

Speculation and Fiction: Introduction

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As students of literature, one of the most frequent questions we encounter is: how does one write anything? What are the factors responsible for writing fiction? Does fiction have its autonomous qualities? Put in a slightly different way: what is thought or how is thought put into fiction? Broadly speaking, the study into the domain of thought is speculation. The Oxford English dictionary defines “speculation” this way: “the forming of a theory or conjecture without firm evidence.”¹ Speculation then is a field of thinking thought, conjecture, or hypothesis which seeks for evidence to become “fact” or “practice.” In such argument, the foundational aspect of all philosophy appears to be speculation. This won’t be an overstatement if we endeavour to trace the genealogy and use of the term in ancient Indian philosophy to the Greco-Roman world, or in the mediaeval scholastic philosophy in Europe.² From the term’s rooted traditional philosophical basis to a particular meaning-making in genre fiction, there have been many developments but one aspect has been relatively unchanged: the question of conjecture. Speculative fiction does not have a rigid definition and is putatively understood to be an amalgam of many genres, forms, thoughts, or techniques. It is also about a world which is not necessarily the existent but in most cases the “material-possible”: the conjectural. Fiction in that analysis appears to be the medium through which the conjectural element of speculation is given a concrete material body. But fiction is not an end product only, the printed book or the text in this case, but also a world of ideas, thoughts, and imagination. In that sense, there is fiction already always within the “genre” of speculation. These are some of the interrelated but not always easily articulable aspects that we wanted to engage with in this volume, “Speculation and Fiction.”

For us, speculation is not necessarily speculative fiction, but both of them are not mutually exclusive either. We understand speculative to be a philosophical condition of contingency. We also understand by speculation a committed materialist political art. What we produce here in this introduction is thus our various readings of these two domains: speculation and fiction, which we believe have a dialectical relation between them, especially in the aspects of form and content, thought and practice, the raw material and the product etc. We do not mean that these are exclusive readings. We are not “experts” in this field, and as editors of an online journal that produces bimonthly publications, neither is expertise a strict

requirement from us. We would like to see ourselves as interlocutors or mediators of a dialogue that is already existent in critical circles but not widely recognized or practised. We consider our writings as one of the many contributions in this volume that seeks to understand what speculative fiction is or what relation speculation holds with fiction. Our methods of intervention are also designed by our ideological moorings and political beliefs. Plainly put, we believe in starting or mediating discussions, and not dominating them.

With this humble “directive” in mind, we now move on to the individual parts of our introduction. The first part by Arka Chattopadhyay engages with speculative philosophy, realism, and contingency before discussing them in fiction while the second by Sourit Bhattacharya takes up the question of animal in the speculative narrative and the potential exchanges with the field of animal studies.

Speculation and Thinking in Philosophy and Literature

To re-turn to Aristotle’s *Poetics*—one of the first critical and philosophical texts to deal with the question of literary classification— we have the famous distinction between history and poetry where the Greek thinker reflects that while history deals with “what has happened,” poetry by which he means the literary in a more general way, deals with “what *may* happen” (Aristotle 35, emphasis mine). This distinction already lines up the literary alongside the hypothetical and the counterfactual. In more recent times, the neo-historicist approach has mobilized literature in and as history, drawing on various models of revisionary and counterfactual textual history in all of which there is an implicit and explicit claim that literature can reconstitute history through its own discursive formation and plug holes that might exist in the official annals. While we may or may not agree with Aristotle that literature is “more philosophical” than history because it can go beyond the closed historical actuality into the realms of a more open potentiality, we can see the speculative act in relation to thinking as a process which manifests itself differently in both philosophy and literature.

If philosophy thinks thinking as it organizes its discourse around the thinking act, fiction too has its own way of thinking through storytelling. Philosophical thoughts are often anchored by the philosopher as the thinking subject but in the *world* of fiction, insofar as fiction *conjures* a *world* of its own with both similarities to and differences from the external world; thinking doesn’t simply happen at the level of the author or at the level of the characters that populate the fictional world. The fictional world, as a collective entity, thinks.³

In other words, it is fiction which thinks and this process manifests itself at the level of the world, brought forth by a fictional work. And even in the so-called “realistic” and “historical” fiction, the conjured fictional world is after all a specific *construction* which (*re*)-*imagines* and (*re*)-*configures* reality and history from its own vantage points. However high the level of verisimilitude may be, a literary work of fiction is always, strictly speaking, *irreducible* to reality and history insofar as it fundamentally reshapes them through its being and becoming. This is where speculation is endemic to literary imagination in constituting the fictional universe. When thinking as a process opens itself to the contingency of the possible (the “what if”) through the speculative act, it gives us an ontology of fiction. Understood in this way, *speculation is the very extension of thinking which fictionalises thought* and thus opens it up to the literary.

From Speculative Philosophy to Speculative Materialism: Transcendence to Immanence

The speculative has been typically identified with transcendental ontology and classical metaphysics within the history of Western philosophy. For someone like Whitehead in *Process and Reality* (1929), the speculative flirts with the philosophical universal and its systemic and hermeneutic absolutism: “Speculative Philosophy is the endeavor to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted.” (Whitehead 4) Donald Verene in his book *Speculative Philosophy* (2009) locates the speculative at the heart of philosophical dialectics by evoking Hegel’s invention of the “speculative sentence” in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* with yet another absolutist echo (ix-x). But perhaps more importantly, Verene also evokes James Joyce’s use of the term in *Finnegans Wake* and explicitly triangulates the speculative, the philosophical and the literary (xii-xiii). In the contemporary ethos of continental philosophy, the speculative has undergone a paradigm shift from the transcendental to the immanent plane. The contemporary philosophical movement of “speculative realism”⁴ with exponents like Graham Harman, Ray Brassier and Quentin Meillassoux, has sought to engage with the speculative from a more materialist position of immanence which is open to the contingency of the world. Within this turn, Harman figures the speculative as an indispensable contemplative mediator for the access to the world of objects.⁵ For Brassier, the speculative is an encounter with the ‘nihilistic’ possibilities of negation by panning out toward the human and the non-human future of “extinction.”⁶

