Dreaming Futures: The Risks and Rewards of South Asian Futurisms

Nudrat Kamal

"The most characteristic science fiction does not seriously attempt to imagine the "real" future of our social system. Rather, its multiple mock futures serve the quite different function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come."
– Fredric Jameson, "Progress versus Utopia; Or, Can We Imagine the Future?"[1]

"Visions of the future imagine how life might be otherwise. If we do not imagine our futures, postcolonial peoples risk being condemned to be spoken about and for again."
– Uppinder Mehan, *So Long Been Dreaming*[2]

Introduction: Why South Asian Futurisms?

It is the end of the 21st century and Mumbai, like most major cities of South Asia, has drowned. Gaiacorp, a ruthless multinational corporation that already rules parts of the world, has won the bidding war to run the subcontinent's government, and many of the remaining unsubmerged towns are being ravaged by heatwaves, famines and violence. At the same time, hundreds of small, zero-carbon *bastis* have cropped up all over South Asia, each adapted to its local ecology but connected to one another by green corridors and a huge data network called the Sensornet that measures energy use, temperature, carbon flows, and biodiversity indexes. These *basti* clusters, largely the product of the engineering and design of an Adivasi woman, and inhabited and sustained initially by slum dwellers and climate refugees from all over the subcontinent, have just now begun to shift the regional climate back in the right direction, an event hailed as The Great Turning. Welcome to the future, as dreamed and articulated by Indian physicist and science fiction writer, Vandana Singh, in her short story "Reunion"[3]– a mixture of eerily plausible dystopia and quietly revolutionary utopia that is just one of a kaleidoscope of possible futures South Asian speculative fiction writers have been imagining.

The act of imagining and speculating different kinds of future societies is a creative endeavor as well as a political and philosophical one. From Plato's *Republic* which culminates in the articulation of a utopian city-state ruled by a philosopher king, to the vision of a perfect society ruled by Muslim philosophers expressed in Al-Farabi's 9th century treatise *Al-Madina al-Fadila*

(*The Virtuous City*), to 17th century writer Margaret Cavendish's *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing-World* about a perfect, division-less society, writers and thinkers for centuries have been involved in constructing imaginary societies that help clarify their ideas about the futures of their own societies. But it was from the mid-19th century on, in the wake of the Age of Enlightenment and the acceleration of the intertwined projects of capitalism and colonization which undergirded Western modernity, that visions of the future began to be solidified in the form of the distinct literary genre of science fiction (or SF). Entangled as modernity is with ideas of both scientific and social progress, it was a particularly well-suited period for futuristic visions, more so than the historical periods that came before. According to Anthony Giddens, "modernity is vastly more dynamic than any previous type of social order. It is a society which, unlike any preceding culture, *lives in the future, rather than the past*."[4] To grapple with the dynamic change that characterizes modernity, many futuristic SF texts emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries, a flowering that continues to this day.

However, just as modernity is intertwined with the Western imperial project, the development of the science fiction genre too has a particular colonial history. According to Adam Roberts, science fiction serves as the "dark subconscious to the thinking mind of Imperialism",[5] the seedy underbelly hidden beneath the rationalistic veneer given to colonial and neocolonial ideas. John Rieder argues that the origins of science fiction must be contextualised as a product of imperialist culture, beginning in late nineteenth-century British and French fantasies of global conquest and then emerging in the "new" imperialist cultures of Germany, Russia, the United States and Japan in the twentieth century[6]. After all, the two biggest myths in science fiction are that of the Stranger (the alien, whether it's extra-terrestrial, the technological, or the human-hybrid) and the Strange Land (the far-away planet or a distant part of our own, waiting to be conquered), and both these myths also serve as the pillars of the Western colonial project. But just as the genre of science fiction has been a vehicle to explore and further imperial fantasies, it also has the generic tools through which critiques of colonialism and racism can be enacted, through which non-white people can tell their own stories, drawing on their own cultural heritages in different forms. Science fiction's exploration of otherness and marginality, and its potential for imagining more equitable futures, lends itself well to a postcolonial ethos – a potential which many science fiction writers from colonized and formerly colonized places have embraced and which has led to a hybrid kind of science fiction known as "postcolonial science fiction". Postcolonial science fiction can be defined as that particular kind of science fiction that acknowledges and then subverts, in different ways, the genre's genealogical and ideological debt to colonialism.

The term postcolonial science fiction is useful to keep in mind while tracing the trajectory of futuristic visions in South Asia, the origin of which can be traced to the early 19th century. Much of the science fiction being written in the subcontinent since the 19th century, according to Suparno Banerjee, re-contextualized 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".[7] In contrast to visions of the future that came from the minds of writers from Western Europe and North America in the wake of modernity, South Asian visions of the future have a more complicated relationship to modernity, because the subcontinent's own relationship to modernity has been shaped by its colonial past and continues to be mediated by neocolonialism and global capitalism. It is therefore worth investigating the specificities of such futuristic texts to see whether they can be gathered into visions of a collective and transnational future for South Asia which we might call "South Asian futurisms."

