

Bangalore's Urban Ecology Crises: Science Fiction to the Rescue?

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ABSTRACT: *There has been a plethora of cross-genre writing on Bangalore as a city-space commenting on its history, its evolution into a cosmopolitan megacity and its consequent urban ecological crises. The writings span across quantitative/qualitative data analysis studies on specific civic/ecological issues with projections for the future, photo narratives, personal autobiographies and novels. The dominant discourses that arise from these writings are mainly seen in the showcasing/ nostalgia of an idyllic ecological past, together with urgent data-based calls for the addressal of present day civic/ecological crises in the city. Juxtapositions of Bangalore past and present have also played an important role in creating awareness of ecocidal practices. It is in this context that my paper attempts to examine Ammu Joseph's "Back to the Future", a short piece of speculative fiction on Bangalore. While the text self-reflexively uses the techniques of dream-sequence and imaginary wish-fulfilment to project the fantasy of a Bangalore with most or all its civic/ecological problems resolved, it remains within the realm of possibility as far as an enlightened scientific vision goes. Invoking the Brian Aldiss definition of science fiction as cultural wallpaper (14)., one can understand that science fiction used in the context of urban ecology also contains within it the possibilities of advocacy in terms of citizen rights, good governance and maintenance of common natural resources. While locating herself as a citizen within the present-day crises-ridden and dysfunctional urban space of Bangalore, the speaker in the text creates a futuristic Utopian city-space in which these ecological problems have been miraculously and scientifically solved. The imaginative power of her projected vision is particularly potent in the context of giving the ecologically impossible a scientific reality. If science fiction may be loosely understood as a way of pointing at future possibilities for human and ecological evolution, I argue that this text self-reflexively uses many of the elements and tropes of science fiction (in its mundane/feminist/protest manifestations) and exemplifies a uniquely creative and useful way forward in the ecological future of Bangalore.*

KEYWORDS: *Urban ecology; science fantasy; planning; city-space.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The transformation of Bangalore in the post-liberalisation phase has primarily manifested itself in various forms of urbanisation, which in turn have led to crises of urban ecology in relation to the city-space on an unprecedented scale. Although the city retained its colonial image of "Pensioners' Paradise" well into the 1980s, a complex combination of politics (both global and local) and the market forces of a global economy catapulted Bangalore into the international arena, particularly in the fields of computer software and information technology. In the last three decades Bangalore has been a recognised hub of IT industry and technological innovation in relation to the global market. While these developments are projected by the government as signs of a progressive outlook, the ecological fallout of unplanned development has largely been faced by the tax-paying citizenry of what is today a mega-city. The problematic terrain of Bangalore's urban ecology ranges across the following issues: a steadily deteriorating climate, crumbling and vastly inadequate urban infrastructure, illegal land acquisition and use, poor public transport facilities, lack of civic amenities, increasing crime levels (particularly against women and children), the artificial creation of urban slums, corrupt and inefficient governance, citizen apathy, destruction of green spaces/cover, population pressure, traffic congestion, dangerous levels of air, water, soil and noise pollution, urban poverty and visions of future growth distorted by political greed for power and capital gains.

II. DISCUSSION

In invoking past images of Bangalore from the 1980s and the 1990s, Ammu Joseph's writing is not merely nostalgic indulgence, but an incisive analysis of the reasons for the civic/ecological conditions that present-day Bangalore suffers from. These older images of the city are juxtaposed with its 21st century realities to highlight the city's most glaring problems. The juxtaposition itself is, significantly, framed within a complex dream-fantasy, in which a genie of supernatural powers grants her the proverbial three wishes to fulfil her desire for an 'ideal' city-space. Inadequate infrastructure, misconceived architecture and a degraded environment are the three most prominent urban issues identified by Joseph in her analysis; easing of traffic congestion,

redesigning the architectural cityscape and restoration of the city's ecology (in terms of water bodies and greenery) are her three wishes. But even within this fantasy framework, Joseph's genie is out for a nap, and is clearly not up to the task. Humour apart, the genie's absence can be construed as a clear-eyed recognition that: (a) supernatural forces may have to be construed to address the scale and depth of the urban problems in Bangalore; (b) fantasy alone will not be sufficient to tackle the matter.

