

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Historical Poetics of Indian Dystopian Fiction in English: A Critical
Study**



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Submitted to

The Department of English

Faculty of Arts

The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda
Vadodara, Gujarat, India – 390002

In conformity with the requirements to fulfill the criteria for the award of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Introduction

This dissertation historicizes the anglophone Indian dystopian novel to examine the genre's contemporary form in India by studying selected novels as representative specimens of broad thematic classes that pervade Indian English dystopian novels. These novels include Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (2020), Sowmya Rajendran's *The Lesson* (2015), and Gautam Bhatia's duology, *The Wall* (2020) and *The Horizon* (2021).

This research enterprise is premised on the argument that anglophone Indian dystopian genre fiction is not a reductive derivative of the Western, Anglo-American dystopian genre fiction; consequently, its development and generic constitution as a distinctive Indian literary category cannot be explained by undiscerningly extrapolating the historical and ideological contexts of European modernity and its ramifications that precipitated Western dystopian fiction in the early twentieth century.

The pioneering anglophone dystopian genre fiction that appeared in Europe and America in the first half of the twentieth century, exemplified by works like Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), articulated a systemic critique of European modernity, whose ramifications were most emblematically represented by World Wars, totalitarianism, and weaponization of science and technology, particularly weapons of mass destruction like the atom bomb. These historical ramifications challenged the Enlightenment doctrine of scientific progress, that science and reason would invariably precipitate pervasive civilizational progress and freedom. The classical dystopian fiction of the early twentieth century thus sought to contest the doctrine of scientific rationality and to highlight the inherent dystopian sensibilities of the utopian belief in scientific progress to bring about civilizational progress and freedom through scientific and technological advancement. This is the broader socio-historical and ideological context within which the representative anglophone dystopian fiction emerged and developed in Europe and America.

However, India's relationship with European modernity is mediated through its colonial subjugation, and therefore, its grievances with the trajectory of European modernity and its dystopian visions are not entirely the same as those of the West and are partly shaped by its

colonial history. In this context, Chapter 3 of the dissertation elucidates how various sociohistorical developments in postcolonial India, such as the Partition, military conflicts with neighboring countries, and the imposition of the Internal Emergency (1975-1977), as moments that destabilized the ideological assurances of anticolonial modernity and disrupted the utopian aspirations associated with independence. Collectively, these events created a socio-historical precedent conducive to articulations of dystopian sentiment in Indian literature.

Furthermore, critics like Gauri Viswanathan, Meenakshi Mukherjee, and Priya Joshi have traced the circulation and production of the Indian novel to the nineteenth century, while Suparno Banerjee, Sami Ahmad Khan, and Urvashi Kuhad have similarly delineated early strands of Indian science fiction to the late nineteenth century. Thus, both the novel and the broader generic category of science fiction have a history of over a hundred years in India. Despite such a longstanding literary heritage and apposite sociocultural and historical developments, anglophone Indian dystopian genre fiction only began to take shape in the late twentieth century.

Yet, a detailed review of literature reveals sustained academic research projects that probe the emergence of anglophone Indian dystopian genre fiction and comprehensively contextualize the genre's emergence as well as the conditions of cultural and literary ascendancy of the genre, and articulate a theoretically consistent account of the socio-historical motivations behind its thematic and ideological concerns remain scarce. Thus, this dissertation undertakes the essential task of examining the contemporary form of the Indian dystopian novel in English through historicization.

To carry out such an extensive undertaking, I rely on the theoretical framework of Historical Poetics as the primary analytical framework. Historical poetics offers a set of methodological procedures that enable one to theorize literary history through socio-historical comprehension of genres, forms, and their functions. Historical poetics was first conceived by the nineteenth-century Russian theorist Alexander Veselovsky (1838-1906), whose work deliberated on broad interrelations of social and literary history “to explain the rise and fall of particular literary forms in particular historical periods” (Kliger and Maslov 39). A more detailed discussion on historical poetics is undertaken in the later section.

Research Objective and Questions

The primary objective of this research is to historicize the rise of anglophone Indian dystopian novel in 1990s India within its broader socio-historical contexts by studying selected novels as specimens of the genre to inquire into its contemporary form.

