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Dystopian Mumbai: Futurism in Varun Thomas Mathew's *The Black Dwarves of the Good Little Bay*

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Abstract

Dystopian science fiction narratives often serve as a powerful medium for imagining the post-apocalyptic scenarios of contemporary socio-political realities. In the context of South Asia, the intersection of multinational capitalism and corrupt politics within a dystopian setting provides a poignant commentary on the region's vulnerabilities and systemic injustices. Varun Thomas Mathew's *The Black Dwarves of the Good Little Bay* (2019) is set in the year 2041, where the tropical city of Mumbai is seen to be recuperating in the aftermath of a massive flood that has led to the rehabilitation of its city-dwellers into 'Bombadrome', a towering structure developed by the state-corporate alliance. This paper situates the novel within the framework of South Asian Futurisms, exploring how colonial histories and environmental precarity shape dystopian imaginaries of this tropical region. The book presents a cityscape that becomes a contested space for extrapolating and interrogating narratives of past(s) and future(s), a recurring theme in contemporary speculative fiction. This paper focuses on representations of environmental change and techno-capitalist ideologies that emerge as recent Anglophone Indian literature takes a dystopic turn. The reading explores new thematic possibilities within dystopian literature, positioning Mathew's novel within a broader discourse on tropical speculative fiction.

Keywords: dystopian cityscapes, tropical Mumbai, South Asian Futurisms, techno-capitalism, environmental precarity, tropical speculative fiction

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Introduction

We live in a world of postmodern anxieties. As Veronica Hollinger succinctly reminds us, "To be postmodern is to sense that we have become separated from the past by the ruptures and crises of ever more quickly receding recent history and also to recognize that we do not yet have much of an idea about where we are headed" (2001, p. 161). Robert T. Tally Jr. states that, "The perils of the postmodern condition, of late capitalism and globalization, that had been cause for such consternation and anxiety a generation or two ago appear almost quaint, in contrast to the far more pervasively gloomy worldviews that predominate the present" (2024, p. 3). Futurism is a reflection of the outside world and a lens through which speculative fiction writers imagine possible futures. It has been gradually developing into a sensibility in popular culture, where the feeling of dystopianism looms on all sides, accompanied by apocalyptic forebodings and terrors. The concept of CoFuturisms is an amalgamation of various forms of futurisms from artists, scholars, and technologists of colour, including "Afrofuturisms, Indigenous Futurisms, Latinx Futurisms, Asian Futurisms, and Gulf/Middle Eastern Futurims" (Taylor et al., 2024, p. 1). In many ways, CoFuturisms have become a manifestation for people from the tropical regions of the world, who seek to contend that these regions are not so nearly isolated from the Western world system of late capitalism as we may have been lead to imagine. In their study of "Tropical Landscapes: Nature-Culture Entanglements" Lundberg, Regis, and Agbonifo contend that the tropics "are construed as the exoticised environmental Other of the temperate Western world as this is informed by art and culture, and imperial; and scientific practices" (2022, p. 2). This colonialist 'tropicality' (a form of tropical Orientalism), offers hindsight into the myriad modes though which colonisation and oppression works to suppress voices of colour and highlights the importance of acknowledging and analysing the visions of tropical futurisms, rather than meekly following Western temperate futurisms, which include white supremacist future visioning.

Varun Thomas Mathew's *Black Dwarves of the Good Little Bay* (2019) primarily addresses whether future economic development alone could atone for sins committed in the past. A moving portrayal of the land and the times, the novel highlights the mythologies constructed by a corrupt government as it deftly exploits modern technologies, media, and state-sanctioned violence, leading to climate disasters that displace millions of its people. The novel appeals to the nationalist discourse and cultural memory of the people viewed through the eyes of a retired civil servant who offers snippets of life led by ordinary residents of the old tropical city of Bombay. This paper proposes a close reading of the futurism portrayed in *The Black Dwarves of the Good Little Bay* (hereafter *Black Dwarves*), particularly as it evokes a sense of regret and nostalgia for a city lost and a collective way of life forgotten. The

analysis focuses on the utopian features of a fictive society controlled by an authoritarian government and how these features are intricately linked to the city's transformation. Specifically, the paper examines how the tropical island city of Mumbai is unmade by the dual threats of climate change and corrupt politics. Particular attention is given to the protagonist and narrator, whose recounting of the days leading up to the disappearance of the monsoon rains and the city's submergence serves as a poignant commentary on contemporary environmental and political issues. A reading of narrative techniques, themes, and symbolic imagery characterise *Black Dwarves* as a work of Futurism. By further situating the work within the framework of South Asian Futurisms, this study seeks to explore how it envisions the possibility of alternative tropical futures while reflecting on the socio-political and ecological challenges of the present.