In trying to tease out the nuances of what the term South Asian futurisms might constitute, we can look to Afrofuturism and African Futurism for inspiration. The term Afrofuturism was a term coined by Mark Dery[8] to refer to speculative fiction that addresses the concerns of Black Americans in modes that draw on their unique histories and cultures. In critiquing the West-centric gaze of the term Afrofuturism, Nigerian speculative fiction writer Nnedi Okorafor came up with the term African Futurism, which might be even more useful for our purposes. Okorafor defines African Futurism as "a subcategory of science fiction" that is "similar to 'Afrofuturism'" but more deeply "rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West".[9] By not centering itself around the concept of "American" in its definitions, African futurism is freed from the white Western gaze. Similar to the ways in which African futurist texts imagine sustained and specific futures based on various African countries' unique cultural traditions and histories, and which acknowledge and grapple with the role of Western colonialism and slavery in the continent, South Asian speculative fiction envisions futures for South Asia that draw on our own histories and cultures without necessarily centering the Western gaze. In conceiving of the category of South Asian futurisms, therefore, we might understand this body of South Asian literature as one which mixes colonial ideas with indigenous philosophical thought, scientific knowledge and cultural mythology, in ways that reject Western understandings of South Asia because they have typically been produced by and for vernacular communities of the subcontinent.

What kind of futures are being envisaged by writers who are located in specific local socio political contexts of South Asia and who are rooted within various South Asian histories and cultures? How can these futures transcend the local and contribute to global visions of the future? How do such visions explore the unique risks of being an individual or a community in South Asia in the 21st century, subject to various systems of power and hierarchy? An important aspect of this envisioned futurity is its power of de-familiarisation and restructuring of the reader's own present. Futuristic visions can play a role in jarring readers out of their complacency and allowing them to view their own present through a more critical lens. Frederic Jameson contends

that this de-familiarisation enacted by SF futures also does the important work of turning the reader's present into the past of something indeterminate, making readers more aware of their own temporality.[10] This function of futuristic texts becomes doubly important when it comes to colonized and formerly colonized peoples, who have been cast as being perpetually "in the past" in the race towards progress and modernity. South Asian futurisms, therefore, might be tools we can use to wrest the discourse away from the dominant Euro-American culture machine and dream of radically different futures. Over the course of this essay, I hope to illustrate that this body of South Asian futurisms offers a vibrant poetics and vocabulary to explore questions of risk and reward which arises out of the impacts of (neo)colonialism, global capitalism, religious nationalism, and, increasingly, climate change on the subcontinent.

A History of Imagined Futures

The subsection of South Asian SF that has been involved in articulating visions of the future has its roots in the distinctly political and anti-colonial discourse of 19th century colonial India. An early futuristic fiction written in South Asia was Kylas Chunder Dutt's English-language short story 'A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945',[11] which was published in 1835 and depicts a future rebellion undertaken by the Indian Army against the British colonizers. Dutt was an 18-year-old Bengali student when he wrote this piece, which is also one of the earliest South Asian fictional texts written in English. 'Journal' narrates a battle between the English-educated, urban elite revolutionaries led by the charming Bhoobun Mohan and the British colonists, whose leaders are the appropriately named Governor Lord Fell and Colonel John Blood-Thirsty. Even though the story ends with the Indians being defeated, the text is clearly radical in its orientation. 'Journal' was followed by another futuristic text, also written in English, called 'The Republic of Orissa: A Page from the Annals of the 20th Century',[12] which was written by Shoshee Chunder Dutt and published in 1845. This vision of the future also depicts a battle for independence, although this one is more radical than 'Journal' in more ways than one: not only does this battle end with Indian independence, it is also a revolution which is led not by local elites but by the doubly marginalized Adivasi tribes. Set against the backdrop of a fictitious Slavery Act passed by the British in 1916 which leads to a violent confrontation between the British and Indian revolutionary forces from Bangla, Bihar and Orissa, the story ends with the independence of the state of Orissa and the slow decline of the British empire. Both these works of futurisms fall under "soft" or "social SF," as they are less concerned with scientific principles or advanced technology and more with a changed political and social order. As Banerjee explains, both these stories are examples of "utopian 'future-histories' in their political motivation and portrayal of coming events through extrapolation of contemporary socio-political developments. The element of 'estrangement' in these texts is temporal…wherein the temporal estrangement helps create a radically new social order."[13]

