



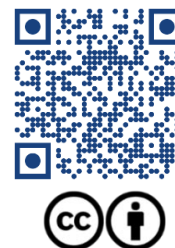
# Reimagining the Future: Asian Futurism and Its Resonance in India with Special Reference to Samit Basu and Manjula Padmanabhan

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**Abstract**— Asian Futurism is an emergent intellectual and creative movement that reconfigures the futuristic imagination through the lens of Asian histories, mythologies, and contemporary realities. As a critical response to the Western-dominated visions of the future, Asian Futurism provides a platform for alternative narratives rooted in decolonial, techno-spiritual, and socio-political paradigms. This article explores the contours of Asian Futurism with a specific focus on India, examining the works of Indian authors like Samit Basu and Manjula Padmanabhan's works, like- *Turbulence*, *Resistance*, *The City Inside*, *Harvest* and *Escape*, respectively. All works embody Asian futurism by critiquing societal inequalities in dystopian futures rooted in Indian culture. Their speculative fictions critically engage with the themes of identity, technology, power, and resistance completely resonate with the theme. Indian authors reinterpret local traditions and futuristic technologies to narrate a uniquely Indian future, offering resistance to Western hegemony in global science. Asian futurism is a cultural movement envisioning futures through Asian lenses, often challenging Western narratives, with Indian literature contributing through speculative fiction.



**Keywords**— Asian futurism, future narratives, speculative fictions, cultural movement.

## I. INTRODUCTION TO ASIAN FUTURISM

Asian futurism is a dynamic cultural and artistic movement that reimagines future possibilities through an Asian perspective, contrasting with Western-dominated science fiction narratives. It draws inspiration from Asian technological advancements, cultural elements, and histories, often addressing themes like colonialism, identity, and social inequality. In literature, it manifests as speculative fiction that integrates Asian contexts into futuristic settings, offering alternative visions of the future. Futurism has long been considered a space of imagination dominated by the West. However, the rise of Asian Futurism disrupts this trajectory by embedding future narratives within Asia's vast cultural, philosophical, and political frameworks. Rooted in the aesthetics of Afro futurism and indigenous futurisms, Asian Futurism recognises Asia not merely as a setting but as an active

agent in envisioning alternative futures. Indian literature, often tied to its colonial past and postcolonial identity, is now evolving through the infusion of futuristic themes that challenge both tradition and modernity. Asian futurism is characterised as a fluid and deictic concept, often defined in contrast to Western futurism, which tends to focus on technological progress and individualistic heroism. It encompasses various artistic expressions, including literature, inspired by Asian cultural elements such as technological advancements, anime, and sci-fi depictions of Asian societies. It challenges Western stereotypes, particularly techno-Orientalism, which portrays Asia as a futuristic dystopia, by offering narratives that integrate Asian identities, histories, and social dynamics into speculative futures. For instance, works like Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* and Indra Das's *The Devourers*

are important writings in literature for blending Asian culture with futurism, highlighting its global relevance.

The movement is not monolithic; it includes subcategories like South Asian futurism, which encompasses Indian literature, and is often compared to Afro futurism for its focus on cultural reclamation and speculative exploration. Its significance lies in providing alternative visions that address issues like colonialism, identity, and social inequality, making it a vital part of contemporary cultural discourse.

## II. SCOPE IN INDIAN LITERATURE

In Indian literature, Asian futurism is expressed through works that project Indian society into the future, exploring how current trends might evolve. Authors tackle issues such as caste, religion, gender, and technology, using speculative fiction to critique contemporary realities and imagine alternatives. Notable works include dystopian narratives that reflect on global inequalities while being grounded in Indian culture, enriching global literary discourse. Asian Futurism can be broadly defined as a cultural and artistic movement that uses speculative narratives to explore Asia's future through technology, tradition, mythology, and postcolonial critique. It does not merely project Asia as a consumer of technology but reclaims the narrative as a creator and philosopher of technological and social futures. Influenced by globalisation, surveillance, artificial intelligence, climate change, and digital capitalism, Asian Futurism also challenges linear development models imposed by Western epistemologies. Writers, filmmakers, and artists from across Asia—such as Liu Cixin from China, Mamoru Oshii from Japan, and Bong Joon-ho from South Korea—have contributed significantly to this paradigm. Within the Indian context, the potential of Asian Futurism lies in reinterpreting the Vedas, epics like the *Mahabharata*, and colonial history through a speculative lens, thus constructing an indigenous vision of the future.