The following are some of the key research questions that structure the research exploration and effectively enable the pursuit of the stated objective:

- What are the different conceptions of dystopian imagination in English and Indian English novels?
- What socio-cultural conditions contributed to the emergence of this form?
- What cultural markers are designated as the signifiers of dystopia?
- What is the nature of dystopian signifiers—does it lean toward escapism or romanticism, or is it cautionary?
- What are the socio-cultural and historical motivations behind the circulation and adoption of the dystopian genre in India?
- What historical developments during this period made dystopian genre fiction a relevant form of expression?
- What sociocultural markers are employed to ‘Indianize’ the dystopian genre fiction?

Research Methodology

To materialize the professed objective of this thesis and address the research questions, the dissertation employs an array of theoretical frameworks to develop a critical understanding of the ideas about genre, novel, utopia, dystopia, modernity, imperialism, and globalization by drawing on terminologies and theorizations from various disciplines like Utopian Studies, Postcolonial Studies, English Studies, and Comparative Literature. To contextualize these

ideas within the research paradigms of this thesis, I refer to Historical Poetics as the primary methodological framework.

Historical poetics, as briefly indicated earlier, was first conceptualized by Alexander Veselovsky and later developed in the works of Russian Formalists, Czech Structuralists, and Mikhail Bakhtin as an approach that seeks to theorize literary history through a socio-historical comprehension of forms and genres. In contrast to the prevalent aesthetic and evolution-oriented inquiry into forms in the Anglo-American literary tradition, historical poetics pursues a historical examination of social and literary ‘preconditions’ that contribute to the emergence of forms.

The term ‘historical poetics’ was first used by the nineteenth-century Russian theorist Alexander Veselovsky (1838-1906) in his essay titled ‘From the Introduction to Historical Poetics’ (1894). Veselovsky conceived “literature as a social phenomenon” (Kliger and Maslow 39) and thus viewed literary history as intimately tied to the broader “history of social thought” (Veselovsky 40). Consequently, Veselovsky focuses on dynamic social and historical processes to comprehend literary developments rather than conceiving literary history as a static account (Shaitanov 432). Thus, he contended that literary forms correlated “with the systemically changing social ideals” (qtd. in Kliger and Maslow 3) and, therefore, “understands literary phenomena (both individual works and genres) dynamically as responses to socio- psychological demands” whereby “form is a reaction to need, an attempt at meaning in the face of its historically urgent lack” (11).

In other words, the emergence and development of literary genres and forms are responses to and necessitated by the sociohistorical changes occurring in a society at the time. In this way, they serve a sociohistorical function and become relevant. Furthermore, historical poetics enable us to apprehend that literary practice is “not only a response to, but also a constitutive factor in, history” (2). On account of this social and historical quality of literary practice, Veselovsky opposed “postromantic aesthetics” and the prevalent Romantic mode of analysis, which credited individual authors as the sole originators of the literary creative process and undermined the role of the inherent process of literary evolution by discrediting

the influence of inherited tradition and collective historical processes (Shaitanov 437; Kliger and Maslow 14).

To surmise, historical poetics is characterized by three central theoretical premises and tenets. First, literature and literary practices of creation and circulation (including analytical) are permeated by dynamic social and historical processes. Second, literary forms and genres evolve in response to sociohistorical developments within a society at a particular juncture in time. Thus, they are viewed as dynamic literary categories serving a sociohistorical function rather than as literary artifacts finalized into a static mode. Third, due to this social and historical quality of literary practices and forms, the Romantic mode of literary analysis and values such as spontaneous expression, originality, and genius are inadequate measures and impede a more comprehensive conceptualization of literature.

Thus, within historical poetics, the Romantic literary tendencies, such as the obsession with a creator's personality (the poet's literary genius) itself, become one of the "historicized categories" (Shaitanov 437). Historical poetics de-emphasizes the overstated role of the individual author as primary originator of literary forms and content, and foregrounds inherent interconnected sociohistorical forces and the role of traditional inheritance in the process of literary creation and circulation through historicization, to show that the individual literary creator and their creations themselves are only a part of and a response in a broader sociohistorical 'dialogue.'