South Asian Futurisms

T. J. Taylor describes the development of several types of futurisms that fall under the broad umbrella of CoFuturisms in the introduction of the *Routledge Handbook of CoFuturisms* (2024). These include Afrofuturism (coined in the 1990s), Indigenous Futurisms (2003), Latinx Futurisms (2004), and Asian Futurisms (2016). Most of these correspond with views from the peoples of the tropics and often present tropical futurisms. Similarly, the growing engagement with Asian Futurisms has led to the emergence of more distinct and regionally specific CoFuturisims, such as Gulf Futurism (2007), Arabfuturisms (2015), South Asian Futurisms, Middle East Futurisms (2018), Desi-futurism (2019) and Indo-Futurism (2022) (as cited in Taylor et al., 2024, pp. 2-5). The term CoFuturisms, first developed by Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay in his work on CoFutures (2020, 2021), brings together previously overlooked "ethnic futurisms and Global South futurisms" (Taylor et al., 2024, p. 5). It serves as "a response to the problematic futures of the racist, capitalist Global North" while emphasising that CoFuturisms are "in fact expansive and diverse" rather than restricted to a narrow set of alternatives (p. 6). Along with Yudhanjaya Wijeratne's 2019 article on Ricepunk, Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay's 2016 essay on Kalpavigyan in South Asian SF is a significant work that has contributed to the development of South Asian Futurisms.

In *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), Fredric Jameson remarks that the deepest vocation of science fiction is "to demonstrate and to dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future" (pp. 288-289). While this incapacity is debatable, a movement within South Asian Science Fiction and Fantasy (SFF) reveals works envisioning various possible futures being produced by authors as diverse as Sri Lanka's Theena Kumaragurunathan (*First Utterance,* 2016) and Yudhanjaya Wijeratne (*Commonwealth Empire* series, 2018-2021); Pakistan's Bina Shah (*Before She*

Sleeps, 2018) and Usman T. Malik (*Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan,* 2021); Bangladesh's Saad Z. Hossain (*The Gurkha and the Lord of Tuesday,* 2019); and India's Vandana Singh (*Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories,* 2018) and Samit Basu (*The City Inside,* 2020). Tarun K. Saint notes that the influx of futuristic storytelling in South Asian SFF is undergoing a "mini-Renaissance," where he observes that this resurgence reflects "a sharp awareness of momentous transitions afoot in the post-colonial world, with sharply critical accounts of skewed development and modern techno-dystopias" (2022b). Bangladeshi Anglophone writer Saad Z. Hossain's fictional re-imagination of a city blends science-fictional tropes with fantasy in his works such as *The Gurkha and the Lord of Tuesday* (2019), and its sequel, *Kundo Wakes Up* (2022). In an interview, Hossain comments on the recurring trope of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in his fictional worlds, stating: "One argument for AI usage is that it is just a tool, like any other tech, and we should adopt it or be left behind" (Quayum, 2023, p. 189). Hossain further stresses that rather than replacing humans, AI has the potential to augment human capabilities, serving as a personal assistant for each individual. The core issue lies not in AI but in the economic systems that prioritise profit over human well-being: "enemy, as always, is not the tools but the system which hunts for profit relentlessly" (p. 189).

A Brief History of Futurisms from India

Ryan A. D'Souza's article titled, "Imagining a Desi Future," introduces desi-futurism, a form of South Asian Futurism that interprets "desi versions of the past, present, and future" (2019, p. 47), thereby challenging the whitewashed visions of a technologised future by incorporating desi or brown experiences to reimagine the portrayal of the world. London-based musician Sarathy Korwar (2022) describes his latest album as a work of both "Indo-Futurism and South Asian Futurism" (Clarke, 2022, as cited in Taylor et al., 2024, p. 4). Similarly, Priya Bandodkar in her thesis, used the lens of Indofuturism to imagine "an alternative future for India without its inglorious colonial past, in order to help Indian people reorient their post-colonial, post-apocalyptic present" (Bandodkar, 2021, p. 66)