Meillassoux: Speculation from Chance to Contingency

Quentin Meillassoux is perhaps the most accomplished thinker in the movement, not least because the other two partly build on his thoughts.⁷ In *After Finitude* (2008), translated from French to English by none other than Brassier, Meillassoux painstakingly demonstrates how the logic of the world conflates the necessary with the contingent. For him, this contingency is not only *a* necessity but the *only* necessity of the world (Meillassoux 65). Meillassoux's fundamental move to separate speculation from metaphysics by antagonizing the necessity of the world explodes in a logic of absolute contingency or the absolute necessity of contingency:

If all metaphysics is 'speculative' by definition, our problem consists in demonstrating, conversely, that not all speculation is metaphysical, and not every absolute is dogmatic— it is possible to envisage an *absolutizing* thought that would not be *absolutist*. (35, emphases in the original)

Meillassoux brings down the speculative from the domain of the transcendental to that of "factuality (*factuel*)": "the factual is defined as the very arena for a speculation that excludes all metaphysics." (128) This "factual speculation" inaugurates contingency as "pure possibility":

[...] absolute contingency [...] designates a *pure possibility*; one which may never be realized. For we cannot claim to know for sure whether or not our world, although it is contingent, will actually come to an end one day. We know, in accordance with the principle of unreason, that this is a real possibility, and that it could occur for no reason whatsoever; but we also know that there is nothing that necessitates it. To assert the opposite, viz., that everything must necessarily perish, would be to assert a proposition that is *still* metaphysical. (63, emphases in the original)

In unmooring speculation from metaphysics, Meillassoux absolutizes mathematics, especially the Cantorian invention of the "transfinite" in set-theory to make the crucial distinction between contingency and chance. By forcing Kant with Cantor, he translates the Cantorian (or Kantorian?) transfinite as the following: "*the (quantifiable) totality of the thinkable is unthinkable.*" (104, emphases in the original) The transfinite shows the passage from the Kantian finitude to the "actual infinity" of set-theory. Meillassoux acknowledges

that the axiomatics of the mathematical apparatus retains a possibility that all of the possible or the thinkable may constitute an *a priori* totality. But as he rightly observes, “we have at our disposal *one* axiomatic capable of providing us with the resources for thinking that the possible is untotalizable.” (105, emphasis in the original) This is how he summarizes the essence of this mathematical nuance: “What the set-theoretical axiomatic demonstrates is at the very least a fundamental uncertainty regarding the totalizability of the possible.” (105) It is from this “fundamental uncertainty” that we will come back to the literary domain of fiction with a final qualification that there is an analogue between Meillassoux’s “terrestrial thought” (113) where the world *factially* thinks its pre-human beginning and its non-human end and what we have called above, the world of fiction that thinks of its own accord.⁸

Can the literary world speculate contingently?: Krasznahorkai and Sandipan

Our speculation from this point would be to think through the implications of this *untotalizable possibility* in the fictional world of the narrative. Can speculative thought in its fictionalizing potential of ‘worlding’ open a transfinite fictional universe where contingency will fix chance? For this to happen, fictional speculation must be considered *irreducible* to the free play of chance. If fictional speculation is reduced to chance, it follows that to speculate is to speculate anything and everything; in other words we can speculatively conjure the totality of the possible. In Meillassoux’s terms, this would be a fictional counterpart of speculative metaphysics. On the other hand, if we could have a strategy of literary speculation that refrains from thinking all of the possible, it would be an immanent and materialist speculation with an ensuing politics of rendering the transfinite uncertainty of the contingent world. Could there be a literary-speculative act where speculation differentiates contingency as a de-totalisation of the possible from chance as a totalisation of the possible? This hypothetical literary-speculative act would have to fix the totality of chance with the untotalizability of contingency. This would open the fictional world to the transfinite logic of uncertainty that overwrites the necessary with the contingent. As two instances of this play between chance and contingency, we will briefly look at the function of speculation in its narratological uncertainty in László Krasznahorkai’s novel *Satantango* (1985) and in its historico-political impossibility in Sandipan Chattopadhyay’s novel *Bharotborsho [India]* (1999).

Satantango, originally published in Hungarian in 1985 and translated into English in 2012, depicts the invented world of a human community, living in a dreary hamlet where life has left them behind. The collective farm is called an “estate”—a community that has clearly failed to take off. Although the author maintains a Kafkaesque silence about the historical positioning of this world in actual time and space, one suspects a subterranean 1980s Hungarian setting with the communist regime in its final phase of degeneration. The first chapter, narrated in what appears to be a third person omniscient point of view, begins with the hope of a saviour’s arrival in the ruined estate and focuses on a man named Futaki as he hears the church bells, one October morning. There are no paragraph divisions in *Satantango* and the dense undivided prose on the page chooses the scenic closure of the chapter as the only unit of composition. Each chapter gives us a different slice of this ruined communal life from the perspectives of different characters. The narration is intimate and yet always executed from a third-person panoramic distance except in the sixth chapter where Irimias’s speech is narrated in first-person and the indentation on the page changes.