An important intervention into this nascent body of South Asian utopian-futuristic texts was made by Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's delightful feminist utopian short story, 'Sultana's Dream'.[14] Published in 1905 in the Madras-based *Indian Ladies' Magazine*, and written in the form of a dream visited upon the eponymous Sultana, the story presents a futuristic world called Ladyland which flips the gendered concepts of *purdah* and *zenana* observed by upper-class/upper-caste Muslim and Hindu women of Hossain's milieu. Instead of the women being sequestered into the *zenana*, a gendered space that was literally removed from the arena of social and political activity, Ladyland places these constraints upon men by restricting them into what the story calls the *mardana*, while the female citizens of Ladyland are given agency in regulating their movement as well as the shaping of their society. Thus, as Sultana discovered, in Ladyland women use education, science and modern technology to govern a futuristic state which is without hierarchies of religion and class (caste, however, is conspicuously missing). The women rulers of Ladyland use scientific knowledge in order to work with nature for society's benefit – for example, they have learnt to harness the sun for the city's power. Through this feminist utopia, Hossain elaborates on an alternative, feminist form of modernity which differentiates itself both from the indigenous as well as the colonial patriarchal definitions of modernity. Like 'Journal' and 'Orissa,' 'Sultana's Dream' is also avowedly anti-establishment and written in a playful and humorous tone, although it stands apart as being the only one of the three that complicates ideas of gender in its vision of the future.

The early 20th century also saw the publication of another important utopian-futuristic text, the Hindi novel *Baisvin Sadi* (The Twenty-second Century)[15] written by Rahul Sankrityayan and published in 1924. Sankrityayan was, at various stages of his life, an Arya Samajist, a Buddhist monk, a nationalist who was imprisoned by the British on many occasions, and a Marxist socialist who was inspired by the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917. *Baisvin Sadi* brings together many of these aspects of Sankrityayan's political and philosophical journeys. The novel begins with the main character Viswabandhu ('friend of the world'), a retired teacher, emerging from a cave after a long sleep of 200 years to explore a utopian India which is free of caste and communal discord, and where society is organized on the basis of rationality and for the benefit and enrichment of each individual. *Baisvin Sadi's* future is clearly a socialist utopia, as all means of production are owned by the state and there are no social inequalities. Private property has been abolished and a four-hour workday, education, health and happiness have been secured for all. The private domain has also been transformed – children are communally raised and men and women are socially and financially equal. Professions such as military generals, lawyers and manual garbage-pickers have been rendered obsolete. Not only is *Basivin Sadi* possibly the first response to the Russian revolution outside the USSR, it is also remarkably anti-colonial and anti-capitalist, presenting a communist alternative both to British colonialism as well as to the religious nationalism that was rising as a response to the former.

In contrast to these anti-colonial and anti-capitalist utopias of colonial South Asia, South Asian futuristic visions after British independence are much more sombre, tilting more towards dystopias that express postcolonial anxieties, mixed with more muted utopian impulses. These texts engage in social satire and critique of the newly formed postcolonial South Asian states through the articulation of dystopian futures. The authors of these texts were extrapolating from the anxieties of their own times, from geopolitical tensions and religious fundamentalism to state corruption and neo-colonial exploitation. One text which would sit perhaps uneasily within this category is Urdu satirist Muhammad Khalid Akhtar's novella *Bees Sau Gyara* (Twenty-Eleven)[16], published in 1954 in Karachi. Although depicting a dystopian future, it is far from being dark or sombre in tone, adopting instead the ironic and playful tone of the earlier 19th century utopian works and applying it to an absurd dystopia. The novella begins in a 21st century which is reeling from the destruction wrought upon the world after a great war. It is narrated from the perspective of Mister Popo, the president of a fictional state who is invited by the government of the country of Mazneen to tour its capital city Shutruba, and whose compilation of a report of this tour forms the bulk of the novella. Apart from being a president, Mister Popo is also something of an amateur anthropologist and so his report is filled with his insights into the cultural, social and economic conditions of this futuristic country, which is clearly meant to be a satire on the then-newly formed Pakistani state. The fascist surveillance state of Mazneen is indicated by the presence of a special police category called the PULJAKMACH – *Pakar Lo Jis Ko Marzi Chahey* (arrest anybody you want). The state machinery includes the *Vazir-e-Jhoot* (Minister of Lies) and the *Wazir-e-Jahalat* (Minister of Ignorance). The few women that are visible on the streets are enclosed in "kiosks"made out of tin and fitted with headlamps, side horns and small wheels – a dystopian critique of the *purdah* which can be contrasted to the utopian *mardana* of Hossain's Ladyland. The poor and homeless, who are plentiful, are re-named Lovers of the Open Air. Akhtar's playful and light-hearted approach to this dark future is reinforced in the preface to his novella, where he emphasizes the ultimately optimistic interpretation of the world of the novella: "Perhaps you will find this world strange, bizarre, crooked in many ways, yet despite all of its frailties I believe it glows and thrums with the warmth of human love".[17]