Indian SF offers a unique perspective within postcolonial discourse by shifting the focus from a history-centered narrative to a future-oriented imagination. For Mehan, many 1990s Indian SF challenged the boundaries of science in an attempt at domestication of technology by "putting it at the service of [Indian] cultural beliefs and practices" (1998, p. 64). He explains that Indian SFs "wrestle with the need for technological development, but are wary of one which might come at the cost of neocolonial relationship with the Developed Countries" (p. 64). Hans Harder claimed in his study of Marathi SF, that many earlier regional SF works "consciously strive to connect SF actions to their mythical predecessors" (2001, as cited in Banerjee, 2020,

p. 87). Uppinder Mehan in *So Long, Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy* (2004) contends: "If we do not imagine our futures, postcolonial peoples risk being condemned to be spoken about and for again" (pp. 269-70). For Suparno Banerjee, science fiction being written during the colonial era, re-defined modernity "not only within the Enlightenment tradition but also within a mythic rebirth of ancient Indian wisdom, or traditions that question modernity itself by imagining alternative ways of being" (2020, p. 7). In *Final Frontiers, Science Fiction and Techno Science in Non-Aligned India* (2020), Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee has explored "the relation between science fiction, science and technology and the postcolonial nation's claim to modernity" (Mukherjee, p. 3). He insists that "science was not only a core element of Nehru's domestic strategy. It played an equally dominant role in his aspirations about India's 'non-aligned role in an international arena defined by the bi-polar Cold War world'" (p. 4). He quotes David Arnold in positing the post-independence Indian SF scene: "socio cultural changes, state science, building institutions, nationalist and internationalist scope, rewriting the history of science in and for India" (p. 18). Sami Ahmad Khan in *Star Warriors* (2021), employs perspectives from chaos theory, among other theoretical approaches, to study and contextualise Indian SF from the 1990s to the present, as a "chaotic system" where "approximate present" does not "approximately account for the future" (p. 4), underlining the expansiveness and dynamism of Indian SF.

As early as nineteenth-century colonial India, authors like Kylas Chunder Dutt and Shoshee Chunder Dutt explored anti-colonial themes in speculative future histories. Regional writers soon embraced science fiction in vernacular languages, with contributions from Hemlal Dutta, Pandit Ambika Datta Vyasa, and Jagadananda Roy. Alternate histories appeared in the works of Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, while Jagadish Chandra Bose pioneered SF based on scientific principles. Keshav Prasad Singh, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, and Nath Madhav expanded the genre, followed by futuristic Hindi novels from Anandidhan Banerjee and Rahul Sankrityayan. Later, Manoranjan Bhattacharya and Nanigopal Majumdar further enriched Indian SF, marking its diverse evolution across languages and themes. Works of such writers "displaying influences of techno-scientific themes, also seen in their contemporary western counterparts, such as the invention of gadgets, mad scientists, lost worlds, fantastic travels and adventures etc" (Banerjee, 2020, p. 33), later grew to include issues related to climate change, the growing power of corporations overtaking state governments, and surveillance technologies in the hands of multinational corporations.

Contemporary Futurisms from India

A new wave of SF writing emerged post-liberalisation of the Indian economy (1991 onwards). Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995) and Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* (1997) set the tone for ecological and increasingly sensitive gender-inflected narratives (Saint, 2022a, p. 201). More interesting additions to this genre include Vandana Singh's *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet* (2008), Samit Basu's Gameworld trilogy (2004-7), Anil Menon's *The Beast with Nine Billion Feet* (2009), Manjula Padmanabhan's *Island of Lost Girls* (2015*),* Lavanya Lakshminarayan's *Analog/Virtual and Other Simulations of Your Future* (2020), and Siddhartha Deb's *The Light at the End of the World* (2023), to name just a few (Saint, 2022a, pp. 202-205). Banerjee points out three important characteristics that mark the genre of Indian English SF in the current century: firstly, it "has travelled well outside the borders of the country" (2020, p. 49); secondly, this century "often deliberately blurs the boundaries between SF and its cousin genres of fantasy, horror and magic realism" (p. 50); and thirdly, this leads towards the "cultural hybridity that Homi Bhabha identifies as a major quality of postcolonial societies" (p. 51). As a means of exploring the genre, these works examine the intersections of consumerism and majoritarian nationalism, predicting the political future of the next decade.

This brings to mind variants of the existing realities portrayed in some of the recent fictional works, for example, in Shiv Ramdas' *Domechild* (2013), where politics and technology merge to construct a vast dome-shaped city that reportedly fails to eclipse nature and mortality. What Ramdas primarily concentrates on in *Domechild* is the "way we look at AI and its development" (Khan, 2019, p. 27). Similarly, Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* (2017) presents another example of a quasi-fascist India of the 2040s. In this work, religious fundamentalism and disparity are depicted through the utopian promises of neoliberal urbanisation and technological progress within gated communities. Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (2020), set in New Delhi in the 2030s, is "a world of extreme inequality, invasive surveillance, social media distortions, climate change, right-wing fundamentalism, and technocratic governance" (Kuldova, 2022, p. 170). Prayaag Akbar's latest novel, *Mother India* (2024), portrays a tech-driven Hindu nation based in contemporary Delhi, blurring the lines between reality and "data-scraping, world-eating generative AI engines" (Jha, 2024). Aditya Sudarshan's *Idolatry* (2024), like *Black Dwarves,* reimages the city of Mumbai, where a novel tech giant called Shrine Tech allows people to envision and worship a god of their preference using a technology similar to AI or virtual reality.