In Indian literature, Asian futurism finds expression through speculative fiction that projects Indian society into the future, exploring how current trends might evolve and intensify. This genre is particularly resonant given India's diverse cultural landscape and its historical engagement with colonial and post-colonial narratives. Indian authors use futurist literature to address themes such as caste, religion, gender, and technology, often critiquing contemporary realities while imagining alternative possibilities. Key themes include the impact of globalisation, as seen in dystopian visions of socio-economic disparities, and the intersection of technology with traditional Indian values. Notable motifs include the

use of Indian mythology, language, and social norms to ground futuristic settings, ensuring cultural authenticity. For example, works like Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* and Gautam Bhatia's *The Wall* are part of anthologies like *The Gollancz Book of South Asian Science Fiction*, which highlight the genre's growth. These narratives not only engage with local issues but also contribute to global discourses on futurism, enriching the literary landscape with diverse perspectives.

The scope extends to various subgenres, such as dystopian fiction, eco-futurism, and queer futurism, reflecting the pluralism of South Asian experiences. Events like the Bangalore International Centre's discussion on "Magical Women and the Blossoming of Indian Speculative Fiction" in 2019 underscore the genre's increasing visibility, with authors like Vandana Singh and S. B. Divya also contributing significantly.

Manjula Padmanabhan, born in 1953 in Karnataka, India, is a key figure in this genre. Her works, such as the play *Harvest* (1997), set in a future where India supplies organs to the West, and the novel *Escape* (2008), depicting a dystopian society oppressing women, exemplify Asian futurism. These narratives critique societal issues through futuristic lenses, rooted in Indian contexts, and challenge Western narratives of progress. Asian futurism represents a burgeoning cultural and artistic movement that seeks to envision future possibilities through an Asian lens, distinct from the often Western-centric narratives prevalent in global science fiction and speculative literature. Her multifaceted career as a playwright, cartoonist, and novelist has seen her tackle themes of gender, power, and technology in futuristic settings, making her an ideal subject for this analysis. Her works, including *Harvest* (1997), *Escape* (2008), and *The Island of Lost Girls* (2015), are celebrated for their dystopian visions rooted in Indian contexts.

*Harvest*: Set in Bombay in 2010, this play envisages a future where India supplies human organs to the West, critiquing the commodification of the human body and globalisation's inequalities. It reflects Asian futurism by grounding its dystopian vision in Indian socio-economic realities, using local settings to address global ethical dilemmas.

*Escape*: This novel depicts a future where women are oppressed by patriarchal technology, with Meiji's escape and resistance highlighting themes of freedom and identity. It embodies Asian futurism by imagining a future where gender inequalities are amplified, rooted in Indian cultural contexts.

*The Island of Lost Girls*: This novel explores the objectification of women in a futuristic setting, critiquing

marriage commercialisation. It uses Indian cultural references to ground its narrative, aligning with Asian futurism's focus on local-global intersections. Short Stories: *Gandhi-Toxin* projects Gandhian ideals into the future, imagining non-violence as a weapon, while *Sharing Air* addresses air pollution in a futuristic Delhi, both exemplifying speculative takes on contemporary issues.

Padmanabhan's *Harvest* won the Onassis Award for Theatre in 1997, marking her as a pioneer in subcontinental science fiction. Her narratives often critique global inequalities and bio-political issues, aligning with Asian futurism's focus on challenging Western narratives. Her short stories, such as *Gandhi-Toxin* and *Sharing Air* from *Kleptomania: Ten Stories* (2004), further illustrate her engagement with futuristic projections of Indian societal issues.

Samit Basu, a pioneer in Indian speculative fiction, is best known for novels like *Turbulence* (2012), *Resistance* (2013), and *The City Inside* (2020). His work exemplifies a futuristic imagination deeply embedded in Indian socio-political reality, making him a vital figure in the discourse of Asian Futurism.