These contending premises and tenets concerning literary history, evolution, and forms, first articulated in the writings of Veselovsky, were recast and developed by several Russian and Czech theorists before being consolidated into a composite literary theory of language and literature in the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin through his radical theorizations such as the theory of novel, dialogism, the chronotope, among other notable concepts. An in-depth discussion of these theoretical assertions and how they contribute to the development of historical poetics as a framework is elucidated in Chapter 2.

In the context of the research paradigms of this thesis, examining the form of the Indian English dystopian novel through the framework of historical poetics would involve engaging with questions inquiring what historical conditions led to the circulation and adaptation of dystopian fiction in India. How do we contextualize the circulation of a literary form like dystopian fiction within Indian literary traditions when the genesis of such a form is rooted in the Western literary tradition, wherein it is deployed as a critique of specific socio-historical processes of modernity within European and American sociopolitical contexts? In adapting such a literary form in India, what socio-cultural negotiations take place on the part of the writers in navigating discordant Western and Indian relationships with discursive ideas about categories, such as nation, history, science, and modernity?

Amidst such a differential conceptualization (rooted in politics of location) of these ostensibly pervasive ideological categories, how does a writer ‘Indianize’ such a literary form, and what socio-cultural markers are employed to achieve such signification? These are some of the key questions this research attempts to address.

Key Findings

The following findings of the dissertation systematically address its core research questions, which inquire into the socio-cultural conditions that led to the emergence of the anglophone Indian dystopian novel, how it conceptually differs from its Western counterparts, and the specific cultural markers and strategies employed to ‘Indianize’ the genre.

Corresponding to the research questions about the emergence of anglophone Indian dystopian genre fiction and socio-cultural and historical developments that made it a relevant form of cultural and literary expression, the study finds that while proto-dystopian impulses existed in Indian English fiction from the early nineteenth century through the 1980s (such as in Salman Rushdie’s works), a distinct genre tradition of anglophone Indian dystopian fiction only begins to consolidate around the turn of the twenty-first century, which is now described by critics like Mrinalini Chakravorty (267) and E. Dawson Varughese (1054) as ‘post-millennial dystopian fiction.’

The emergence of this literary corpus was precipitated at the intersection of two major historical developments in India: the postcolonial disillusionment and the liberalization of the Indian economy. The postcolonial disillusionment can be apprehended by the waning of anticolonial, nationalist utopianism on account of traumatic events like the Partition, military conflicts, and the 1975 Internal Emergency, which destabilized, or to a certain extent, gravely contravened the ideological assurances of the newly independent postcolonial state; while the liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s marked the advent of what Giddens calls 'high modernity' (Giddens 177), characterized by globalization.

This economic shift produced a new, English-speaking, aspirational, techno-managerial middle class whose values, technological sensibilities, and anxieties aligned with the themes of science fiction and dystopia, forming the primary author-reader network for the genre.

With respect to the different conceptions of dystopian imagination in English and Indian English novels, as stated earlier, the research establishes that Indian dystopian fiction is not a reductive derivative of Western traditions, which is reflected in its formal and ideological characteristics.

Classical Anglo-American dystopias (such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World*) emerged as systemic critiques of the failures of European Enlightenment rationality, industrialization, and totalitarianism following the World Wars. India's relationship with modernity, however, was mediated through colonial subjugation. Indian dystopian fiction depicts issues in which modern democratic and bureaucratic institutions are permeated by and reconfigured through premodern, indigenous hierarchies and neoliberal forces. Formally, while Western dystopias typically project societal fears onto a distant, speculative futuristic timeline, relying on spatial and temporal alterity, postcolonial Indian dystopias are almost always 'presentist.' Using Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, the research finds that Indian dystopias locate their fears in the 'here and now,' intensifying existing social structures to critique the immediate conditions of millennial capitalism.

Another key finding of the study concerns the ‘Indianization’ of the genre and the social markers and signifiers employed to ‘Indianize’ the fiction. Indian writers indigenize the global dystopian template not merely by inserting local names or ornamental motifs, but by fundamentally restructuring the genre's formal logic through indigenous epistemologies, mythic structures, cultural and literary artifacts, and sociocultural scripts.