Akhtar's own assessment of the work and the ultimately hopeful tone of the novella brings to mind the concept of the "critical dystopia." Elaborated upon by Thomas Moylan in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, a critical dystopia is one which recognizes the redemptive qualities of the dystopian world it creates and offers possibilities of transforming or changing this world through the alliance of diverse voices and perspectives[18]. Unlike the static worlds of 19th century South Asian utopias or classical dystopias, critical dystopias are heterogeneous and uninterested in black-or-white absolutes. He says, "The critical dystopian vision of the 1980s and 1990s took a hard look at the bad new times of contemporary enclosure and, within a sober apprehension of the intensified exploitation and deprivation, endeavored to find traces, scraps, and sometimes horizons of utopian possibility".[19] While Akhtar's *Bees Sau Gyarah* is an early example of such a critical dystopia in South Asian SF, I argue that this heterotopic and critical imagining of the future comes into its own in some of the futuristic imaginings of contemporary South Asian writers, many of whom are writing in English.

Imagining Futures Now

If the futuristic visions of the latter half of the 20th century represented a "dark futurity,"[20] as authors grappled with postcolonial state failures, geopolitics and the effects of neo-colonialism, the 21st century has only added to these anxieties being explored by South Asian SF writers in their imagined futures. Climate change and the growing power of corporations working in tandem with or even overtaking state governments are two of the common threads that are discernible amongst contemporary South Asian futuristic writing. This is unsurprising, given the level of destruction climate change is already bringing to the subcontinent, as well as the increasingly precarious and exploitative position South Asian countries have in the neo-colonial global marketplace. A third common anxiety that these futuristic visions bring to life is the sinister and rapidly advancing surveillance technologies in the hands of corporations and state governments. These urgent global and planetary concerns have led to a flowering of dark futuristic imaginings by contemporary South Asian SF writers. These futures are either classical dystopias or more heterotopic critical dystopias and both sets of works explore the increasingly dangerous risks of being alive in the present moment in South Asia.

One of the more interesting recent additions to the classical dystopian category is the Pakistani Urdu animated short film *Shehr-e-Tabassum* (The Smiling City)[21], which was released in 2020. Unlike in some other languages of South Asia, in Urdu we find multi-genre hybrid works that combine elements of science fiction with fantasy, horror, mystery and adventure in serialized stories published in pulp magazines and periodicals. An example of such a hybridized Urdu work is *Devta*[22], a serialised fantasy thriller novel by Mohiuddin Nawab, written in the form of an autobiography of a man with telepathic powers, which was published in the Karachi-run *Suspense Digest* for 33 years from 1977. However, a robust tradition of purely science fictional works is lacking in Urdu. This is what makes the arrival of *Shehr-e-Tabassum* all the more noteworthy. Written by Ayesha Iftikhar and Arafat Mazhar (and directed by the latter), the nine-minute long short film was produced by Puffball Studios, an independent animation and design studio in Lahore. The film explores Pakistan in 2071: the prologue states that after a protracted and violent civil war, the state has finally established an era of stability, peace and innovation. In this country of supposed contentment, it is illegal for citizens to express any emotion other than happiness. The state closely monitors each citizen's emotional state through the mandated use of a high-tech headgear known as Hasmukh and polices their speech and

expression via flying bots. All forms of dissatisfaction, from personal unhappiness to political dissent, are therefore outlawed. The Hasmukh device awards you points based on how well you comply with the law of perpetual smiling, and these points in turn are the prevailing currency of the country, thus showing the ultimate collaboration between a totalitarian state, unchecked capitalism and advanced surveillance technology. In its tone of cautionary despair, *Shehr-e-Tabassum* can be seen as a classical dystopia in the same vein as Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. As Robert Seyferth explains, a classical dystopia is the antithesis of a utopian narrative: "dystopia is described not by a fascinated visitor, but by an inhabitant of an apparent good society that, from the inside, does not look very good at all."[23] The term that screenwriter and director Mazhar uses to describe the film's political and generic inclinations is *cyber-khilafat*: a hybrid form that combines the aesthetics of cyberpunk with the specific religious and ideological anxieties of contemporary Pakistan.

