative utopian society. In Omelas, the child is deprived of "its" use of imagination or reason: "[t]he child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, 'eh-haa, eh-haa,' and it speaks less and less often." Here, we have a site of live performance,[21] which constitutes the utopia of the textual present. In an interview in 1993 with Osborne and Segal, Judith Butler distinguishes between performance and performativity, primarily "think[ing] about performativity as that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names [...] and suggest[s] that this production actually always happens through a certain kind of repetition and recitation. [...] [P]erformativity is the vehicle through which ontological effects are established." Performance, Butler says, "presumes a subject" while performativity "contests the

very notion of the subject." To account this essay's line of argument and partially contest Butler, "Omelas" hosts the element of spectacle *and* questions the stability of the body society: the "performance" of the body society also individualises and is performative for it reveals the contingent nature of purportedly inescapable institutions and therefore its hegemonic "acceptance."

The inertia of cooperation is destabilised through the bodily and metaphorical act of walking away. Therefore, "performance" and "performativity" intersect in Omelas.

These self-performing spectators, as Dubord may have termed it, be it the children, the youths in the procession games displaying the horses, the "divine souffles" of priestesses, or the child peered at in the cellar,[22] are presented nude. The body is representative of the utopia: it is a complicated, problematic, debated site, but a "principal actor"[23] nevertheless. And this is where the quagmire of "Omelas" and the ingenuity of Le Guin lie—the ambiguity of "utopia"[24]—the play of perspectives. The nudity is the bargain manifest. The "utopic" manifestation through the nudity of the children, the youths, the priestesses, is inverted in the "dystopic" nudity of the child in the cellar.[25] The body, as argued by Foucault, is the "zero point" where all utopias start. In a contorted way, the child's emaciated body "starts," or acts as the foundation of the utopian happiness embodied by the body society. There is but one similarity among all the aforementioned: they are part of a spectacle.

Those a part of a spectacle can never really be "free"—they're under scrutiny of some sort or another—"[t]hey know that they, like the child, are not free." Omelas is not isolated: in the text, we are told of outsiders who travel here; in the metatextual sense, we are privy to their actions. Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.[26] Similarly, the child's emaciated, abysmal state of being is radically different from "its" milieu of Omelas; in the metatextual connotation, the Omelians' contractual lifestyle is different from the quotidian familiar to the

readers. While early modern utopian conceptions often relied on such body politics as a means of biopolitical governance and desire for a radically different way of being, the Omelian body society is devoid of any superordinate: they themselves partake and perform, and thereby, they *are* the utopia, a bodily state[27] of this radically different way of being.[28] By way, the child in the cellar exists but as context.[29] In the room, the Omelians come and go, talking of the child alone.

OF RADICALITY

The yellow-lit windows rub their backs upon the darkness of the night and the traveller walking by. These people walk down the street alone, their bodies limpid with the intention to walk away from Omelas. In a uniform society of static cooperation, mobility becomes one of the greatest sources of resistance; the refusal to cooperate is refutation. These people emerge as isolated figures rather than a collective, which may be read as their alignment with the lone child over the body society. These individuals defy the expectations and limitations of society. These are the "social dreamers" of Sargent, who, in their quest for a radically different society, reject the projected normative "helplessness" of non-action. The body, though a space rooted in context, is from where innumerable possibilities continue to emerge and are realised.

There is no tangible sovereign to resist in Omelas as aforementioned. Just as the social contract is perpetuated through the body society, social resistance is marked by individuals leaving. Mobility defies Omelas and "Omelas." The ones who walk away directly resist the political authority of Omelas by removing themselves. There is no certainty of where they are heading; it is truly a gateway of possibilities, the point "where paths and spaces come to meet," and hence the body is nowhere.[30] It is at this point that the utopian potential is realised:

the departing fluidity which contests the contractual rigidity. Here we find a breaking of that circle of biopolitical source of governance, the creation of new utopias by breaking away from an old one.[31] If the body society is an ensemble of individuals, then the individual is an embodiment of the "zero point" of possibilities and transformation. Individuals make society; individuals make change. One cannot "buy" or "make" a revolution; they can only be the revolution.[32] The people walking away is a literal manifestation of resisting political authority, the embodiment which asserts there can be different ways of being from what is repeatedly recited into ratification.