For instance, Samit Basu’s *Chosen Spirits* Indianizes the cyberpunk subgenre by intertwining global digital surveillance capitalism with the specific class and caste disparities of India. Similarly, Basu reworks the cyberpunk trope of ‘city-in-decline’ by inserting a lament on the city of Delhi by Mir Taqi Mir. Gautam Bhatia’s *The Wall* draws on Indian epics and mythology, such as the Ramayana; constructs its narrative world through indigenous concepts; and depicts dystopian control by adopting Sanskrit concepts such as ‘mandalas’ (concentric divisions of society), ‘praya’ (penance), and ‘smara’ (yearning). In Sowmya Rajendran’s *The Lesson*, the dystopian biopolitical control over women is not driven by a futuristic demographic crisis (as in *The Handmaid's Tale*), but by the bureaucratization of everyday Indian patriarchal scripts of honor, shame, and purity, where the state’s punitive technology for disobedient women, the ‘PuriFire,’ chillingly alludes to Sita’s ‘agni-pariksha’ in the Ramayana. In this way, Indian writers embed indigenous epistemic and narrative systems, such as mythic structures, ancient philosophical concepts, and localized socio-cultural scripts, formatively into their world-building and narrative organization

Apart from these findings, which directly address the research questions, Chapter 2 of the dissertation, dedicated to the discussion of historical poetics, also constitutes crucial findings of the study.

The chapter argues that historical poetics offers remedies to the limitations of conventional (structuralist) genre criticism. Modern genre studies are broadly confined to cataloguing formal features or mapping systems of conventions, and often privilege synchronic analysis over historical explanation. In the wake of models associated with figures such as Northrop Frye and Vladimir Propp, as Jameson argues (Duff 167), genre is often treated as a transhistorical structure governed by recurrent narrative functions or archetypal patterns. While such approaches offer taxonomic clarity, they struggle to account for how genres emerge,

mutate, and acquire new ideological valences within specific socio-historical formations. By contrast, the chapter positions historical poetics, tracing its genealogy from Alexander Veselovsky to Mikhail Bakhtin, as a framework that synthesizes form and history. Rather than isolating structure from context, historical poetics demonstrates how literary devices, narrative configurations, and semantic patterns develop from concrete historical processes. In this sense, historical poetics addresses a central theoretical impasse in genre studies and provides a framework to analyze formal regularities without abstracting them from the historical conditions that produce and transform them.

Equally crucially, although historical poetics remains largely unfamiliar outside Russian and Eastern European literary traditions, its principles are frequently adopted (even if not explicitly acknowledged) in contemporary literary scholarship. When critics attempt to explain literary development, trace formal innovation to social change, or situate genre within material and ideological histories, they implicitly rely on the tenets of historical poetics. Yet the framework itself is rarely named or systematically articulated in anglophone or Indian literary studies. It is in this light that one of the dissertation's key findings emerges. The historiographical work of Meenakshi Mukherjee and Priya Joshi can be read as rare and significant instances of historical poetics in practice within the Indian context. By treating the Indian English novel as a form shaped by specific historical pressures rather than as a reductive derivative of Western models, their scholarship practices the central commitments of historical poetics, even though it has not been recognized or discussed as such. The dissertation thus not only rehabilitates historical poetics as a methodological foundation but also repositions these critics as contributors to its development in India, thereby expanding the framework's intellectual genealogy beyond its conventional geographic and disciplinary boundaries.

Conclusion

This dissertation concludes that contemporary anglophone Indian dystopian fiction establishes itself as a distinct literary formation through a process of formal indigenization. Instead of merely functioning as a derivative extension of Western dystopian models, the genre reworks dystopian form at the level of narrative logic, temporality, symbolism, and ideological structure.

As discussed earlier, Samit Basu, Gautam Bhatia, and Saumya Rajendran's novels do not merely localize global tropes through surface markers of 'Indian-ness,' rather, they embed dystopian structures within indigenous epistemologies, mythic frameworks, and historically sedimented sociocultural scripts, whereby Cyberpunk decay is refracted through the *longue durée* of Delhi's literary past; biopolitical control is articulated through local patriarchal and mythic constructions; enclosed dystopian space is organized through Sanskritic and cyclical conceptions of order and hierarchy. Through these formal recalibrations, Indian dystopian fiction emerges as a mode of cultural critique grounded in the historical textures of Indian modernity rather than as an imported aesthetic template.