In *The City Inside*, Basu presents a dystopian Delhi governed by authoritarian surveillance and media manipulation. The novel is set in a near-future India, grappling with populism, digital capitalism, and ecological collapse. Through characters like Joey and Rudra, Basu explores the fragmentation of identity in a hyper-connected yet disempowered society. The cityscape, a blend of decaying history and hi-tech control, mirrors India's current anxieties and aspirations. Basu writes, "The only thing more dangerous than ignorance was carefully curated ignorance" (*The City Inside* 84), highlighting the socio-political dangers of digital manipulation and media propaganda. The novel critiques both internal political dynamics and global techno-capitalism, situating India firmly in the global future while questioning the price of its progress. Basu's work refuses to romanticise tradition or idealise technological advancement. Instead, he interrogates both. His characters are not heroes in the traditional sense but flawed individuals navigating an ethical wasteland. This refusal to conform to Western heroic tropes is an act of resistance in itself—a hallmark of Asian Futurism. The speculative becomes a lens to examine contemporary caste politics, gender hierarchies, and communalism in India, all under the garb of a futuristic narrative.

What distinguishes Basu's work within Asian Futurism is its commitment to cultural specificity. References to Indian festivals, mythologies, and even *chai* stalls remain embedded in his dystopian futures, making

them recognisably Indian. This blending of the local and the futuristic is a decolonial act—it refuses the binary of tradition and modernity imposed by colonial frameworks. Moreover, Basu's narratives challenge the Western monopoly over the imagination of dystopia and utopia. While American futurism often projects apocalyptic collapse or interstellar colonisation, Indian futurism as envisioned by Basu is inward-looking, dealing with moral decay, ecological crises, and identity fragmentation. The emphasis is on collective survival, spiritual ambiguity, and socio-political resilience.

### III. COMPARATIVE CONTEXT AND BROADER IMPLICATIONS

While Padmanabhan is a focal point, other Indian authors like Indra Das's *The Devourers*, Gautam Bhatia's *The Wall*, and Vandana Singh's *The Woman Who Thought She was a Planet and Other Stories* contribute to Asian futurism, often overlapping with South Asian futurisms like Adivasi, Dalit, and queer futurisms. These works collectively enrich the genre, offering diverse perspectives on future possibilities. The movement's growth is evidenced by events like the Jaipur Lit Fest discussions in 2022 and anthologies like *The Gollancz Book of South Asian Science Fiction*, indicating a vibrant literary scene. The significance of Asian futurism in Indian literature lies in its ability to broaden global understanding of futurism, representing diverse cultural narratives. It challenges dominant Western narratives, fostering a more inclusive discourse on future possibilities. As Indian literature continues to engage with speculative fiction, it promises further growth, potentially influencing global cultural and artistic movements.

### IV. CONCLUSION

Asian futurism in Indian literature, as exemplified by Manjula Padmanabhan's works, offers a subtle exploration of future possibilities from an Asian perspective. Her dystopian narratives critique contemporary society, imagine alternative futures, and challenge dominant narratives, highlighting the importance of diverse cultural voices. This movement continues to grow, promising further contributions to global literary discourse, with Indian literature playing a pivotal role in shaping inclusive visions of the future. Alignment with Asian Futurism: Padmanabhan's works embody Asian futurism by setting narratives in futuristic India, critiquing Western influences, and addressing themes relevant to Asian societies. Her use of dystopian genres creates cautionary tales, reflecting on present-day issues through exaggerated futures, a hallmark of futurist literature. Her narratives challenge techno-Orientalist stereotypes by presenting Asian futures as

complex, culturally rich, and critically engaged. Asian Futurism is not just a genre but a movement—a critical and creative reclamation of futures by and for Asian voices. Within the Indian context, it offers a space to reflect upon and resist the historical and contemporary forces of domination, both external and internal. Samit Basu, through his speculative novels, has contributed immensely to this endeavour by imagining an India that is at once real and futuristic, broken yet resilient. As Indian writers continue to explore science fiction and speculative genres, Asian Futurism will remain a vital theoretical and artistic tool to re-envision the nation's place in global and cosmic futures. It is through such indigenous lenses that the future can be plural, inclusive, and authentically imagined.

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