With the breaking of hegemonic acceptance comes the disruption of both "performance" and "performativity." Through this social performance and breaking away, Le Guin interrogates the delimitations of collective acceptance and possibilities of existing otherwise. Her subversive power lies in interrogating not only the bodies, but also the discourse and context behind the creation of these bodies. This space is resistant to stability, morphing with imagination, accommodating an immaterial parsing of a topical concern. Thus, the intersection seems "bodiless," or a zero point, which dismantles the idea of a stable, accepted identity.

In the introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin makes the epigram, "Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive." By making the text an analogue of its context, Le Guin estranges and presents an augmentation of a society petrified by extreme utilitarianism. It presents itself as an ambiguous quagmire of ethics and is not "abstractly philosophical."[33] To classify such complexity under any definition is insubstantial. What at first appears a cognitively estranged, oppositional space to utilitarianism emerges as a contesting environment that reclaims and transforms the utilitarian world which inhibits and enervates one. It is a device created to "destabilize the reader,"[34] the authorial intent of submerged subversiveness compelling readers to confront, challenge, and change. Thus, the body is a powerful site of utopian performance *and* transformation.

The germ of the future is contained within the seed of the present, and "Omelas" plants the possibility of change with the language that creates it.

And indeed, there will be time for the yellow-lit windows to light up more pathways. Through her critical and agile engagement with the genre, Le Guin refracts utopia to suit her contemporary age and embodies the utopian potential of a radically different way of being. In the literary oeuvre, too, SF is a radically different way of being, balancing potential with inquisitive challenge. The generic divisions appear to coalesce or dissolve altogether: this is a zero point where all possibilities are born and resist literary authority. SF doesn't subscribe to the generic bounds: it hovers somewhere in between, as between the sea and the Eighteen Peaks half encircling her bay wavers Omelas like a Fata Morgana.

NOTES

1 Kastan, David Scott, & Stephen Farthing, *On Colour* (London: Yale University Press, 2018)
2 There is no standardised demonym/adjective for Omelas; I shall be using "Omelian" rather than "Omelasian."
3 "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" first appeared in *New Dimensions 3*, 1973. It was included in Le Guin's short story collection, *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*, published in October 1975 by Bantam Books, USA. All quotes from "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," Le Guin's other short stories, foreword, and prefatory notes have been made following the March 1979 (fourth) reprinting of the volume.
4 Levitas, Ruth, *The Concept of Utopia* (Germany: Peter Lang, 2010)
5 Sargent, Lyman Tower, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1 (1994)
6 Le Guin, "Foreword," *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*.
7 In conversation with Héléne Escudié in 2002, Le Guin refers to her Earthsea books, the early fantasies, as being written in "a literary tradition, which was almost womanless."
8 Le Guin's prefatory note to "Semley's Necklace" in *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*.

9 "In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window. [...] The floor is dirt, a little damp to the touch, as cellar dirt usually is. The room is about three paces long and two wide: a mere broom closet or disused tool room. In the room a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect. [...] The door is always locked; and nobody ever comes, except that sometimes—the child has no understanding of time or interval—sometimes the door rattles terribly and opens, and a person, or several people, are there. One of them may come and kick the child to make it stand up. The others never come close, but peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes. The food bowl and the water jug are hastily filled, the door is locked, the eyes disappear. The people at the door never say anything, but the child, who has not always lived in the tool room, and can remember sunlight and its mother's voice, sometimes speaks. 'I will be good,' it says. 'Please let me out. I will be good!' They never answer. The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, 'eh-haa, eh-haa,' and it speaks less and less often. It is so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually.

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. [...] *They all know that it has to be there.* Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness [...] depend[s] wholly on this child's abominable misery." (Le Guin, "Omelas." Italicisation added.)

10 For the unidentified, ungendered narrator, I shall be using the pronoun "they" in reference.

11 "But *we* do not say the words of cheer much anymore." (Le Guin, "Omelas." Italicisation added.)

12 While "thought-experiment" and "psychomyth" are often critiqued synonymously, I would not be inclined to concur with the conflation of these two terms.