Mr. Schmidt and Kráner plan to dupe the community by pocketing the wages and Futaki soon joins them in the act of embezzlement. There’s a strange male couple in Irimiás and Petrina who form another ambiguous hope for the community, bringing in the communist espionage theme. There are too many characters and fragmented stories in this haunting masterpiece and we will have to restrict ourselves to the Doctor’s character and the problem of narration and time which the novel eventually seizes in its speculative leap. The old Doctor’s obsessional micro-world is introduced in chapter three. He plays the self-appointed panopticon as he sits by his window all day and night and notes every single thing he can see in the farm. When he falls asleep he curses himself for the temporary absence of vigilance. Every object of necessity is organized in an obsessional circle around his seat so that he doesn’t have to shift his gaze even for a moment. The doctor has a collapse after he goes out in a stormy night to replenish his fag and drinks. He has to be hospitalized and his gaze on the community is interrupted for a substantial duration. By the time he comes back in the final chapter, there has been a strange death of a little girl and the rest of the community has left the estate at the behest of Irimiás and Petrina. They are away in the city, arrested in suspension between trust in the saviours and the apprehensions of dupery. It is this final chapter titled ‘The Circle Closes’ that *dis-closes* the narratological architecture and its retroactive temporal logic, folding back on itself in a circular motion of time.

When the Doctor resumes his surveying position at the window and obviously cannot see anyone because they have all abandoned the estate, he reflects on his detailed archive of notes on each of the characters and whatever slice of their everyday life he has inscribed in his notebooks. It is at this point that he has the authorial urge to *invent* the life of the community. This is a speculative act of *intervention* for the Doctor and it allows him to configure the world he sees, instead of simply remaining its passive recipient. This is how he records the desire:

He scribbled feverishly and was practically seeing everything that was happening over there, and he *knew*, was deadly certain, that from then on this was how it would be. He realized that all those years of arduous, painstaking work had finally borne fruit: he had finally become the master of a singular art that enabled him not only to describe a world whose eternal unremitting progress in one direction required such mastery but also—to a certain extent—he could *even intervene* in the mechanism behind an apparently chaotic swirl of events! (265, emphases in the original)

After a few descriptive dead ends, when the Doctor finally launches into his counterfactual account of the invisible and inexistent community, the last two and a half pages of the book within quotation marks exactly reproduce the beginning of the first chapter: Futaki's hearing of the Church bells and the hope of a hypothetical saviour's arrival. This is when we finally realise that the third-person omniscient narrative was a disguise and the Doctor is the retroactive narrator of the book. The italicized "knew" in the passage quoted above redirects us to the title of the third chapter 'To Know Something' in which we had first met the Doctor. The Doctor in his introductory chapter already knew that he was narrating it from behind the veil but this knowledge was not shared. This disclosure on the brink of the book's closure also implies that thought in its fictional turn has to embody a world and not just an individual.

Beyond the postmodern narrative technique of metafiction and a *trompe l'oeil* collapse of narrative layers and worlds within worlds, the speculative act of fictionalization in *Satantango* bores a deadly hole in the epistemic and chronological narrative logic as the operative questions become unanswerable. Where are the people of the estate? If their abandonment of the estate is unreal and only happens within the Doctor's invented narrative, why do they not reappear? If the Doctor is the retroactive narrator, then his hospitalization and return both have to be invented and unreal but then there has indeed been a gap in his

surveillance which has prompted him to transfer himself from the position of an observer to that of an inventor. This aporetic temporal logic which blurs the real and the unreal not only holds on to narratological uncertainty in a typically postmodern way but more importantly for our initial argument, it ensures that speculation doesn't reduce contingency to chance. The Doctor in his speculative act could have explored any number of possibilities; in a sense the whole realm of the possible was open to him. However, he decides to explore a particular narrative terrain which temporarily removes himself as a character from the scene of narration, only to bring him back later and the whole speculative desire is premised on this break of temporary self-absence. This is what makes the real untenable as he both comes back and doesn't; the community isn't there and is there at the same time. On the one hand, this opens the transfinite as this narrative can loop ad infinitum from this point of closure but on the other, it also limits the realm of the possible. The Doctor's speculative act, instead of totalizing the possible, walls it in against a figure of the impossible: the community's being there and not being there at the same time as well as his own disappearance and reappearance which *conditions* the act and yet only happens *inside* its weaving. *Satantango* thus maintains a delicate balance between the utopia and the dystopia in subtly distinguishing rigorous speculative contingency from the free reign of chance.

Let us briefly look at the other novel, Sandipan Chattopadhyay's *Bharotborsho* [*India*] which first came out in Bengali in 1999 and hasn't yet been translated. The novel is one of the subtlest and yet one of the most underrated narrative responses to an event that marked a communalist watershed in post-Independence India.⁹ The event is the 1992 demolition of Babri Masjid [a mosque] in Ayodhya to set up a Hindu temple of Rama, the eponymous hero of the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, especially because Ayodhya marked his fictional place of birth. The BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party] led by Lal Krishna Advani back then, with its aggressive Hinduist agenda of establishing 'ram-rajya' ['dynasty of Lord Rama'] and its wing RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh] were at the helm of this demolition. The event rocked the nation with communal riots breaking out in Bombay and also in the neighbourhood of Bangladesh. More than 2,000 people died in the riots. The 2010 High Court verdict on the "disputed structure" and the debate whether a temple had predated the mosque or vice versa, balanced things out by giving parts of the land to both communities and speculatively pointing towards a temple, predating the mosque on the basis of the Archaeology of India Reports. In 2015, when the BJP has been elected into power by the

Indian public and the disease of communal hatred is more rampant than ever, it's interesting to write about Sandipan's novel which actually imagines the outbreak of a lethal epidemic from around 2006 to 2014 and moves further ahead in time till 2042. In the final frontier of this speculative future, the epidemic is identified with a transformation of human beings into dogs and a resultant *dog rule* in the literal sense of the term.