The Black Dwarves of the Good Little Bay

Varun Thomas Mathew, a human-rights lawyer and writer based in New Delhi, wrote his debut science fiction novel *Black Dwarves* in 2019. He situates his work on the western shores of India, where the rains have long since vanished, leaving the land parched. His work is a narrative of how a nation widely celebrated as a success story suddenly revealed itself as an authoritarian dystopia at the turn of the century. *Black Dwarves* shows how India suffers from toxic nationalism, environmental disaster, lives lived in precarity (ranging from the middle classes to those at the very bottom of the social ladder), and a media-arts-entertainment-education apparatus lacking any original thought. In an interview at the time of his book release, Mathew quotes Gunter Grass as his inspiration. Grass wrote "*The Tin Drum* primarily because he wanted to capture the essence of those times for future generations." He continues, "I wanted to do the same with these times for India—an era of change for who we are as people" (Verma, 2019). Set in a near-future India, Mathew depicts regret over losing the city's way of life and raises concerns about the influence of current human decisions on the future of tropical cities.

In *Black Dwarves,* the city of Bombay or Mumbai, has ceased to exist in 2041. In the wasteland, stands Bombadrome, a futuristc technological high-rise enterprise, that is a world unto itself inhabited by residents who are never allowed to leave. Mathew manages to interweave magical realism and memory into the created world of the drome, the fictive and the historical elements of a city lived forty years in the future, while simultaneously exploring the trends within the emerging genre of Indian dystopian science fiction. In the drome, the residents live in a state of nightmarish dystopia masquerading as a utopia where all aspects of life are regulated by a governmental system through suspended animation, to create a perfectly equitable society where every prejudice of the inhabitants is safely indulged and every need fulfilled. In a way, the authorial narrator echoes Mathew's role as the author of the text.[1]

After a massive flood and desertification led to a barren land, the dwellers of the island city of Mumbai are forced to relocate inside the towering, self-sufficient Bombadrome. The internal structure of the 'drome' is artificially monitored to such an extent that the twenty-five million inhabitants have started to live technologically-directed lives. The

[1] Dystopia is described as "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived" (Sargent, 1994, p. 9). This is quite precise when examining the speculative world that a contemporary SF novel like *Black Dwarves* portrays. The novel depicts a place that is "worse" for a contemporary reader than their own subjective experience of that world. Nevertheless, the world portrayed may be seen as a utopia for certain sections of the (fictitious) society: for example, the inhabitants of "Bombadrome," or it was once called "Bom Bahia, or Bombay, or Mumbai" (Woodbury, 2019).

air they breathe contains chemicals that impair their ability to retain memories. The state, through tele-visuals, feeds propaganda about a distorted history into their lives. The man behind the drome, Ankur Lal Shinde, or Alas, is the leading candidate for the upcoming Union elections. The novel is narrated from the perspective of Convent Godse, or CG, the only remaining officer from the discontinued IAS cadre who stands witness to the time when the entire city fell apart. After decades of remaining a bystander to the atrocities committed by the state, CG embarks on an ambitious journey to remind people of the events in 2008 that unmade Mumbai, followed by the entire nation. He hopes to complete his report before the voting commences so that the shreds of evidence of the crimes committed by Alas' DSP (*Dus Shabd Party*) may be revealed to the Indian electorate. CG's narrative is a chronicle of his nostalgic yearning for the past.

The portrayal of CG's narrative is filled with his observations of the socio-cultural conditions of the Bombadrome, which can also be seen as a satire on the utopian visions of communal harmony of a society formed by erasing the horrors of the previous years. He describes the drome-city as "a fortress" that has been "elevated over the inundated soil, large enough to accommodate all the roads and offices and metro stations and housing required for thirty million people" (Mathew, 2019, p. 15). The ruling political party explained that after years of unchecked pollution and environmental abuse by industrialists, the DSP (founded by Alas) was finally capable of creating an era of stability, peace, and innovation: "Break down the old. Wash away every reminder of the past. With the sea, if I can. And then build a utopia in its place. Where everything is controlled. Justice is ensured. Equality is enforced" (p. 159). Inside the Bombadrome, chemicals alter reality and unsuspecting inhabitants take delight in "manufactured peace, the artificially softened speech and the on-demand gratification of pleasures" (p. 92). Any signs of displeasure among the residents are prevented by control and manipulation of their memories by feeding false narratives of history.