Joseph's writing straddles both the worlds of science fiction (in which an alternative world is scientifically created and sustained) and that of science fantasy, in which there is a deliberate violation of scientific fact in order to create fresh possibilities. Both science fiction and science fantasy have played important roles within the field of urban studies, primarily in the creation of alternative possibilities in relation to existing urban problems as well as in envisioning new directions of growth and development. These alternatives have often been in the form of imaginary utopias, in which every conceivable ideal of urban existence can be achieved. Paul Graham Raven identifies three kinds of utopia in urbanism: the classical, the technological and the critical. Of these, the first is too well known in literary studies to require explication; the second involves a kind of "technological solutionism" (Paura 9) in which technology is seen as the ultimate and exclusive answer to all the ills of urban, and even human existence; the third, in which self-reflexivity in terms of both the creation of a fantastic ideal, as well as its sustainability, plays a key role, is the most relevant for purposes of analysis here. In situating herself as a tax-paying resident in a specific urban locality of Bangalore, Ammu Joseph draws a meeting point between the imaginary and the actual, in what Laurence Davis refers to as the "grounded utopian imagination". Davis suggests that the tensions between democratic politics and green imperatives can be usefully addressed through what he calls ecotopia, or the imaginary creation of an ecologically ideal utopia, which would be inclusive in ways that would minimise conflict in specific contexts (Utopian Studies Society (Europe) 14th International Conference 1- 4 July 2013 New Lanark, Scotland. Oral presentation titled "Green Imperatives, Democratic Politics, And the Grounded Utopian Imagination", Web, n.p.).

In the fantastic Bangalore of Joseph's dream/imagination, some of the most pressing everyday civic/ecological problems faced by citizens are taken up and dealt with. Public transport which had always been undependable in Bangalore has become woefully inadequate in the last three decades of so-called growth and development. The working populations of the mega-city of each economic segment have in recent years faced appalling challenges in terms of traffic jams, pollution, road accidents, poor connectivity and collapsed infrastructure in a permanent state of disrepair. The consequences of unplanned development in response to the burgeoning population have also meant that civic and urban facilities like shopping centres, schools, hospitals, offices and parks have become impossibly difficult of access via public transport, throwing commuters into a vicious cycle of dependence on private vehicle use. Garbage clearance is another sore point in the daily life of the average resident in the city, caught as s/he is between the garbage mafia who are often themselves the local municipal authorities and the actual problem of hygienic disposal. This issue overlaps with that of illegal land-use and occupation which is a widespread problem within city limits, as well as on its growing peripheries. In Joseph's fantasy, all these are scientifically and holistically solved. Public roads are well maintained, enabling pedestrians of every age/gender/socio-economic stratum to walk safely; commuters are supported by a well-planned suburban train/metro public transport system, garbage is not only segregated prior to collection but processed hygienically to feed a local fertiliser industry, which in turn supplies residential gardens while providing a livelihood to unemployed youth; green lung spaces are plentiful and well-maintained and easily accessed, as are community centres, shops, schools and other urban facilities.

The most appealing aspects of Joseph's fantasy are its inclusivity and its organic interlinking of related socio-economic factors in the resolution of Bangalore's urban challenges. Joseph envisages a perfect cooperative alliance amongst the planning, authority and administrative government bodies, private players, multinational corporations and local citizen participation in the imaginary construction of a completely revitalised, new and scientifically admissible city. In both her nostalgic recollection of Bangalore's ecological past as well as in her projected fantasy of the transformed new city, Joseph construes the resources of ecology and environment as an integral part of public health, collective ownership and responsibility. This perspective ties in with the larger notion of the planet's natural resources needing common preservation and sharing, a view increasingly adopted by ecologists the world over. In this sense, her scientific fantasy reveals how changes at the grassroots level can be a realistic microcosmic reflection of a transformed ecologically healthy world. In fact, Mathew Gandy's observations on the mapping of urban nature, which he sees as "both a cultural and scientific project" (164), can be applied to Joseph's scientific recreation of Bangalore, in its rich "conception of urban ecology that is connected with an appreciation of historical connections and contemporary entanglements ... (its) progressive kind of global environmental politics ... that is rooted in an enlightened urban consciousness rather than a yearning for imaginary spaces of nature that lie outside modernity" (166). In Joseph's envisaged new city plan of Bangalore, the conventional divide between the rural and the urban is done away with, possibly for two reasons: 1) to consciously reject any hierarchical differences that are commonly constructed between the urban

and the rural; 2) to recognise that Bangalore's identity as a global megacity rests partly on its inept appropriation of once-rural peripheral spaces in its career of heady unplanned urbanisation, especially in the last three decades.