The paratextual authorial preface explicitly declares that in this work the present continuous and the future are placed side by side and Sandipan records his desire to facilitate a dialogue between the present and the future.¹⁰ *Bharotborsho* has an intensely personal story to tell about four friends and lovers and relationships that do and do not work out but the demolition of Babri Masjid is an event that invades their apparently encoded micro-political dynamics from the macro-political world. Harun who is an old Muslim friend of Pinaki, the Hindu protagonist, all of a sudden induces his wife Sudeshna to have sex with him. The intercourse borders on an elliptical consensuality. Pinaki on the other hand only came to marry Sudeshna who was her nurse, after a failed attempt at suicide, following her futile relation with the enigmatic Shelley (her classmate in College, like Harun). Sudeshna reports this semi-consensual intercourse to Pinaki when he returns home in Kolkata from a medical trip to Bombay. It so happens that Harun had sex with Sudeshna on the day of the Babri demolition and Sudeshna reports Pinaki that while she wasn't in the know of the demolition, she is sure that Harun had already seen the footage on BBC and the intercourse was his psycho-social reaction to the instant of the event. Sudeshna's guess is ratified by the narrative. As she reports Pinaki, Harun was rough in bed and used shockingly communalist expletives while having sex (461).

Sandipan uses the same metaphor of 'demolition' ["to break the bed" (438)] to refer to Harun's intercourse with Sudeshna and the novel presents this strange sexual action of instincts in a complex way.¹¹ Harun is a painter who has recently returned to India from Germany with a German wife and it's not that he lacks religious tolerance. The novel may appear to tread a dangerous line with potential accusations of villainizing the Muslim Other but it's much more complex and nuanced.¹² We cannot go on about this in the limited space of this introduction but the finale of this narrative strand comes when Sudeshna confesses to Pinaki in the final chapter that they didn't have protection that day and she has missed her periods twice on the trot. The novel awaits the birth of the child as the product of a perverse 'communal harmony' in the name of *Bharotborsho*'s future.

Let's dwell on the speculative act in this dystopian novel in which every chapter is divided in time. The first part of a chapter happens in the present, involving Harun, Pinaki, Sudeshna and Shelley whom Pinaki fantasizes intermittently, and the second part goes into a journalistic reportage mode by describing the bizarre dog-epidemic, spreading throughout the country. The futuristic sections consistently draw attention to *the speculative act as an effect of discourse*. Scientists variously try to track the unknown disease and the newspapers abound in all kinds of theories and rumours about the specific root and transmission of the disease. This frames *discursivity as a condition of speculation*, which already tempers the free play of chance. The novel's narrator speculates only in reflex. These sections, set in the future and talking back to the present are also fascinating for their mobilization of literature as a discourse at the time of emergency. The second chapter evokes an anonymous Urdu poet's elegy on the time of the epidemic (433) and later on some of these poetic renderings are compared with Daniel Defoe's poignant description of the plague in the London of 1664-65 (442). But perhaps the most significant literary reference is the 2009 erotic epic *Rathinirvedam* by Annabhau Sathe, written in the midst of this epidemic because in this book he proposes sex as the remedy of this disease. And there are actual case histories in which this medicine seems to work. (452; 462)¹³ If Sandipan's *literalization* of the man-becoming-dog in the times of communal violence throws an unfavourable light on the non-human animal, then sexual intercourse, suggested as a remedy, counterpoints the previous reduction of the non-human to instinctual violence by offering another version of animal instinct qua sexuality as a release from that violence.

These sections pile up and escalate theories about this disease from journalistic and popular-science discourses. Sandipan carefully chooses the settings for these outbreaks. Lothal [meaning the valley of death in Gujrati] in Gujrat is chosen not only because Gujrat was a BJP den from 1995 onwards but also because Lothal has the strong Vedic religious history with practices like animal-worship and the burial of the dead. The final speculative explanation offered is that the virus was in the so-called sacred bricks (called 'Ramshila' or the 'stone of Rama' with the name etched on them) and when the demolishers used them to build a temple-like structure, it led to the outbreak of the epidemic. In the final chapter, the genealogy of this dog-rule is traced back not to the Rajasthani hunter dog breed 'bhola', as was thought initially, but to the 'Ibom' dog tribes at the margin of Papua New Guinea.

Speculation is once again conditioned by discourse and the historical act of archaeology which is ironically an imaginative invention in the novel.

There's no doubt that *Bharotborsho* is written as a Swiftian satirical allegory in which the metaphorical disease of communalism in India is literalized in a hyperbolic fashion. As Sudeshna announces her pregnancy to Pinaki, the futuristic section of the final chapter reaches its dystopian instinctual climax. Interestingly though, after describing the monarchical system of this dog-world, Sandipan punctuates the novel with a simple but enigmatic sentence of *absolute contingency*: "Bharotborshe ei sharomeyo-shashon dirghosthayi hoyni. ["This dog-rule in India didn't last long.]" (465) If the discursive anchoring of the speculative act had already fixed chance with a contingent logic, this final act of inexplicable negation creates an *absolutizing* future of openness. The transfinite openness is kept intact as we don't know how and why the dog-rule eventually came to an end but the possible is not totalized even within this bizarrely hyperbolic and dystopian speculation as the final sentence draws a limit to the speculative free play of chance. *Bharotborsho* implies a historicizing political logic of immanent contingency where the incalculable de-totalization of the possible (the decline of the dog empire) is opened up against the speculative metaphysics of all possibilities. If the macabre human transformation into dog seems to exhaust the speculative horizon of possibilities, the enigmatic final sentence installs the transfinite inexhaustible of this process.

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Animal and Speculative Fiction

Is it co-incidental that Sandipan uses dogs to render the social transformation? Humans turned into dogs, humans replaced by dogs, or humans in war with dogs are not very uncommon in speculative fiction. Mikhail Bulgakov's novella *The Heart of a Dog* (1925/1968), Clifford Simak's novel *City* (1952) or Mack Reynold's short story "Dog Star" (1956) promptly come to mind. The curious question is: why dogs? One possible answer could be that dogs, like cats (another animal which enjoys quite a good reputation in this genre), are pet animals which can be domesticized, trained to act like humans, and anthropomorphized. In most of these narratives, the horror generates from a sense of, what following Viktor Shklovsky, could be called, "defamiliarization." The dominantly known, neutralized, or humanized features appear to work against the laws of the human "normal."

