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Research Paper

Narratives of Repair: Ecological Trauma and Collective Survival in *The Black Dwarves of the Good Little Bay*

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Abstract
This essay offers a close reading of Varun Thomas Mathew's The Black Dwarves of the Good Little Bay to examine how contemporary Indian science fiction reconceptualises ecological trauma and survival. Rejecting models of catastrophe premised on spectacle or narrative closure, the novel frames trauma as a slow, infrastructural and ecological condition embedded in everyday life. Drawing on Rob Nixon's theory of slow violence, the essay argues that environmental devastation in Black Dwarves is managed through technological enclosure, bureaucratic governance and mnemonic erasure. Engaging Anna Tsing's account of life in capitalist ruins and Elizabeth DeLoughrey's theorization of non-restorative futurity, the analysis shows how the novel imagines repair as ongoing, collective, and provisional rather than redemptive. In foregrounding continuance over recovery, Black Dwarves advances a postcolonial science-fictional ethics of survival amid irreversible damage.

Keywords: *science fiction, South Asian futures, slow violence, ecocriticism, collective survival, environmental governance; memory and erasure*

Much of contemporary anglophonic science-fiction (SF), that operates the ideas of trauma and its consequences, remains tethered to a rather spectacular rupture. It could be a nuclear apocalypse, major terrorist events, or even a singular but complete civilizational collapse. However, as Rob Nixon, a professor and thinker, has argued, contemporary crises increasingly operate through something he calls "slow violence" which inculcates the attritional, dispersed, "incremental and accretive" forms of harm that are "neither spectacular nor instantaneous" (2).

This paper proposes that contemporary Indian SF, particularly Varun Thomas Mathew's *Black Dwarves of the Good Little Bay*, articulates a distinctive speculative response to trauma, one that is closer in its insight to Nixon's. This response goes around the usual apocalyptic or psychic catharsis, and situates itself in forms of slow traumatic events such as ecological degradation, infrastructural decay, bureaucratic neglect, climate-induced displacement, etc. Under the conceptual frame of 'narratives of repair,' this paper attempts to argue that contemporary SF contributes a crucial ecocritical intervention. It reconceptualizes trauma as environmental and infrastructural, and at the same time it presents survival as a form of collective ecological maintenance rather than narrative resolution. In that, rather than narrativising survival as a form of individual heroism or redemptive closure, such SF texts imagine repair as an ongoing, materially embedded collective practice.

Rob Nixon's formulation of *slow violence* offers a crucial corrective to dominant, event-based models of trauma by redefining violence as a process. Such violence lacks the temporal compression and visual drama through which catastrophe is conventionally recognized. Phenomena such as deforestation, toxic accumulation, climate-induced sea-level rise, the erosion of water and soil, etc. register not as discrete disasters but as crises whose casualties, be it human or ecological, are systematically excluded from urgent political response. In postcolonial and Global South contexts, environmental trauma is consequently lived less as headline catastrophe than as quotidian degradation, such as through contaminated landscapes, failing infrastructure or bodily exposures to toxicity. These are also the conditions that remain politically muted. The representational challenge Nixon poses is a formal one and is precisely the challenge that contemporary SF, particularly in postcolonial contexts, is structurally positioned to take up.

Set in 2041, *The Black Dwarves of the Good Little Bay* unfolds in a future where Bombay (now Mumbai) has been quietly rendered uninhabitable through a persistent environmental attrition. The island city's disappearance and its transformation into a wasteland is the cumulative result of flooding, pollution, ecological exhaustion and other slow-cataclysmic factors. In its place rises the Bombadrome, a colossal, self-contained megastructure described as "a fortress… 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 15). This architectural intervention does not restore the city so much as it seals it off as it encloses millions within a technological shell designed to manage life after irreversible ecological damage. The novel thus situates ecological trauma in a form of unspectacularly slow cataclysm that is incremental and normalised over time so the devastation appears as a mere background condition.

The Bombadrome does promise stability by absorbing catastrophe into infrastructure. Following a massive flood and the desertification of surrounding land, Mumbai's displaced population is categorically relocated into this towering structure, where all aspects of human life are meticulously regulated through technological systems. A land reform bill abolishes private ownership in Mumbai, facilitating mass expropriation at a moment when environmental devastation has already stripped citizens of meaningful choice. As corporations dissolve and property worth billions is abandoned, displaced workers and migrants are recruited to build the Bombadrome, while international institutions such as the World Bank are enlisted to legitimise the project. The resulting structure, a "modern citadel" spanning over five hundred square kilometres and powered by solar energy with an advanced waste-management system (15). Yet it's very efficiency obscures the violence that enabled it, including the lives displaced, the labour exploited, and the memories erased.