13 Le Guin's utopian conceptions, also to extend to her other "more complex" works of SF, are quite topical through their association with social themes. It is not an exhaustive parsing of all socio-political contemporaneous issues, but rather attempts at garnering critical engagement with the specific topics. "Omelas," as this essay explores, is an augmentation of utilitarianism. Another example is her *The Dispossessed,* which also topically concerns an exploration of capitalism and the degeneration of foundational ideals through Urras and Anarres. Her works merit recognition of utopia as a sociological method, a subject expounded by Levitas in her *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (2013),

that utopian imagination critiques the upheld status quo and guides one to transformation.

14 Le Guin's notion of "psychomyth" may be viewed through Levitas's assertion: "Utopia [...] operates at the more concrete level of the social institutions encapsulating those principles, or from which they emerge. Secondly, it considers those institutions as a system—a social system, embedded in an ecological system. The Utopian approach allows us not only to imagine what an alternative society could look like, but enables us to imagine what it might feel like to inhabit it[.]" Levitas, Ruth, "Where there is no vision, the people perish: A utopian ethic for a transformed future," CUSP *Essay Series on the Morality of Sustainable Prosperity*, 5 (Guildford: Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity, 2017)

15 In the prefatory note to "Omelas" where Le Guin quotes William James.

16 Hugo Gernsback, "A New Sort of Magazine," *Amazing Stories,* Volume 1, no. 1 (New York: Experimenter Publishing Co., 1926)

17 As Le Guin writes in her prefatory note to Omelas with reference to William James: "*[L]ook how he says 'us,' assuming all his readers are as decent as himself!*" (Italicisation added.) Morals, despite one's utmost wishes, will never be uniform, and ideologies may or may not be synonymous for two adjacent readers. Therefore, we as readers must refrain from indulging in a moralistic critique, noting that Omelas may not subscribe to our nature of morals.

18 Throughout the text, the destitute child in the cellar is referred to with "it." The child is viewed as a non-entity, stripped of "its" identity and autonomy. The child, therefore, becomes a "zero point" where the possibility of the utopia is born, as well as a zero point where "it" is no longer human. The choice of pronoun to refer to the child reflects this dehumanisation. I shall be using the pronoun "it" to refer to the child.

19 It is often purported that the contract of Omelas is "invalid" on legal grounds of age and on the Hobbesian notion that the child is returned to the state of nature. However, as established earlier, Omelas cannot be circumscribed within the readers' judicial system. Furthermore, rather than being reinstated to nature, the child is institutionally deprived of its faculties and is an externality. Hence, the claim of invalidity isn't sustained.

20 It has been well established in the text that Omelas doesn't have a monarchy, nor any other form of authoritative enforcement, like sovereigns, kings, priests, etc.

21 As Petersen would term it.

22 The aforementioned examples feature in the text of "Omelas." In the antinomical Omelas, the nudity of the body society is because of their autonomy and agency, whereas the nudity of the child in the cellar is because of the lack thereof: "it" doesn't have autonomy to access any clothes, and is, very literally, also stripped

of "its" identity and viewed as a non-entity.

23 Foucault, Michel, "Les corps utopique," translated by Lucia Allais, appearing in *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*, edited by Caroline A. Jones (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006)

24 Le Guin's *The Dispossessed carries* the intriguing subtitle "ambiguous utopia."

25 Disregarding their etymological meanings, "utopia" and "dystopia" have become antipodal today. One may use these two terms to lucidly illustrate the play on perspectives present in Le Guin's works. In the case of "Omelas," the paucity of happiness of the cellar room heightens the happiness in the polis of Omelas—the absence of misery in Omelas makes it seem utopic to the readers who inhabit earthly spaces abundant with misery. Yet, as previously established and to be further discussed, the construct of the Omelian "utopia" serves those deeply rooted in modern utilitarianism; the "dystopian" perspective of Omelas is presented by those who do not subscribe to utilitarian governance. To those supportive of utilitarianism, Omelas is a possibility of a "desired future," whilst for others it serves as a word of caution. cf. Levitas, "Where there is no vision": "Dystopias share with utopias the method of depicting an alternative society, but constitute a warning of what may happen if we go on as we are, rather than a projection of a desired future."