Cyberkhilafat, Mazhar argues "explore[s] modern forms of Islam, technology and power combined to corrupt language and dictate political and social norms to mute individual identity".[24] The term is meant to tease out the perpetual contradiction of contemporary Pakistan's supposed avowal of democratic values and its simultaneous embracing of elements of a "supremacist khilafat state." The specificities of *cyber-khilafat* are articulated further in another animated Urdu short film written by Mazhar called *Swipe* (2020)[25], which explores a future Pakistan where citizens are gripped by iFatwa, an app that crowdsources religious death sentences – the app shows you the profiles of your fellow citizens who have committed varying levels of sin, and you swipe left or right on them depending on whether you believe they ought to be forgiven or given the label of *wajib-ul-qatl* (deserve to be killed). The futuristic vision envisioned by the 14-minute-long *Swipe* draws on contemporary Pakistan's preoccupation with ideas of religious purity (exemplified by the stringent blasphemy laws) by combining them with sophisticated forms of social media technology and state corruption. As such, both films fit into the tradition of classical dystopias or anti-utopias, which Moylan argues are "closed worlds examining the negative impulses of humanity, ending in a despair of awareness."[26] *Swipe*, in particular, exemplifies this despair of awareness, as the main character, Jugnu, in his quest to swipe on the app as much as possible to get enough points to earn the label of a *ghazi* (defender of the faith), ends up swiping right to his father's profile and has to watch as a violent mob kills him. The end of *Shehr-e-Tabassum*, however, has the glimmer of a utopian impulse, as the unnamed female protagonist, whose perspective the audience is experiencing the futuristic city through, takes off her Hasmukh device and stares into her reflection in a mirror as her state-mandated smile fades into an expression of snarling defiance. The film thus ends with this image containing a potential transformation of the dystopian world it has created.

On the other side of the border, an Anglophone Indian novel exploring similar themes of religious fundamentalism and totalitarianism against the backdrop of intense climate change is *Leila*[27] by Prayaag Akbar. *Leila* tells the story of Shalini, a once-wealthy woman who is now at the bottom of the political and social hierarchy of a digitised, heavily surveilled city ruled by the faceless, autocratic Council. Amidst acute shortages of clean water and breathable air, the Council has segregated the city's population into sectors separated by 60-foot walls and connected to each other by "skyroads." This segregation — based on class, caste and religion — means each enclave has its own rules and rituals of marriages, births, deaths and eating, and this segregation is carefully policed and reinforced by armed gangs known as "repeaters". In order to avoid "impurity", sectors privatise their air by enclosing themselves within large air-conditioned "skydomes", the ecological brunt of which is faced by the people living in the slums outside of these sectors, the ones that don't even come under consideration in this hierarchized urban landscape, and whose clean air and water are stolen by their elite neighbours through the skydomes. *Leila* shows the interconnected-ness of the ideas of utopia and dystopia. As Sami Ahmad Khan notes, "The skydome seeks to ameliorate living conditions for the rich by making the poor even poorer and increasing their squalor. 'Must you share their air?' becomes the ultimate symbol of 'aspirational otherising.' A utopia for some – for reasons logistical rather than conceptual – can only be accomplished by creating a dystopia for many."[28] As with *Shehr-e-Tabassum* and *Swipe*, Akbar's futuristic vision is also one where existing divisions along class, caste and religious lines are only exacerbated and intensified in the face of technocracy and climate change. Unlike *Shehr-e-Tabassum's* final image of potential change, however, *Leila* offers the reader no such hope. Instead, the narrative ends with the main protagonist herself embroiled in Moylan's "despair of awareness" as she realizes the extent to which she herself has been complicit in the systems that serve to reinforce caste and class divisions in this future India, despite her otherwise progressive politics and her opposition to the ideology of the Council. The novel implicates Shalini, and by extension the reader, in the realization that the difference between Shalini's and the Council's actions is merely of scale: the Council is reinforcing, at large, ideas of social division that are already ingrained in the fabric of present-day South Asia.

In contrast to these classical dystopian visions of the future of South Asia are two recent heterotopic or ambiguous dystopian visions which have glimmers and traces of utopian possibility embedded within their narratives which I find particularly interesting. The first one is "Bring Your Own Spoon",[29] by Bangladeshi speculative fiction writer Saad Z. Hossain. The story is set in a futuristic, dystopian Dhaka ravaged by climate change, a world where the boundary between the human and supernatural worlds has become threadbare and where both djinns and humans struggle to eke out a daily existence. This is a Dhaka where the water is poisoned, and nobody has eaten fruits or fish for 200 years because of the fear of toxins in them, sustaining themselves instead on synthetic food. In this future, every citizen is chipped and the de facto currency is "sat minutes" – time you can borrow from satellites to activate your chip and provide you entry into a virtual reality that most rich people remain plugged into. Hossain's story, however, is not interested in the elite people of this city and instead takes place entirely amidst

the most marginalized – the ones whose bodies are used by nanobots to clean the city air and create microclimates, or who are experimented upon by powerful pharmaceutical companies. Within this dystopian nightmare, Hossain tells the story of a human, Hanu, and a djinn called Imbidor who come together and start a restaurant with real, organic food, allowing the people on the fringes of this society to come together as a community through the act of sharing a meal together. This restaurant, where customers bring whatever they are able to scavenge from the wilderness and then cook it and eat it together, slowly becomes a site of compassion, shared remembrance and collective caretaking, paving the way for the possibility of resistance.