Within the 'drome', inhabitants are subjected to chemical mediation that dulls memory and softens affect, while state-controlled televised visuals circulate an officially sanctioned version of history, in quite an Orwellian fashion. The result is a population that takes comfort in "manufactured peace, the artificially softened speech and the on-demand gratification of pleasures" (92), even as the ecological and political violences that necessitated the Bombadrome's existence are erased from collective consciousness. What emerges is a dystopia that masquerades as repair, a society that claims to have overcome environmental crisis by enclosing its consequences, quietly snubbing their causes. In Nixon's terms, the Bombadrome exemplifies how slow violence is rendered politically invisible; how damage that unfolds can be managed through administration and, more importantly, without ever being acknowledged as violence at all.

The story is mediated through Convent Godse, a former Indian Administrative Service officer and the last remaining bureaucratic witness to Mumbai's dismantling. His account marked by delay and accumulation, unfolds decades after the events that culminated in the Bombadrome's construction. Godse, then, is neither revolutionary nor heroic, he is rather an archivist of loss and an apologist of administrative labour as ethical action. He inhabits a world in which trauma has been bureaucratised and where environmental collapse has been normalised. He insists on unmasking the political processes through which this ecological and infrastructural catastrophe was quietly converted into governance.

Central to this conversion is Ankur Lal Shinde, known as Alas, the founder of the Dus Shabd Party (DSP) and the chief architect of the Bombadrome. As a leading contender in the Union elections, Alas articulates a political philosophy grounded in total erasure and enforced renewal: "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" (159). He successfully turns ecological devastation into an opportunity for infrastructural consolidation where enforced equality depends on memory loss and spatial enclosure, the exact things the Godse is hoping to uncover.

Godse's intervention takes the form of a report, an act clearly pertaining to the odea of 'narrative of repair' rather than a political overthrow seeking an expose of the Bombadrome as less of a shelter and more a weapon of authoritarian control. After decades of passive observation, Godse resolves to assemble evidence of the events of 2008 that precipitated Mumbai's collapse and reshaped the nation. His urgency is tied to the commencement of an upcoming election. His hopes are that fragments of suppressed history just might interrupt the seamless continuity of the DSP's narrative. His archival labour stands in sharp contrast to the state's erasure of the past, it is repair as an ongoing and fragile practice. Godse's nostalgia exposes the ethical cost of a society that equates harmony with forgetting.

The novel persistently interrogates the logic of infrastructural salvation. What appears as ecological repair is revealed to be a political strategy. As Godse reflects on the ideology underpinning the Bombadrome, the narrative confronts the ethics of sacrificial futurity. He claims, "This country needs to die before it can be reborn" (187).

The Black Dwarves of the Good Little Bay thus refuses apocalyptic closure or restorative redemption. Instead, it frames survival as a matter of continuance within damage, and repair as an ethical practice grounded in memory and collective labour. In doing so, the novel establishes the conditions for a distinctly Indian science-fictional reimagining of trauma, one that locates catastrophe in the slow, infrastructural violence of managed environments. It imagines futurity as the difficult work of living-on amid seemingly irreversible loss.

Matthew's alternate history novel therefore presents ecological trauma as a condition already sedimented into everyday life, what Nixon terms as a violence that is "neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive," which narratively unfolds itself through the damage that is "dispersed across time and space" and therefore "typically not viewed as violence at all" (2–3). The submerged bay in Mathew's novel, or the encroachment of the sea registers as a normalised backdrop, an environmental fact that has been first

bureaucratically absorbed and thereby technologically managed by the drome city large enough to subsume the infrastructural functions of an entire metropolis (Mathew 15). This narrative refusal of apocalypse aligns with Nixon's insistence that slow violence operates as a "long emergency," one whose casualties are "postponed, often for generations," and thus fail to register as crisis within dominant political or affective economies (Nixon 3).