26 Le Guin in conversation with Héléne Escudié, 2002.

27 Petersen, Franziska Bork, "The Body as Non-Place: Utopian Potential in Philippe Decouflé's Dance Film *Codex*," *Spaces of Utopia:* 2, no. 2 (2022)

28 One may recall here Foucault: "My body [...] has no place, but it is from it that all possible places, real or utopian, emerge and radiate." ("Les corps utopique")

29 "But as time goes on they begin to realize that even if the child could be released, it would not get much good of its freedom [...] It is too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy. [...] Their tears at the bitter injustice dry when *they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it*. Yet it is their tears and anger, the trying of their generosity and *the acceptance of their helplessness*, which are perhaps the true source of the splendor of their lives." (Le Guin, "Omelas." Italicisation added.)

30 Foucault, "Les corps utopique."

31 In her prefatory note to "The Day Before The Revolution," Le Guin writes, "Anarchism's principal target is the authoritarian State; [...] its principal moral-practical theme is cooperation (solidarity, mutual aid)." Odonianism emerged as a counter-movement, a "revolution." It is a separate matter of negotiation that upon reading *The Dispossessed* we realise there has been a systemic degeneration of ideals. Anarres and Urras have their own utopic spaces in the literary body. The range of Le Guin's utopic conception stretches the sky, but we may recall that before the ideals degenerated, the revolution founded by Odo was a "story [...] about one of the ones who walked away from Omelas." I have used the word "cooperation" throughout my essay in reference to the social contract: a

reason the social contract is maintained is due to the cooperation, the "solidarity" extended by the contracting parties. Hence, with the breaking of this solidarity comes the solitude of the ones walking away.

32 Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*.

33 Levitas, "Where there is no vision."

34 Le Guin in conversation with Héléne Escudié, 2002.

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The Burden of Being Other: Caste and Communalism in Neeraj Ghaywan's *Homebound*

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Neeraj Ghaywan's sophomore film, *Homebound* (2025), is a mirror held up to the face of contemporary India. Moving beyond the critical acclaim of his debut film, *Masaan* (2015), Ghaywan, a filmmaker invested in the politics of identity and dignity, delivers a scrutiny of discrimination by juxtaposing the lives of two marginalized individuals: a Dalit man, Chandan Kumar Valmiki, and a Muslim man, Mohammed Shoaib Ali. By placing their lifelong friendship—and its eventual fracturing under socio-political pressure—at the heart of the film, the director articulates the truth of the Indian social fabric: that while the mechanisms of oppression may vary—caste-based for the Dalit and communal-based for the Muslim—the lived experience of structural violence and denied dignity is a tragic commonality. The film asserts that in India's stratified society, the Dalit and the Muslim are equally discriminated against by the pervasive power of the Hindu caste system and its communal outgrowth.

The story of the film, inspired in part by journalist Basharat Peer's article (2020) on the migrant crisis during the COVID-19 lockdown, is structured around the aspiration of Chandan and Shoaib to become police constables. Their dream is not merely a career goal; it is a desperate quest for dignity and power—the two most fundamental commodities denied to them by birth. As a Dalit, Chandan seeks to escape the intergenerational shame and structural poverty of his caste, while Shoaib, a Muslim, aims for the social shield and legitimacy that a government job offers against escalating communal prejudice. Their goal of joining the police—-

an institution seen as an enforcer of the very exclusionary status quo—is an indictment of a society where even the lowest rung of state power is seen as the only viable path to self-respect.

Ghaywan demonstrates how the forces of caste and religion intersect to create a double bind of exclusion. Chandan, for instance, internalizes the shame of his Dalit identity to such an extent that he attempts to pass as a Kayastha and deliberately avoids ticking the SC (Scheduled Caste) box on his application form, seeing the reservation provision not as a right but as a visible mark of inferiority that invites further prejudice. This fear is brutally validated in a scene where an upper-caste government officer cruelly taunts him with casteist slurs, equating his ambition to a pig trying to wear a lion's skin. This moment in the film is a representation of how the invisible social code of caste remains more potent than any constitutional provision. The film captures how the language of prejudice, the subtle micro-aggressions of touch, purity, and social seating, function to maintain the caste hierarchy. Chandan's mother being prohibited from cooking the mid-day meal due to her caste is not just a personal humiliation; it is a systemic barrier that blocks even the most fundamental forms of social participation.