What lurks behind the collapse of the old world order is the blaming of the dissenters called the 'Black Dwarves'. The Black Dwarves movement began when a group of manual scavengers were arrested for allegedly destroying the city's public property with sewage and excrement. An irate police commissioner described them as "*Kaala Bauna*", or "Filthy Black Dwarves" (Mathew, 2019, p. 58). Soon their plight attracted a series of city-wide protests and strikes of menial workers, daily wage labourers, minorities, and outcasts (Bharucha, 2019). But the movement that started as an innocent fight against the status-quo, ended up organising the violence that supported the political vision of the ambitious DSP party. Upon becoming operational, Alas's administration paved the way for the construction of the Bombadrome by introducing a land reform bill that prohibited anyone from owning private property in Mumbai. The

neo-liberal restructuring of the entire state began soon after the flood with mass migration dissolving corporations and people abandoning property worth billions. Over the following years, Alas recruited all manner of cheap help, such as immigrants and out-of-work labourers; and funded visionaries and professionals to carry out a blueprint of the Bombadrome. He coerced the central government and the World Bank to back his claim to the land thereby building a self-sufficient "modern citadel" (p. 15), spanning over 500 square kilometres, powered by solar power and a near-perfect waste management system. However, what at first seems like a utopia, is proven distopian by the lack of accountability. The narrative voice questions the cost of innocents who were put to the sword to achieve this monstrous form of utopia to carry out Alas's ideology in which he states, "This country needs to die before it can be reborn" (p. 187). The life of Bombadrome originated in devastation.

While the ones in power like Alas "would prefer not to remember the past or the means that they have employed to come to this end", someone like CG is "unable to come to terms with his complicity in the events" (Prasad, 2021, p. 133). The residents of Bombadrome chose not to have a relationship with the past. This desired effect is achieved through a mixture of behavioural control through surveillance and chemicals designed to modify the air they breathe. On the one hand, the state contains sections on persuasive techniques or mind control (Mathew, 2019, p. 30). On the other, they are mandated to wear virtual reality gear (jointly manufactured by the state government and the Reliant Tech Corporation) called AREBO sets that alter their reality thereby eliminating all possibility of confrontation related to race and caste: "They're all wearing AREBO sets, which alters their reality to give them the illusion of privacy with their own god, while digitally wiping out traces of devotees and idols from other faiths" (p. 26). The drug injected within the drome air further induces a unique state of amnesia: "one that left its victims' normal faculties untouched but weakened their hold on the perception of history" (p. 30). Without any memory of the country's history, people become easier to manage, and thus in a larger scheme, they lose their identity and humanity. This erasure of individuality can also be seen in the banning of people's names by reducing their unique identity to that of exchangeable drome members. The party leader Alas issued a UID (unique twelve-digit code) in the place of a name for all the state's citizens after the electoral triumph.

The two great institutions of dystopia are the business corporation and the state. CG explains how the state government poured resources into funding the production of artificial intelligence systems. The Reliant Tech Corporation, a multinational tech company, was instructed to integrate an AI translation software (called *Bhaashafish*) with the AREBO headsets so that everyone within the Bombadrome could understand each other, regardless of their regional language (Mathew, 2019, p. 28). The state's reliance on multinational corporations is further illustrated by the Bombadrome

Atmospheric Engineering Corporation, or Bae Corp, which under Alas's orders, spent years researching and developing the medically treated air within the drome. The state also capitalised on people's personal preferences and fantasies by "privatization of pleasure" (p. 28), selling all kinds of psychedelic substances and legalising sexual intercourse without suppression as the fundamental right to pleasure. The inhabitants of the drome overconsumed and followed the latest fashion as clothes were re-fabricated after a single wear, making the garment engineers one the richest employees within the drome. Entry or exit into the drome is digitalised by submitting a drop of blood for a quick DNA tech-scan, while children are directly recruited from schools to India's Foreign Agrarian Service, a mercenary capitalist force that generates revenue for the drome by cultivating arable land across the globe.

Interestingly, unlike other dystopian novels, the climate catastrophe portrayed in the novel makes neoliberal capitalism an ever-flourishing enterprise. The DSP-led state government obfuscated the invasion of the Arabian Sea by constructing a self-contained high-rise drome, attributing it to "the melting of the polar ice caps and the rise of ocean levels across the globe" (Mathew, 2019, p. 14). Alas, the incumbent chief minister of the state of Maharashtra, deceived the entire population of Mumbai into thinking that the city's changes in the atmosphere were the results of "decades of environmental degradation and the chemical reconfiguration of our [their] surroundings" (p. 14). He transformed the site of ruin into a "modern citadel" (p. 15) by constructing the technocratic society of the drome, thereby symbolically liberating the wasteland. This mirrors the Indian nation's technological and economic boom, as the current government aims for a 'digital India' by embarking "on a vision of a novel Indian society, scientifically improved and digitally connected" (Karmakar & Sarkar, 2024, p. 415).