The inhabitants of the Bombadrome live precisely within such postponed catastrophe. They are protected from immediate exposure, yet structurally dependent on systems that displace ecological harm onto those outside the dome. Nixon's claim that "those people lacking resources are the principal casualties of slow violence" becomes legible in the novel through the figure of the Dalit manual scavenger, whose body bears the infrastructural afterlives of ecological neglect and caste oppression and whose labour remains invisible precisely because, as Nixon observes, "their unseen poverty is compounded by the invisibility of the slow violence that permeates so many of their lives" (4). Significantly, Mathew avoids any scenes of spectacular suffering and renders the violence through bureaucratic silence and normalisation, echoing Nixon's argument that media and state discourses privilege "spectacular violence" while attritional harm remains "anonymous" and of "indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world" (3–4). In this sense, *Black Dwarves* does not merely illustrate slow violence; it formally enacts Nixon's representational challenge by converting an ongoing, unspectacular ecological condition into narrative itself, refusing both apocalyptic rupture and redemptive closure in order to make visible a trauma that persists precisely because it has been rendered administratively ordinary.

Amitav Ghosh proclaims that the climate crisis "also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (Ghosh). Mainstream narrative forms, be it the literary or historical novel, have struggled to accommodate gradual planetary breakdown. As Ghosh notes, in a climate-altered future, such as one where "sea-level rise has swallowed the Sundarbans" and made cities like Kolkata or Mumbai uninhabitable, artists and readers would desperately seek signs of that altered world in contemporary literature. If they find none, "what can they do other than conclude that ours was a time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognising the realities of their plight?" (Ghosh). In short, Ghosh and Nixon both argue that slow ecological crises demand new narrative forms capable of depicting the incremental horror. In Nixon's terms, the Bay's trauma is slow in Mathew's novel as nothing explodes at once. Furthermore, the narrative itself resists sensationalism, staying deliberately away from a cataclysmic blockbuster or melodramatic moralising. Instead, his is a careful mining of ongoing decay, exactly the kind of storytelling Ghosh calls for.

Naomi Oreskes observes that humans have "become geological agents, changing the most basic physical processes of Earth," transforming it's fundamentals but our stories have profoundly lagged (qtd. in Chakrabarty 206). Indian SF as a response to precisely these interlinked ecological and postcolonial crises, attempts to embrace giving form to slow violence. Ursula K. Heise's notion of eco-cosmopolitanism further underscores that local environmental harm is globally entangled. Her idea urges readers to think beyond isolated incidents, as she opines that ecological issues are situated at a complex intersection of politics, economy, technology and culture and therefore can't be adequately understood through a narrowly local or place-bound perspective (28). She contends that eco-cosmopolitanism demands a reorientation of environmental imagination itself, as she says that "the challenge for environmentalist thinking… is to shift the core of its cultural imagination from a sense of place to a less territorial and more systemic sense of planet" (56). A flood in Mumbai is, then, inevitably connected to distant histories of colonial extraction and modern capitalism. The decaying infrastructure and natural systems in Mathew's novel are shaped by both the legacies of colonial urban planning and contemporary state neglect, a convergence that Heise describes as the "imbrication" of local ecological systems within global ones (192). Through the linkages between caste oppression, state bureaucracy and climate devastation, *Black Dwarves* initiates an eco-cosmopolitan awareness that humans have a duty to all ecosystems, not just the one that they are a part of.

Repair in the novel is sustained through partial interventions as it remains an structurally fragile affair. Anna Tsing in her account of "life in capitalist ruins," opines that survival unfolds through "collaborative survival" (4) rather than recovery and, "precarity is the condition of our time" rather than a temporary aberration (20). Mathew's novel similarly situates futurity within damage, imagining survival as the labour of living on amidst ecological ruin rather than the overcoming of catastrophe. In doing so, contemporary Indian SF departs from dominant Western SF paradigms that privilege either utopian recuperation or dystopian finality. Instead, like Matthew, these narratives favour what Elizabeth DeLoughrey theorises through tidalectic temporality, that is a mode of existence grounded in repetition and continuance (1). She emphasises that postcolonial futures are organised around horizons that "remain an ideal rather than an attainable destination" (246), shaped by histories of violence that, "do not belong safely to the past," but persist through new forms and scales (269). Ecological futurity is therefore not a cure that totally resolves damage, it is however an endurance and continuance that redefines survival as collective, uneven and yet unfinished.

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