Simultaneously, Shoaib's experience exposes the communal arm of the same Hindu-caste-hegemonized system. As a Muslim, his religion becomes the primary marker for his otherness, subjecting him to a different yet equally debilitating form of discrimination. The film highlights how casual bigotry is normalized, such as when references to his faith surface during an India-Pakistan cricket match, immediately shifting his identity from friend or Indian to Muslim outsider. In a new work space, his identity as "Mohammed" is what an Islamophobic manager primarily focuses on, showcasing how institutionalized prejudice operates with a calculated, almost bureaucratic cruelty. For Shoaib, the struggle is not to overcome the shame of his birth as a Dalit but to counter the escalating suspicion

and distrust placed upon his community in a majoritarian state.

The film does not present two separate struggles; it shows their essential unity under the banner of Brahmanical patriarchy and its structural offspring. Both the Dalit and the Muslim characters are denied access to the "home" of national belonging. Chandan is denied the purity of social space, his existence polluting the caste-defined structure, while Shoaib is denied the political space, his loyalty constantly questioned by the communal gaze. Their statuses as migrant workers during the lockdown sequence—the film's dramatic peak—becomes the ultimate equalizer. Stripped of their regional, educational, and social markers, they are reduced to a common, dehumanized category: the expendable poor, walking hundreds of kilometres with nothing but their fragile friendship. In this state of acute vulnerability, the film suggests, the state's indifference is a universal experience for the marginalized, regardless of whether their identifier is caste or religion.

The COVID-19 lockdown in *Homebound* functions as a dystopic lens that magnifies and renders visible the structural violence always already present in Indian society. The pandemic, in this reading, does not create new forms of exclusion but rather accelerates and exposes existing ones with brutal clarity. The image of Chandan and Shoaib walking along a deserted highway—bodies exhausted, identities stripped to their bare, vulnerable core—becomes a metaphor for what can be identified as the dystopic everyday of the pandemic: a state of exception where the marginalized are rendered expendable, their suffering normalized as collateral damage. The lockdown, presented by the state as a universal public health measure, reveals itself in the film as a profoundly uneven experience, one where the fault lines of caste and religion determine who can safely "stay home" and who must risk everything on the road. Ghaywan's representation of this dystopic reality frames the pandemic as a moment when the latent authoritarianism of social hierarchies becomes manifest,

when the abstract categories of "citizen" and "migrant" are suddenly filled with the concrete weight of caste and communal identity. The highway, in this dystopic vision, is not a space of transit but of suspension—a liminal zone where the characters are neither here nor there, neither fully citizens nor simply bodies, but rather the embodied proof of how crisis deepens rather than dissolves existing structures of otherness.

Ghaywan, however, refuses to succumb to fatalism. The character of Sudha, an Ambedkarite woman who possesses a strong moral compass and political clarity, offers an essential counter-narrative of resilience and hope. Sudha's embrace of education and her determination to "carry her own chair" in a society that expects her to sit on the floor represents a principled resistance rooted in B.R. Ambedkar's vision. Her relationship with Chandan—a bond that transcends caste shame—is a flicker of optimism, suggesting that dignity is not something to be granted by the system but to be claimed through self-respect and solidarity.

Homebound is an important piece of Indian cinema, not for its social gestures, but for its quiet, empathetic realism. It documents the daily indignities faced by two communities who, despite their historical and theological differences, find themselves sharing the same low rung on India's social hierarchy, both equally subordinated by the systemic design of caste and communalism. By showing how the anxiety of the Dalit to escape caste and the fear of the Muslim to resist communal suspicion are two sides of the same coin of structural exclusion, the film urges us to recognize a collective oppression. Its importance lies in its ability to generate empathy and, in doing so, to reframe the conversation: the journey back home for all marginalized Indians remains a distant dream until the structures that define them by their caste and faith are dismantled. It is a testament to the necessity of solidarity in the face of a shared burden of otherness.

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