Despite the harsh world Hossain has created, the focus of the narrative remains on the kindness the characters show each other, an alternative way of being in the world that is at odds with the ethos of dystopia around them. Towards the end of the story, as the surveillance state zeroes in on this small community and threatens to eradicate it violently, this alternative way of being is articulated by Imbidor's call to action: "We should follow Hanu, who gave us food from nothing. I have slept a long time. I remember when they used to chain you to the earth and force you to work, to force your children and their children to the same labor. Now I am awake, I see they have taken your flesh too, they have herded you together like cattle, and living or dying, your bodies are little factories, cleaning the air for them. Your chips are your collars. They kill you without thought. You fear the air, the water, the trees, the very ground you walk on. What more can you lose? Why not leave this place? Let us go forth into the wilderness, where they dare not follow."[30] This seed of utopian possibility is one that is nurtured over the course of the narrative, and provides a kind of blueprint from finding one's way out of a dystopian world – a blueprint which rejects individualism and segregation, and instead emphasises connection, not just with each other but with nature, "the wilderness" which humans have poisoned and then become fearful of.

This utopian impulse, which is founded on an ethics of interconnectedness, also thrums in the futuristic vision I began this essay with. In Vandana Singh's "Reunion," the larger world of the narrative is dystopian in ways that are similar to the other contemporary futuristic visions I have discussed – unchecked power of corporations, the destruction wrought by climate change, a grotesque divide between the rich and the poor. But Singh's narrative offers a way out of the dystopia, in a manner similar to Hossain's story. Mahua, the Adivasi woman who comes up with the design for the zero-carbon, interconnected *bastis*, gets her idea from observing nature. She notices little tufts of leaves growing out of the cracks on a road she traverses every day, "like a bunch of islands in a sea."[31] As she explains to her friend Raghu, "There were places along the side of the road that had already become overrun with weeds by the same process. And some of the islands were connected to other islands through cracks. So it occurred to me – well, the road is so much stronger than a leaf. But when a leaf settles in a crack, it starts a process. Soil accumulates, plants start to grow, and you know what plant roots can do...split rock. Split the road."[32] Extending the metaphor, Mahua and Raghu realize that small pockets of change, if they are the right kind of change "but also if they have the right kind of connectivity,"[33] have the potential to bring about change on a larger scale. The story proves this right as, despite the drowned cities and the subcontinent overtaken by a megacorporation, the climate of South Asia begins to shift in the right direction by the microclimates created by the interconnected *bastis*. Singh's narrative rejects the idea of urban centers being the sole sites of change. As Raghu says, "Positive social change always comes from the margins, but islets of resistance in the mainstream are also important."[34] It also complicates the idea of Western science and technology being the savior, as Mahua's work is a complex interaction between her engineering and design knowledge with her Adivasi heritage, the history of their marginalization and their community's specific way of connecting with nature. Both "Reunion" and "Bring Your Own Spoon," therefore, emphasize localised forms of community-building and solidarity, particularly amongst those on the peripheries — small communities utilizing indigenous forms of knowledge and collective memory to build their resistance against the larger dystopian social order.

Conclusion: Finding Utopias Within Dystopias

The radical possibilities offered by South Asian science fiction and fantasy writing stand in stark contrast to the grim-realism genre of literary fiction that is usually privileged in South Asian literary discourse as well as in the global literary marketplace. The fiction which is most often talked about in literature festivals, or which gets reviewed and critiqued in newspapers and journals, is that which utilizes the generic tropes of literary realism to explore South Asian stereotypes like hunger, crowding, terror and poverty. This is particularly true of Anglophone writing in South Asia. This privileging of a certain kind of genre and form has, I think, led to a narrowing of the South Asian literary imagination which in turn has limited the narrative possibilities we have for imagining our futures. The realist form is proving to be increasingly less relevant is helping us make sense of our contemporary situation. Our reality today is outlandish and almost fantastical in its absurdity and bleakness, and requires a matching radicalness to meet it. Perhaps the sheer audacity of the science fiction and fantasy genre is the only one equipped to do the job. Situated within the traditions of South Asian literature, science fiction and fantasy certainly offers a range of unique narrative tools that speak to the complexity of our bewildering present. Despite the continued marginalized status of the genre within literary discourse in the subcontinent, speculative fiction writers are continuing to write stories that circulate in international and local online magazines as well as publications by smaller independent presses and are slowly elbowing their way into the mainstream. This is partly because younger readers have already been disillusioned by the limitations of the realist genre for understanding the present and envisioning the way forward.