In *Black Dwarves,* the Coastal Wall keeps out much of the sunlight and wind from entering the Bombadrome, and its surrounding regions.[2] The narrator recalls the conditions that led to its creation over thirty years ago, about a year after the Arabian Sea had flooded the entire city. An unparalleled migration had begun soon after the coastal regions of Mumbai became impossible to breathe in. Even the state government relocated its offices far inland and naval bases were shifted further up the coast. Alas soon turned to rational explanations to explain his reason behind rebuilding the city. It was easier to convince citizens who became desperate for order in the wake of an environmental catastrophe. Hence, the expansion of the tech-driven fortress of

[2] The delineation of space through the creation of a physical wall is a prominent motif in dystopian worlds. As Sioli points out, "the authoritarian regime of OneState, depicted in the novel *We* (1921) by Yevgeni Zamyatin; the totalitarian rule of Big Brother, captured in *1984* (1949) by George Orwell; and the tyrannical dominion of Heirs, described in *The Not Yet* (2014) by Moira Crone" are deliberate in their literal depiction of "walls as borders, showing in an explicit and straightforward way that borders are "a process of social division" in space" (2024, p. 71).

Bombadrome began soon after the construction of the Coastal Wall.[3] The Wall since then has become a border, a process of environmental and social division in space. It is even named for the coast it separates. It both confines and encircles Bombadrome, thereby, the entire city of Mumbai. It carries no openings except the few man-made Tar Roads at sea level that exist outside the city—only for the movement of machinery for heavy construction. Each wing of the Bombadrome has a few additional segments called Addendums affixed to the hull of the drome that opens directly onto a Tar Road. They have no entry or exit points connecting to the drome. It is in the Addendum on one of Tar Roads, where CG the narrator lives, directly cut off from the Coastal Wall, thereby remaining completely isolated from the drome.[4] Life in Bombadrome is transparent, exposed to the public eye, and deprived of privacy and isolation. Their "pristine glass walls" (Mathew, 2019, p. 23), attest to the reality of the building's homogenous private apartments and a life of comfort. In contrast, according to popular belief, the sea is limitless and unbounded. CG's residence outside the Bombadome is a homage to this nostalgia: "while my home isn't the most appealing of residences I cannot live anywhere else. Here, I can smell the salt of the sea and feel the soil below my feet. Here, I feel free." (p. 24). The ending of the novel, thereby, appears optimistic.

A central concept to understanding dystopian science fiction narratives, Stephen Kenneally says "is that of limitation" (2018, p. 221) where surveillance technologies control access to public space. The capacity of individuals to comprehend, imagine, or build alternative worlds is impaired when their comprehension of the world in which they live is restricted. This is the psychological consequence of the Bombadromians' enforced restrictions. Despite the fact that their daily lives were relatively routine and content, a rotation system ensures that every 'homepod' gets a single day's worth of the sea view at least once a year. "If there were no visions of the outside world, it would be easier to imagine it as an unspoiled paradise"(2018, p. 221); instead, the residents are periodically shown the forbidden landscape, thus their aspirations are limited to waiting for an annual allotment of time by the sea, where they are able to observe a world that has been devastated. Here, the Bombadrome blurs the boundary between utopia and dystopia. While the Coastal Wall reflects the visceral truth of the real world, the beauty and ugliness of the human condition, the drome, through interpretation by AI, mirrors a haven almost idyllic in nature untouched by humans. This presents an uncanny dichotomy between what is and what could have been. The Bombadrome is an urban-scale manifestation of Jeremy Bentham's plan for prison

[3] Antony Cooper and Søren Tinning, referencing the work of numerous researchers, talk about "the conceptual shift from borders as territorial lines to bordering as socio-cultural processes, practices, and discourses" (Cooper & Tinning, 2020, p. 28).

[4] This resonates with the Green Wall in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921), which was constructed "to protect the rational, mechanized, and perfectly ordered OneState from Nature, the "irrational, ugly world of trees, birds, and animals" (p. 91), as well as from the wild people of Mephi" (Sioli, 2024, p. 72). Caterina Resta in her article "Walled Borders" gives the wall "ontological and political character, which concerns not only territory but also the discriminating definition of human and non-human" (2019, p. 10).

architecture, the Panopticon, as it imposes a disciplinary exercise of power enforcing "a certain self-discipline under threat of external observation" (1791, as cited in Browne, 2015, p. 34). Bentham argued that a regime would control the population, "all by a simple idea of Architecture!" (p. 34). Hence, the totally visible society of Bombadromians "is not of spectacle but of surveillance" (Foucault, 1995, p. 217). The world inside the drome is an ironic panopticon, and the inhabitants unknowingly profess to take pleasure in living within it.