The animal is shown to be either highly intelligent and superior in knowledge and governance (such as Reynold's "Dog Star" or Franz Kafka's "The Investigations of a Dog" [1922/1933]) or ruthless, perverse, and grotesque (as in Bulgakov or Philip K Dick's "Roog" [1953]). It is not surprising that the technique of "defamiliarization," the rise of dog and cat stories in speculative fiction, was used recurrently during the First and Second World War. Not surprising because the nonhuman-animal is used as a trope to render certain human conditions of loss, degeneration, erosion of moral values, and above all, the incomprehensible cannibalistic brutality in the humans. Also notable is the aspect of showing the difference between the two in qualities such as intelligence, compassion, organization etc. In either way, be the nonhuman animal used in an allegorical vein or on the literal plane, the animal question appears to be an important area of inquiry in speculative fiction. This part of the introduction will engage with it.

Beast Fable to Animal Studies

Speculative fiction critic Bruce Shaw writes that the use of animals in speculative fiction is modelled on the genre of the beast fable, which is a short narrative in verse or prose where animals talk, behave or act like humans. He shows that in the development of the genre, from ancient India to the Greco-Roman world through *Panchatantra*, Aesop's *Fables*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, two distinct lineages have come down in English literature: one is the use of animals in "mainstream English literature" such as Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* or Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, and "another branching is the development of the lineage in science fiction and fantasy" (46). For Shaw, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* which laid the steady grounds for speculative fiction in Europe was influenced by Jean de la Fontaine's fables, which in turn were drawn upon the Indian and Aesopian ones. The two most important creations in this lineage for Shaw, Bulgakov's *The Heart of a Dog* and Karel Čapek's *War with the Newts* (1936), were inspired by Shelley's work and on many occasions took from the fairytale and folktale forms (125, 140). Though Shaw's categorization of "mainstream" and genre fiction is debatable, this observation is not entirely groundless. David Lodge also notes, "Popular science fiction, for instance, is a curious mixture of invented gadgetry and archetypal narrative motifs very obviously derived from folk tales, fairytale, and Scripture, recycling the myths of Creation, Fall, Flood, and a divine

Saviour, for a secular but still superstitious age” (137). As the genre develops, the apparently simplistic structure of the stories and the instructive lessons undergo multiple transformations. Critique of existing conditions becomes the driving motive of the reworked beast fable versions, where not only the content with its allegorical purchase but the narrative making, the intergeneric, overlapping body of the text, also appears to contribute significantly in this context, allowing the aesthetic to help shape the aspect of “defamiliarization” to a large extent. We’ll come to this last statement shortly.

What happens to the animal in this modern rendition? Is it liberated from its anthropomorphic qualities in the fable? Is it given a space of difference with focus on its skills of cognition, behaviour, and intelligence? Is it placed within a domain of alterity where the humans and the nonhumans transgress biological and social-cognitive borders? These important questions which require careful attention are beyond the scope of this introduction. What is noteworthy here is that they make significant pathway-links with the field of animal studies. Following the publication of Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation* (1975) and important critical interceptions at various stages on the human torture of animals or the question of animal agency, by noted artists, activists, and philosophers such as John Berger, Barbara Smuts, Donna Haraway, and Jacques Derrida, animal studies became an important field of inquiry in humanities and social sciences departments.¹⁴ Haraway and Cary Wolfe’s contributions have been particularly helpful for making pathway-links between speculative fiction, ethics and posthumanism.¹⁵ These aspects have compelled literary critics Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin to call for a new paradigm in literary studies, “zoocriticism” which through a study of literary-cultural texts can engage powerfully on the questions of “wildlife protection and conservation,” eviction of human communities “from their homeland to make way for game parks for wealthy tourists,” etc. (18). A study of the animal in speculation fiction appears particularly significant in this context: it enables the discussions of animal rights and ethics significantly while also allowing the possibility to understand how the rich historical development of the genre of beast fable has contributed powerfully to such discussions.

Animal, Narrative, and Critique: Nabarun Bhattacharya's *Lubdhak*

Let us build on this argument with an analysis of a dog-novella by the maverick Bengali writer, Nabarun Bhattacharya.¹⁶ *Lubdhak* (written probably in 2000; Bengali for the

dog-star Sirius in the constellation), is a novella about the removal and killing of dogs from the streets of Kolkata and the mythic resistance by the animals to such pogrom. “Mythic” because the story not only allows the dogs verbal speech, intelligence, organisational skill, and rationality, it stages a fairytale link between the everyday street dogs and the various imaginary cosmic dog stars. The long torture on the street dogs has forced the cosmic dogs to launch a dog asteroid on Kolkata which will annihilate the metropolitan city from the world maps in seven hours’ time. The street dogs are asked by a cosmic dog-messenger Anubis to leave the city at once. The narrative uses not only mythological and cosmological aspects, but is also composed of forms such as parliamentary debates over choosing a proposal on dog removal, the diaries of scientists experimenting on dogs and humans, anthropological accounts of tribal knowledge in astronomy, and newspaper reports. A very cursory understanding of this fragmentary, eclectic, and highly sophisticated narrative suggests that the story is not only about dogs and their resistance, but also the historical acts of torturing by the humans on various species including their own. The critique appears implanted both in content and in form, or rather the development of the content in the composite form of the narrative.

The conceptual boundaries of a human animal and a nonhuman animal are situated right at the beginning when the narrator says:

Be it an earthquake, a World War, an epidemic or the accident of an atomic submarine in the peaceful times – wrong or right, there is always a calculation of lives lost by the humans. What else do we understand by the loss of lives in these accidents? Certainly that of the humans (Ch. 1, 383).