This elbowing of speculative fiction onto mainstream literary discourse in South Asia is indicated by initiatives such as *The Salam Award for Imaginative Fiction*, which aims to promote science fiction writing in Pakistan and recently announced its fifth annual winner, and the publication of two volumes of the anthology *The Gollancz Book of South Asian Science Fiction*, which gathers together speculative writing from South Asia in English as well as works translated from Urdu, Bengali, Marathi and Hindi. In the introduction to the second volume of the anthology, which has writings from both established and new writers, editor Tarun K. Saint argues that current trends in contemporary South Asian speculative fiction reveal "a productive conjoining of the bizarre and the mundane, the real and the hyper-real, yet underpinned by a sense of the perils of existing in techno-bubbles of simulated utopias in a region on the cusp of what may be irrevocable alterations."[35] For Saint, the contours of the worlds being created by South Asian science fiction writers today reveal "a return to an ethically grounded collective South Asian civilizations narrative, along with a growing recognition that multiple 'other' South Asian spaces exist."[36] One can discern various thematic strands and prose styles of writers in different languages converging into the distinct literary tradition of South Asian futurisms, a variegated body of work which speaks to the multiplicity of South Asian realities.

Visions of the future are more crucial now than ever. As this essay has argued, an important function of futuristic visions has always been to estrange readers from their own present moment so that they might be able to view it differently, a call to action which is increasingly urgent today. The futurisms offered by South Asian science fiction and fantasy writers have responded to specific socio-political moments in the subcontinent's history, offering alternate visions of the future in contrast to the varying discourses of (neo)colonialism, capitalism, ethno-religious nationalism and geopolitical conflict. As the optimistic, resistance-fuelled fervour of 19th and 20th century South Asian utopian futurism has given way to the dark futurity of the 21st century, contemporary visions of the future offer a reminder about what exactly is at stake if the current trajectories of our lives in South Asia are allowed to proceed unchecked. These visions are startling not because of how dissimilar they are to our present, but because of how plausible and realistic they appear. The dystopia of climate change is already upon us, and we have already been witnessing decades of violent nationalism and increasing authoritarianism. What South Asian futurisms might offer us is perhaps a roadmap into a radically different future: one that connects localized forms of struggle and resistance into a broader, transnational and potentially global way of being, one that urges us to seek out and nurture those glimmers of utopia we can see in the dystopian world around us.

Notes

1. Frederic Jameson, "Progress versus Utopia; Or, Can We Imagine the Future," *Science Fiction Studies* Vol. 9, No. 2 (July, 1982): 147-158.
2. Uppinder Mehan, "Final Thoughts." In *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction & Fantasy*, eds. Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004), 794-98, Apple Books.
3. Vandana Singh, "Reunion," in *The Gollancz Book of South Asian Science Fiction*, ed. Tarun K. Saint (Gurugram: Hachette India, 2019), 341-64. Anthony Giddens, *Conversations with Anthony Giddens: Making Sense of*
4. *Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 94; emphasis mine.
5. Adam Roberts, *Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2000), 66.
6. John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 3.
7. Suparno Banerjee, *Indian Science Fiction: Patterns, History and Hybridity* (University of Wales Press, 2021), 7.
8. Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." In *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.
9. Nnedi Okorafor, "African Futurism Defined," Nnedi Wahala Zone Blog, posted October 19 2019, http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html
10. Jameson, "Progress," 152.
11. Kylas Chunder Dutt, 'A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945,' *Wasafiri* 21/3 (2006), 15–20.
12. Shoshee Chunder Dutt, 'The Republic of Orissa: A Page from the Annals of the Twentieth Century.' In *Bengaliana: A Dish of Rice, and Curry, and Other Indigestible Ingredients* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spik, and Co., 1878), pp. 347–55.
13. Banerjee, *Indian Science Fiction*, 25-26.
14. Hossain, Rokeya Sakhawat, *Sultana's Dream and Selections from the Secluded Ones* (New York: Feminist Press 1988).
15. Rahul Sankrityayan, *Baisvee Sadi* (Allahabad: Kitab Mahal, 2015).
16. Muhammad Khalid Akhtar, "Bees Sau Gyara." In *Chakiwara Mein Visaal: Teen Novel* (Karachi: Aaj Ki Kitabain, 2012).
17. Akhtar, "Bees Sau Gyara," 11.
18. Thomas Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000).
19. Moylan, *Scraps*, 276.
20. Banerjee, *Indian Science Fiction*, 116.
21. Arafat Mazher, "*Shehr-e-Tabassum: An Animated Short Film*," YouTube, premiered on February 29 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Guio-TOXFoo
22. Mohiuddin Nawab, "Devta". *Suspense Digest.* (Karachi: *Kitabiyat Publication*, 1977-2000), in 56 volumes.
23. Peter Seyferth, "A Glimpse of Hope at the End of the Dystopian Century: The Utopian Dimension of Critical Dystopias," *ILCEA* [Online], 30, January 31 2018, doi:10.4000/ilcea.4454
24. Abdul Mueed, "Meet the inventor of *Cyber-khilafat," The News on Sunday*, September 27, 2020, https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/720504-meet-the-inventor-of-cyberkhilafat
25. Arafat Mazhar, *Swipe: An Animated Short Film*, YouTube, premiered on November 7, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spvflY-ZN-A
26. Moylan, *Scraps*, xii.
27. Prayaag Akbar, *Leila* (Delhi: Simon and Schuster India, 2017).
28. Sami Ahmad Khan, "Dom(e)inating India's Tomorrow(s)? Global Climate Change in Select Anglophonic Narratives," *Fafnir: Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research*, Vol. 6, Issue 2, 2019, 33.
29. Saad Z. Hossain, "Bring Your Own Spoon." In *The Djinn Falls in Love and Other Stories*, ed. Mahvesh Murad and Jared Shurin (Oxford: Solaris, 2017), 624-74, Apple Books.
30. Hossain, "Bring," 673.
31. Singh, "Reunion," 353.
32. Singh, "Reunion," 354.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.