However, there remains a central tension within this formation of a distinctive Indian literary category of anglophone dystopian genre fiction: the classed nature of its representation of Indian-ness. Critics such as Tabish Khair, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, and Shikha Vats have observed that anglophone Indian fiction is predominantly authored by and oriented toward an English-speaking, upper-middle-class readership. Dystopian crisis often unfolds through elite protagonists whose anxieties reflect the vulnerabilities of liberal, urban civil society rather than the precarities of subaltern life. However, drawing on Fredric Jameson's conception of genre as a 'socially symbolic act' and Partha Chatterjee's distinction between civil and political society, this dissertation argues that such asymmetry is not an ethical oversight but a formal representation of India's uneven modernity. By maintaining the structural separation between the discursive, insulated resistance of the protagonists of the novels, decidedly located within civil society, and the embodied, precarious survival of the marginalized, inhabiting the political society, these novels encode the stratified realities of post-liberalization India into their narrative architecture. Their refusal to depict a romantic, cross-class revolutionary synthesis becomes a self-reflexive acknowledgment of the limits of the very social location from which they speak.

Finally, the dissertation demonstrates that the authenticity of anglophone Indian dystopian fiction lies not in its capacity to represent a unified 'Indian' identity, but in its formalization of contradiction. Its structural indigenization and its classed perspective operate together, revealing how the promises of neoliberal modernity remain unevenly distributed and internally fractured. In doing so, the genre consolidates itself as a historically grounded and

formally innovative category within Indian literary studies, which depicts contemporary India by exposing the limits, anxieties, and compromises of the social world that produces it.

Recommendations/Suggestions for Further Research

While this dissertation has sought to establish a historically grounded account of the anglophone Indian dystopian novel, its methodological coherence necessitated deliberate exclusions that open substantial avenues for future research. Thus, the restriction to the novel as a primary form, and to English as the principal linguistic medium, leaves several adjacent yet critically important terrains underexplored. Among these, Indian dystopian graphic novels demand sustained scholarly attention. Graphic narratives such as *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* (2015) by Sarnath Banerjee, *Halahala* (began in 2009) by Appupen, and *Bhimayana* (2011) exemplify dystopian engagements with caste, urban alienation, ecological collapse, and marginal histories through experimental visual idioms. However, their analysis requires methodological tools attuned to visual semiotics, multimodal narration, and graphic temporality; these are frameworks that exceed the scope of a study centered on prose fiction. A comprehensive examination of Indian dystopian graphic narratives would therefore not only expand the corpus but also refine the analytical vocabulary necessary for understanding dystopia across media.

Equally significant is the prevalence of dystopian imagination within short stories in both English and Bhasha literatures. Anthologies such as *Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories* (2018) by Vandana Singh reveal the conspicuous presence of eco-dystopian and climate-fictional concerns in shorter narrative forms, often more urgently than in the novel. Yet, unlike the Indian novel, the short story lacks an adequately systematized historiography capable of tracing its formal evolution across languages and regions. The diversity of storytelling traditions in Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Malayalam, and other literatures complicates descriptive poetics and demands foundational archival and historiographical work before genre formation can be mapped with methodological rigor. Similarly, dystopian sensibilities in Indian theatre, evident in plays such as *Harvest* (1997) by Manjula Padmanabhan, *Final Solutions* (1993) by Mahesh Dattani, and *The Muslim Vanishes* (2022) by Saeed Naqvi, remain under-theorized in relation to genre studies. Theatre's performative and embodied dimensions introduce additional methodological challenges that similarly warrant dedicated inquiry.

Nevertheless, the theoretical groundwork developed in this dissertation, particularly its articulation of historical poetics and its delineation of constitutive dystopian concerns, offers a transferable framework for future studies. The analytical tools formulated for examining emergence, formal transformation, and ideological encoding in the novel can be extended to short stories, graphic narratives, and dramatic texts. Future research may thus build upon this foundation to conceptualize Indian dystopia as a cross-media formation, tracing how its structural indigenization and socio-historical inscriptions manifest differently across linguistic traditions and narrative forms. In doing so, scholarship can move toward a more expansive and systematically articulated account of dystopian imagination in the Indian literary field.

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