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue that the compromise of any serious concern of animal rights by the humans is orchestrated by a certain “ethical acceptability”: “why worry about animals when children are starving, or when other people are still being killed, raped and abused?” (137) For them, the rise of factors such as these goes back to the long imperialist, anthropomorphic and racist culture of the “West” of comparing oppressed and aboriginal humans with beasts and other animals (136). Nabarun seems to touch on these aspects of racialized anthropocentrism when his unnamed and inconsistent narrator informs us of the official approval of the proposal of putting the dogs in the colossal cages built by the British for slaughtering “impotent,” “useless” animals. In order to zero in on the uselessness

of these “creatures,” he refers to the various experimentations such as the shuttle-box experiment where the dogs were taught to be helpless and unnecessary by electrocution. These scientific discussions are followed by a direct quotation from the diary of the noted Russian physiologist Ivan Petrovich Pavlov: “Can we also exercise it on the humans? Why can we not? If the main characteristics of the nervous system between the humans and the dogs are identical, why would it appear humiliating for mankind?” (Ch. 2, 389) In these apparently eclectic juxtapositions, Nabarun seems to situate the fundamental point of development for science: the journey from using the nonhuman animal as the “body of sacrifice” to finding comparative conditions in the humans. A little later in chapter 6, we encounter another passage:

The shivering stops after five minutes. The breathing pattern becomes faster between the sixth and tenth minutes. Between the eleventh and the thirteenth, the breathing came down to only three times and it ended completely after this. The anatomy started an hour later. (406)

We are told that this was not done on the dogs, but on the Jewish war prisoners by the Nazi doctors. This was exercised, as the report goes, for the “betterment of science” (406). Rarely does one miss the trenchant critique of scientism and the destruction of life by the author. The development of science is based on the brutal torture of the nonhuman animals which are often compared, as Huggan and Tiffin mentioned, with the oppressed human beings, their bodies being expendable and useless, as in the case of imprisoned Jews here. This positivist aspect of science, much of which boasts of contributing to the development of civilization, has made sure in an ugly manner that there is no fundamental difference between the humans and nonhumans in the utilitarian aspect. In that, Nabarun makes a useful connection with Peter Singer’s significant work on animal liberation based on the utilitarian ethics of equality. The social critique appears to be related with the larger questions of ethics and urgency for Nabarun.

The element of critique however, as is already intimated in the reference to quoted texts, is equally powerfully implanted in the use of multiple narrative genres and forms. In chapter 4, where Nabarun introduces the verbal capacity of the dogs, especially in Kaangojano (Ear-Sprouting) and Gypsy who are frightened of the stories of forceful removal of dogs from the city, we are also told of Ear-Sprouting’s belief in the dog legends – the dog

stars which navigate the sky with pomp and power where, the dog-king, Sirius pays respect to the greatest of dog-soldiers, Laika. Reality, cosmology, and mythological accounts are blurred here. The Russian dog Laika is the first nonhuman animal to traverse the space, while Sirius is a highly luminous star almost twice the mass of the sun. The constellation around Sirius is known as Canis Major (Greater Dog). Nabarun refers to this constellation a number of times, detailing in chapter 6 the very minute historical aspects: that it was first discovered by the German astronomer Friedrich Bessel in 1844, to American astronomer Alvan Clark's claim that it is twin by formation (Sirius A and B), to the "astonishing" piece of information that the detailed knowledge of Sirius B is also found in the extremely minor ethnic group in Western Africa, the Dogon tribespeople (405). These detailed historical and anthropological aspects of astronomical science are then juxtaposed with the mythological character of Anubis, the dog-headed god in ancient Egypt who is sent by Sirius to transfer the message to the street dogs that the city will be destroyed soon (409). This is what the author calls the "kukur-upokotha" or the dog-legend. It is interesting to note that the aspect of the fantastic here is created out of the everyday, the scientific, and the realistic. Is realism incapable of rendering a critique? Nabarun perhaps has a particular understanding of realism in mind. His use of the fantastic through the blurring of genres associated with anger and critique has a close model in the Marxist critic Michael Löwy's "critical irrealism." For Löwy, irrealism is not anti-realism, but a critique of realism where the rules governing the "accurate representation of life as it really is" is critiqued by various subversive techniques. Löwy gives us examples of utopian, dystopian, oneiric, fairytale narratives, and adds that the word "critique" here is to be understood not as "a rational argument, a systematic opposition, or an explicit discourse; more often, in irrealist art, it takes the form of protest, outrage, disgust, anxiety, or *angst*" (196; emphasis in the text). Löwy gives us examples in ETA Hoffman, Kafka, and Samuel Beckett. It can be justifiably extended to Nabarun whose entire oeuvre is filled with dissent, anger, and rage – against the Stalinist oppressive Russia, against United States of America's gross neoliberal schemes, against India's ceaseless greedy invitation of multinational capitalism and the stampeding of the poor and the subaltern in the name of consumerist democracy, etc.. Marxist in ideology, committed to the creative energies of political art, and highly inspired by Bulgakov, Kafka, and Bakhtin, Nabarun's world of the irrealist is underlined by a deep critique of the structures of society. Thus we see the author compelling the narrator to say: "the megacity that is beautifying itself in the new millennium in the manner of a gigantic female monster has no room for the dogs" (388), or allows the

puppies a gigantic melodramatic speech of exodus and the imminent disaster for Kolkata and its heartless people: “we are going away from your city...Why don’t you understand that your cruelty, your ignorance, your mercilessness, and your greed will come back to you like a boomerang?...you are a dying species” (412). In using these passages of critique and anger, in extending the borders of the beast fable to include the legend, the scientific, and the mythological, Nabarun strongly lays the ground for a materialist, critical irrealist art.