Dystopian Landscapes and Tropical Wastelanding

Ecocritical dystopian fiction often demonstrates how society adapts "to the near-future, physical changes in environmental conditions and landscapes" (Scott, 2022, p. 13-14). They qualify as a hybrid genre, "in which rumination on a catastrophic event (usually climate change) is not simply a narrative tool, but a way of reflecting on our present" (Malvestio, 2022, p. 28). The city of Mumbai becomes a lens through which the extravagance and chaos of a lived world is shown. "The people of Mumbai went back to their lives and forgot about the disappearance of the monsoons. They didn't care why the rains had gone, and whether they would ever come back", says the narrative voice (Mathew, 2019, p. 12). The effect of such a scenario relates "to bring us closer to the crises involved, rather than to underline an idea that catastrophe will happen sometime in the future" (Scott, 2022, p. 14). In another example, the narrator CG remembers "when the rains failed, it meant the land had witnessed something unworthy of forgiveness, and inevitable strange and terrible things would follow" (Mathew, 2019, p. 13). These prophecies give an insight into the impacts of neocolonial hunger for power but at the same time warn that nature that brought forgiveness and redemption could also become unforgiving. Reengaging with the old landscape becomes impossible for the people of Bombadrome: with the earth turning into quicksand, animal life disappearing entirely, and the air growing thicker. An expansive Coastal Wall divides this city from the sea, barricading the horizon, sunlight, and wind. Eco-dystopias "tend to indulge in the representation of the consequences of climate change", while showing "the known world reduced to a wasteland deprived of life and littered with the remnants of a past civilization" (Malvestio, 2022, p. 29). The narrator resides in his quarters on one of the few man-made Tar roads existing outside the drome. By positioning himself directly overlooking the Wall, CG becomes the periphery: on the verge of existence, seeking to expose and critique the drome city.

Mathew's description of the shores of Mumbai where the Bombadrome now stands is the novel's approach to (tropical) wastelanding. The term is borrowed from Traci Voyles' article on the native Indian Navajo country, where she argues that "wastelanding is a racial and a spatial signifier that renders an environment and the bodies that inhabit it pollutable" (2015, p. 9). In this case, the term is extended to the

analysis of tropicality—in which the (neo)colonial imagination of the tropics works to create visions of utopias and dystopias in the forms of paradise and hell. For Lundberg, Regis, and Agbofibo (2022):

> Tropicality involves two major tropes.… In one imaginary the tropics is a Garden of Eden, presenting landscapes and waterscapes of rich biodiversity—a fecund, exotic, paradise. The opposing image conjures the tropics as a torrid zone wild, primitive, unconquerable, inhospitable and pestilential. (p. 3)

The protagonist narrator in *Black Dwarves* introduces the "patch of earth" (Mathew, 2019, p. 11) that "was once called Mumbai" (p. 11). The people inhabiting the land turned it into a ruin. For over thirty years, while the rest of the coastal route of the subcontinent experienced copious amounts of rainfall during the monsoon season, parts of Mumbai have hardly seen any rainfall. This climate apocalypse that plagues the city, provides a direct critique of human choices. He declares: "…the earth beneath our feet has rebelled against us" (p. 11). Thus, Mathew personifies Earth and nature by giving them agency. Julia Siepak (2024) proposes the term "speculative landscapes" to describe "the spatial poetics" of futuristic writings. She writes:

> Writers imagine alternative spaces that are open for speculation and based on reciprocity between the human and the nonhuman. Such representations challenge the colonial idea of land as stable and inactive, as well as depart from the dominant understanding of space as based on the categories of ownership and resource extraction. (p. 122)

A speculative landscape allows for reimagining a geographical location that has been a site of commodification and conquest. In the novel, the narrator CG recalls the political unrest of the fateful elections in 2008 shortly after the series of terrorist attacks in various locations across Mumbai. A few days later, the rains failed, leading to increasing heat waves and drought, and finally, coastal flooding from the Arabian Sea inundating the southern and northern sectors of the city within a few days.