35. Tarun K. Saint, "Introduction." In The Gollancz Book of South Asian Science Fiction Volume 2, ed. Tarun K. Saint (Gurugram: Hachette India, 2021), 12.
36. Ibid.

Akbar, Prayaag. *Leila*. Delhi: Simon and Schuster India, 2017.

Akhtar, Muhammad Khalid. "Bees Sau Gyara." In *Chakiwara Mein Visaal: Teen Novel*. Karachi: Aaj Ki Kitabain, 2012.

Banerjee, Suparno. *Indian Science Fiction: Patterns, History and Hybridity*. University of Wales Press, 2021.

Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." *In Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1994.

Dutt, Kylas Chunder. "A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945," *Wasafiri* 21/3, 2006. 15–20.

Dutt, Shoshee Chunder. "The Republic of Orissa: A Page from the Annals of the Twentieth Century." In *Bengaliana: A Dish of Rice, and Curry, and Other Indigestible Ingredients*. Calcutta: Thacker, Spik, and Co., 1878. 347–55.

Giddens, Anthony. *Conversations with Anthony Giddens: Making Sense of Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Hossain, Rokeya Sakhawat, *Sultana's Dream and Selections from the Secluded Ones*. New York: Feminist Press, 1988.

Hossain, Saad Z.. "Bring Your Own Spoon." In *The Djinn Falls in Love and Other Stories*, ed. Mahvesh Murad and Jared Shurin. Oxford: Solaris, 2017. 624-74.

Jameson, Frederic. "Progress versus Utopia; Or, Can We Imagine the Future," *Science Fiction Studies* Vol. 9, No. 2, July 1982. 147-158.

Khan, Sami Ahmad. "Dom(e)inating India's Tomorrow(s)? Global Climate Change in Select Anglophonic Narratives," *Fafnir: Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research*, Vol. 6, Issue 2, 2019.

Mazhar, Arafat. *Shehr-e-Tabassum: An Animated Short Film*. YouTube, premiered on February 29 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Guio-T0XFoo

____ *Swipe: An Animated Short Film*. YouTube, premiered on November 7, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spvfIY-ZN-A

Mehan, Uppinder. "Final Thoughts." In *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction & Fantasy*, eds. Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004. 794-98.

Moylan, Thomas. *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*. Boulder: Westview Press, 2000.

Nawab, Mohiuddin. "Devta". *Suspense Digest*. Karachi: Kitabiyat Publication. 1977-2000.

Mueed, Abdul Mueed. "Meet the inventor of *Cyber-khilafat*." *The News on Sunday*, September 27, 2020. https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/720504-meet-the-inventor-of-cyberkhilafat

Okorafor, Nnedi. "African Futurism Defined". *Nnedi Wahala Zone Blog*. October 19, 2019. http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html

Sankrityayan, Rahul. *Baisvee Sadi*. Allahabad: Kitab Mahal, 2015.

Rieder, John. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan University Press, 2008.

Roberts, Adam. Science Fiction. London: Routledge, 2000.

Saint, Tarun K. "Introduction." In *The Gollancz Book of South Asian Science Fiction Volume 2*, ed. Tarun K. Saint. Gurugram: Hachette India, 2021.

Seyferth, Peter. "A Glimpse of Hope at the End of the Dystopian Century: The Utopian Dimension of Critical Dystopias," *ILCEA* [Online], 30. January 31, 2018. doi:10.4000/ilcea.4454

Singh, Vandana. "Reunion." In *The Gollancz Book of South Asian Science Fiction*, ed. Tarun K. Saint. Gurugram: Hachette India, 2019. 341-64.