However, it should also be mentioned that the speeches and verbal exchanges by the dogs appear at times deeply humanized. Not only the melodramatic slogans in the end, the dogs are told to have stories of their own which are primarily dominated by human characters or gods, such as a human king or the saint Gautam Buddha or the Hindu god, Indra. These factors appear to make the critical edge a tad blunt and meaning hazy: in trying to carve out a critique of anthropomorphism, is Nabarun carelessly endorsing one? But the excess of melodrama also compels us to think whether the writer suggests that there is an epistemological limitation in knowledge gathering and community sharing. How dogs “actually” think will continue to be a mystery. More relevant to our politics and ethics should be a formalization of this thought and the urgency to critique it. This method of reading isn’t completely groundless, especially if we bring in the reference to the philosopher Thomas Nagel’s noted essay “What Is It Like To Be A Bat?” where Nagel tells us that it is impossible to think like any other animal species since every animal is at the centre of its experience and perception.¹⁷ What the human animal can allow is a possibility of respective imagination, an empathetic association which is a registration of the difference of the other species and the simultaneous acknowledgement of its existence and habitational space in the domain of the animal at large.

Before concluding, let us make a quick point about defamiliarization that our discussion of the animal in speculative fiction started with. Defamiliarization appears to be taking place here not only through the implanting of human or other species attributes into the dogs, but also through the structuring of the narrative, through its mingling and collapse of genres, through the identification of epistemological limitations to species knowledge. Interestingly, Shklovsky had something akin to mind when he wrote about the concept of “defamiliarization”: “the technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end and must be prolonged” (20). Nabarun’s choice of a dog-narrative creates

the prospect of unfamiliarity; but it is also his use of an eclectic, composite text, constituted by genres and forms of science fiction, legends, mythological accounts, tale-telling, newspaper report, government planning, and melodrama that the possibility of aesthetic perception reaches a prolongation. This prolongation not only allows the reader the necessary space to register the various aspects of social critique in the text and make connections between critique and the question of urgency, it also enables him or her to see how a speculative text is produced, or for that matter, how a text is “produced” from different raw materials, with overlapping boundaries and generic collapses. The critique is no less there.

This is how we have attempted to engage with the issue. The other contributions have also situated the genre of the speculative in art and inquired after directions or challenged prospects in their individual readings. Lara Choksey's article “The Runaway Sign: Semiotic Adaptation in Literary Analysis” approaches literary speculation in Doris Lessing's novel *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*, engaging with semiotics at the socio-biological level. Choksey critiques biological determinism, focusing on the theme of genetics in Lessing and analyses adaptation without reducing it to evolutionism. The article's purchase on a bio-semiotic logic of change explores a potentially new literary interface of speculation with the discourse of science(s). Anushka Sen's “Possible and Possibilities: The Aesthetics of Speculation in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*” evokes generic debates about ‘speculative fiction’ and reflects on the mechanism of speculation in Ishiguro's community of clones. Sen dwells on speculation's relation to rumour and role-playing and explores how the novel deals with the figure of the possible. The reading also opens up historical questions of representation, knowledge of origin and themes of surveillance in the speculative world. Kristine Brown's contribution “Personhood: Fukuyama's Caveats and Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*” returns to the same Ishiguro novel but with a dramatically different analytic and theoretical concern as she reads the novel in a neo-historicist way, alongside Francis Fukuyama's *Our Post Human Future*. Fukuyama figures in the piece as a cautionary humanist on debates regarding bio-engineering and Brown shows how these caveats resonate with Ishiguro's novel. The piece implicitly creates a dialogue between speculation and the human in our digital age of *technological reproducibility*.

Aoife Byrne's contribution “‘Improbabilities abound’: Daphne du Maurier's *Rule Britannia* and the Speculative Political Future” takes up the question of the colonial-imperial in speculative fiction with a reading of du Maurier's *Rule Britannia*. She reads in the text's

multilayered construction the anxious emotions of Britain's debilitating political futures after the Second World War and the dismantling of the colonies. Dibyadyuti Roy's article "Of Men, Machines, and Apocalypse: Anxieties in Indian Speculative Fiction" extends the discussion to the postcolonial world. Roy argues that the hyper-masculine military-industrial complex as the basis of neoliberal warfare by America has been imitated and worked upon in the recent examples of radioactive speculative fiction in India which however stage interesting exchanges with the aspect of postcolonial democracy. Finally, Asami Nakamura's piece brings to the collection, one of the most significant writers in speculative fiction, Margaret Atwood. Entitled "'I'm a refugee from the past': The Function of Nostalgia in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," Nakamura's work proposes through a deep critical investigation that "affect" in the form of trauma and nostalgia is foundational for much of Atwood's imagination and practice which she seems to draw significantly from the work of George Orwell.

These are some of the other entry-points to the domain of speculation and fiction. We hope this volume contributes to the exciting current research in speculative fiction as much as it enables critical thoughts on the aspect of the production of fiction *per se*.

Notes:

1. OED. Web. July 29, 2015. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/speculation>
2. See for example, Matthew R Dasti and Edwin Bryant 2014; Richard Kroner 1956; Levi Bryant et al 2011.
3. Anthony Uhlmann makes this argument in an article titled 'Thinking with the World: Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*' where he writes:

The thought that is thereby expressed within the work is not the mind of an individual or group acting in the world, or not only that; but rather a world is created which itself thinks. (63)
4. The name 'speculative realism' comes from a conference that took place at Goldsmiths College, University of London in April 2007. Graham Harman, Ray Brassier and Quentin Meillassoux were speakers in it and the conference was moderated by Alberto Toscano.