The defamiliarisation of the tropical urban landscape is a result of social and environmental changes, resulting in an overwhelming sense of loss. One of the important consequences of global warming is the "disappearance of the monsoons" (Mathew, 2019, p. 12), which serves as a precursor to the events that would ultimately result in the construction of the Bombadrome. CG recounts a moving belief about rainfalls, "each year the arrival of the rains declared to mankind that their sins stood a chance at redemption" (p. 13). The land is remembered by the narrative voice, who

experiences an overwhelming sense of grief, as it "had witnessed something unworthy of forgiveness" (p. 13). Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville Ellis conceptualises this emotion with what is called 'ecological grief,' namely, "the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change" (2018, as cited in Siepak, 2024, p. 125). The book's engagement with ecological grief permeates toward its dystopian character, it is Mathew's approach to call to his readers to take action, "aimed at making us react before ecological disaster becomes inevitable" (Martinez-Falquina, 2019, p. 165). Environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht coined the term 'solastalgia' which "refers to the lived experience of distress caused by the loss of value and the desolation of one's home environment" (Upward et al., 2024, p. 2). It is described "as a form of homesickness experienced when one is still at home yet is affected by the destruction of one's home environment" (p. 2). In this way, the catastrophic disaster in *Black Dwarves* addresses the feeling of nostalgia and urgency in the age of the Anthropocene, by directing "the reader's imagination to encourage reflection on their own position in the broader scheme of environmental future" (Siepak, 2024, p. 125).

Nevertheless, despite the profoundly dystopian character of the novel, the current future of the narrative sneaks an ultimately hopeful image of a future world with a potential for change:

> You know now what existed before they built this monstrosity [the Bombadrome] to imprison you all. Perhaps you prefer this Bombadrome and its technological marvels to the bitter reality of the old world, but I am confident that you now know that even a century of good governance and benevolent administration is not penance enough for what they did in order to get elected. (Mathew, 2019, p. 275)

As the landscape becomes more and more de-familiarised when the corrupt party comes into power, the narrative offers a chance for the humans of Mumbai to understand their strength through every single vote in the upcoming elections. Maybe choosing a better alternative would suggest that the environment, however changed, will still hold a way for humankind's existence on Earth. As Ruth Levitas observes in *The Concept of Utopia (*1990)*:* "Dystopias are not necessarily fictional in form; neither predictions of the nuclear winter nor fears of the consequences of the destruction of the rain forests, the holes in the ozone layer, the greenhouse effect and the potential melting of the polar ice caps are primarily the material of fiction" (p. 195). Mathew's cautiously hopeful tone evokes the concept of 'critical dystopia'. This "describes works that authors 'intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary

society' but which usually include 'at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia'" (Claeys, 2017, p. 281).

Conclusion

The Black Dwarves of the Good Little Bay is an example of contemporary Indian Anglophone fiction, delving into the techno-capitalist imagination of a neoliberal, globalised nation on the brink of eco-dystopia. Delhi-based author Varun Thomas Mathew sets the novel in a future Mumbai, in an India where the rest of the natural world is going through a change as "part of a global weirding related to climate change" (Scott, 2022, p. 17), where a majoritarian political party (DSP) asserts routine control over all its citizens. By imagining such scenarios in the future, the novel comments upon how a society is complicit in bringing about its destruction. The layered narrative, combining personal recollections and documentary–style evidence, highlights the urgency of collective accountability and the need for dissenting voices. The novel's spatial imaginary, which is set in 2041, was inspired by the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks across various locations in the city. The author, through his narrator's reflections, critiques the infiltration of an external entity, like the activities of a Pakistani terrorist group, that created perfect conditions for an Indian/Hindu nationalist electoral triumph: "Within the next thirty minutes, gunfire would be heard across Mumbai, and the terrorists would tear through several of the most crowded locations in the city: the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, a café in Colaba, a hotel near Nariman Point, a Jewish centre and the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel" (Mathew, 2019, p. 258). Through his recollection of history, the protagonist CG becomes a person who seeks redemption for his years of silence as a civil servant and places the responsibility on the Indian electorate, their votes, for future hopes of nationhood. Thus by doing so, South Asian dystopias retain an ability to envision hopeful alternatives that seem to be almost absent in Western dystopian literature, which often lean towards finality. Tropical dystopia, among other dystopias, draws attention to the questions of the future of the coastal regions that appear to be bleak. "A new study warns that coastal cities of the world such as Mumbai could be at risk of being overrun by sea water by 2050 and that millions more could be impacted by rising sea levels", writes Goswami for *India Today* (2019). Of particular concern, as Lundberg, Vasques Vitas and Das contend in their work on Tropical Imaginaries and Climate Crisis, is that "relative sea level rise, along with other climate change effects, is predicted to be higher in the Tropics" (2021, p. 2). Many South Asian SFF writers move away from earlier dystopian writings promising catastrophic closure or redemption, by critiquing the capitalist avenues of globalisation within particular contexts. These CoFuturisms may be considered under the recently emerging genre of Indofuturism, which recognises the necessity of developing novel socio-political and epistemic contexts to articulate the unpredictable nature of post-Halocenic post-colonial societies and ecologies

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