The dream-image of a Bangalore reordered to be an ecologically viable and sustainable urban space configured by Joseph can therefore hardly be viewed merely as part of the classical utopian paradigm, in its supposedly apolitical, escapist and compensatory implications. A more constructive view would be to understand this fantasy as a critical utopia coming within the realm of scientific possibility (if not probability), while it simultaneously raises crucial questions about who and what constitute urban space in today's times. In his essay "Whose Right(s) to What City?" exploring the question of urban rights, Peter Marcuse draws from the work of Lefebvre, David Harvey and Herbert Marcuse, and makes a distinction between those who are deprived and those who are discontent in relation to their positioning within their given urban space (30). The inclusivity of Joseph's vision takes both these strands into consideration and recognises their transformative potential in the creation of a new urban space. Her imaginary city in terms of socio-economic inclusivity can be linked closely with Marcuse's analysis of urban material class interests which constitute the urban in the western context; a parallel can be drawn as follows:

Marcuse	Ammu Joseph
a) The excluded	a) the unorganised labour sector, the unemployed, caste/ gender fringe groups (implied)
b) The working class	b) No distinction between blue/white collar jobs
c) The gentry	c) The vast middle class sections of Bangalore
d) Capitalists	d) property/home/land owners, businesses, MNCs
e) Establishment intelligentsia	e) media, academics, taxpayers/citizens
f) The politically powerful	f) Government, corporate sector, private players

In general terms, Marcuse identifies citizen rights in the urban context as pertaining to clean water, clean air, housing, decent sanitation, mobility, education, health care, and democratic participation in decision making (34). In analysing the Lefebvrian conceptualisation of the city as urban space, Marcuse further identifies the notions of justice, equity, democracy, beauty, accessibility, community, public space, environmental quality, support for the full development of human potentials to all according to their needs, the recognition of human differences, sustainability and diversity, as making up the texture of the urban (36). Joseph's scientific projection brings a local specificity to all these elements, while not losing sight of the fact that conventional definitions of the 'city' (in Wirth's terms of size, heterogeneity and density {Schmid 48}) still apply in great part to Bangalore's realities, and that many of its present-day problems stem from this. Joseph's scientifically transformed Bangalore conforms to the Lefebvrian and Marcusean constructs of the urban, in its envisaged shift from an overwhelming emphasis on consumption as a marker of urban rights to a self-reflexive reordering which democratically decides what is produced, how it is produced, the right to determine these, as well as the right to participate in production.

Through the device of scientific fantasy, Ammu Joseph's reordered Bangalore presents an alternative which is almost the antithesis of the city's present-day severely contested urban space. Joseph's work illustrates the observations of Kofman and Lebas on urban utopia :“ U-topie, as the search for a place that does not yet exist, plays a major role in Lefebvre's conception of the right to the city, which emerged from a consideration of the possible impossible” (21); both refer to urban feminist Ruth Levitas in arguing for “... the necessity of utopia because of its potential for social transformation, a really possible world whose emergence from the present state of affairs is credible. It can be defined as the desire for a better way of living expressed in the description of a different kind of society that makes possible that alternative way of life (257)” (Kofman 22).

III. CONCLUSION

The urban ideal Joseph imagines tallies with the Lefebvrian thought that it is not “the right to the existing city that is demanded, but the right to a future city...” (Marcuse 35). Joseph's new Bangalore stems (rather than shying away) from the fact that the actual urban space is constantly contested and in the Lefebvrian sense, produced, by different forces ranging from the topmost corridors of power to the most disenfranchised segments of population within Bangalore. In viewing the urban as a “constant reinvention ... viewing the contemporary urban crisis as an opportunity to imagine alternatives and to create new possible urban worlds” (Schmid 59), Ammu Joseph's scientifically reordered urban space raises questions, as it should, about the imbalances, inequalities and injustices that form the texture of the actual city-space. It is important to note,

however, that her fantasy does not stop short with just an idealised vision. Throughout the recreation, she “emphasizes the disjuncture between the actual and the possible” (Brenner 17). The Tagore epiphany at the end of her dream (“Into this heaven, oh genie, let my city awake!” (Joseph 252) hopes for a renewed collective ecological/civic urban consciousness, without which her fantastic vision cannot be sustained. And this consciousness is manifested in the abrupt awakening at the very end: it firmly places her imagined ecological construction of Bangalore within a critical urban utopianism that characteristically questions its own imagined ideal, as well as its ability to sustain it.

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