5. The object is a thread that runs throughout Harman's body of work. For a concise elaboration of what he calls object-oriented philosophy, see the book *Bells and Whistles: More Speculative Realism* (2013).
6. See Ray Brassier's book *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (2007), especially the third and fourth parts of the book titled 'The Anatomy of Negation' and 'The End of Time'.
7. See Graham Harman's book *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (2011).
8. Meillassoux overturns Kantian "correlationism" in which thinking and being or subject and object can only be accessed in their *correlation* and not in isolation from one another (5). Meillassoux's separation of the subject from the object alienates the human from the world and allows us to deduce the world's own thinking from his argument. The theme of terrestrial life and thought runs through Meillassoux's book. For him, the problem is to think the life of the planet in a non-human scale. He uses terms like "arche-fossil" (26) and "ancestrality" (1-28) to argue that terrestrial life goes further back than the human relation with the world and the future awaits an end of the world which *might* come after human extinction. Once we move out of the correlationist inclination to think the human and the world necessarily in an inseparable way, we have to grapple with "terrestrial thought." There is *evental* life in the "ancestral" which goes before the appearance of the human in the world. The "arche-fossils" further suggest that there is life in the galaxy and this life is "anterior to terrestrial life" (26). At the same time, it is also possible that there *will have been* life in the planet and in the bigger cosmic world after the disappearance of the human. This opens up a *non-human temporal scale* and it's not possible for the human to think this thought. We can thus deduce from this anti-correlationist argument that the world itself thinks in a *contingent* way which goes before and after the *necessity* of human existence.
9. A novel like Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* [*Shame*] (1993) became much more popular in the vernacular Bengali canon especially when the author received death threats after the release of the book.
10. The preface reads: "Ei rochonay ghotoman kahini ebong bhobishyot akhyan royechhe pashapashi; uddeshyo, porpor ebong pashapashi thakte thakte tara kichhudin melamesha koruk—Lekhok ["In this work, the story that is happening in the present and the story in the future are placed alongside one another. The point is to let them mingle in this place, after and alongside each other— Author?"]" (427) [This and other pieces of translation from *Bharotborsho* are done by Arka Chattopadhyay]

11. In the fourth chapter, Sudeshna uses the metaphors of a gun and an Eagle's penetrative gaze to describe Harun's eyes during the moment of seduction. When Babri's first pillar *breaks* down, Harun is *breaking* her bed ["Bichhana bhangchhe"], as Sudeshna crosschecks the time later (438). In chapter ten, she tells Pinaki: "Shudhu mone hochhilo destroy korte chaichhe kichhu. Amake. Shabol diye gainti diye shudhu gha dichche amay. Parle bodh hoy gunriye dhulo kore dito. ["I only felt that he was trying to destroy something. Me. He was hammering me with a pickaxe and a crowbar. Were it in his power, he would've reduced me to ashes.]" (461)
12. Pinaki's doctor in Bombay is Muslim and when Pinaki is in a meeting with him regarding his uncle's cancer, someone calls him on the phone to give the Babri demolition news and he immediately asks Pinaki to leave for Kolkata as riots start in Bombay. He also hails the communist heritage of Kolkata as a safety-valve against a religious politics of Right wing communalism and the possibility of riots. In the futuristic reports, Sandipan is faithful in documenting the plight of the Muslim people. In one of the snippets set in 2012, a Muslim man decides to commit suicide when his house is set on fire with the final announcement that he wants to die Muslim instead of being forcefully converted to Hinduism (459). Instead of vilifying Harun, it can be argued that Sandipan's point is to look disturbingly deep into the unconscious life of instincts and explore how the most sensitively secular mind can also fall prey to momentary religious identifications prompted by the Other's act of communal hatred. This leads to a formation of reaction-symptoms that express themselves in Harun's act of vengeance.
13. *Rathinirvedam* is the title of a 1970 erotic Malayalam novel by P. Padmarajan and Annabhau Sathe (1920-1969) whose name Sandipan punches with *Rathinirvedam* who was a social reformer and a folk-poet, hailing from the marginalised Dalit community.
14. Singer's work is based on the Utilitarian principle of equality which argues that everyone is entitled to equal moral consideration irrespective of race, nation, and species: "If a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration" (9). His work has been foundational for studies in animal torture, especially in livestock farming and vivisection, and ethics. For a quick survey of the field, see these work, Berger 1980; Smuts 1999; Derrida 2008.
15. See Donna Harraway 1991; Wolfe 2003.
16. Nabarun Bhattacharya (1948-2014) was the only son of Bijan Bhattacharya and Mahasweta Devi, both noted literary personalities in West Bengal, India. Nabarun's work has been deeply political and avant-gardist in character. His first novel, *Herbert* (1993) was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Prize, India's highest recognition for literary achievement and made into a critically acclaimed film by Suman Mukhopadhyay. He is known for creating the character of "fyataru," the flying subaltern who criticizes

and attacks the bourgeois status quo with the weapon of everyday filth. These subalterns appear to launch a movement against the State's political inefficacy, corruption, and capitalist trends in *Kangal Malsat* (another celebrated novel, 2002; War-cry of the Beggars). Nabarun has also written poems, plays, and short stories. He is known for his fierce critique of establishment politics and "dissident" narrative form: the frequent mixing of realistic and non-realistic elements for a depiction of social reality.

17. Thomas Nagel writes: "I want to know what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task. I cannot perform it either by imagining additions to my present experience, or by imagining segments gradually subtracted from it, or by imagining some combination of additions, subtractions, and modifications. To the extent that I could look and behave like ... a bat without changing my fundamental structure, my experiences would not be anything like the experiences of those animals" (439' emphasis in original); Also useful in this discussions, the anthropologist Roy Willis' observations, published in the same year (1974): "The distinctive peculiarity of animals is that, being at once close to man and strange to him, both akin to him and unalterably not-man, they are able to alternate, as objects of human thought, between the contiguity of the metonymic mode and the distanced, analogical mode of the metaphor" (128).

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