

Japanocentric Critical Dystopias

An Exploration of the Critical Dystopian Lens in Japanese Contexts

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Abstract

Contemporary critical dystopian fiction circulating in the English-speaking world is largely shaped by progressivist sensibilities that frame dystopia as the intensification of oppressive traditions, hierarchies, and techno-economic rationality, and emancipation as their erosion. This paper argues that a significant strand of Japanese dystopian literature articulates a contrasting critical logic. Drawing on works by Tawada Yōko, Murata Sayaka, Oyamada Hiroko, and Kawai Masashi, it demonstrates that these texts frequently frame the erosion of tradition, social roles, and demographic continuity not as liberation, but as dystopian in itself. In these narratives, the disappearance or degradation of the Japanese polity – understood as an interrelation of territory, population, social relations, and cultural continuity – constitutes the central object of anxiety. By juxtaposing Japanese dystopian fiction with dominant Anglosphere models of critical dystopia, this article proposes the concept of *Japanocentric critical dystopia* as a culturally situated expression, highlighting the limits of progressivist assumptions within dystopian fiction.

Keywords: Critical dystopia; Japanocentric critical dystopia; progressivism; Nihonjinron; Japanese identity.

ISSN: 03928667 (print) 18277969 (digital)

DOI: 10.26350/001200_000266

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1. Introduction

Dystopian fiction typically depicts bleak, futuristic societies that function as warnings about contemporary concerns. Through these storyworlds, authors reflect on “decisions about technology, warfare and social behavior that are

Contributo sottoposto a *double-blind peer review*.

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being made today”¹. A “mirror of the maladies of modernity”², amid escalating economic, social, political, and environmental crises, the genre has increasingly shifted into what Tom Moylan defined as “critical dystopia”³. No longer merely a (sub)genre of science fiction, critical dystopia operates as a lens on reality: a representational mode that prompts engagement with contemporary social, economic, political, and, more recently, environmental issues at a transnational level. As such, dystopian storyworlds are constructed through critical reflections on prevailing cultural, social, and political conditions, as perceived by the work’s author⁴. In conjunction with the narratives they present, these storyworlds serve as spaces for articulating concerns and aspirations regarding real-world economic, cultural, societal, and environmental trajectories⁵. Critical dystopia thus functions as a form of ‘fiction that warns’, expressing fear – as well as an implicit horizon of hope – regarding ongoing historical and cultural developments such as the rise of authoritarian politics, climate change, and shifting discourses around sex and gender.

In its global circulation, critical dystopian fiction has coalesced into a set of perspectives and narrative trajectories that closely mirror feminist, postcolonial, and posthumanist discussions surrounding progress and humanism⁶. In urging active engagement with present crises, it increasingly functions as a fictionalization of contemporary reality itself, akin to a form of “augmented realism” [*realismo aumentato*]⁷. Prominent examples include Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* series (2017-.2025), the television adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017-present), Christina Bazter-

¹ C. Penley, “Time Travel, Primal Scene, and the Critical Dystopia”, *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, 5, 3 (1986): 66-85 (66).

² C. Watanabe, “The Genealogy of Dystopia [*Disutopia e no keifu*]”, *Aichi Ronso*, 112 (February 2022): 85-86

³ T. Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, London: Routledge, 2018; F. Vieira, “Introduction”, in *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, edited by F. Vieira, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013: 1-8 (2-3).

⁴ I. Cavalcanti. “Critical Dystopia”, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Utopian and Dystopian Literatures*, edited by P. Marks, J.A. Wagner-Lawlor, F. Vieira, Cham: Springer International Publishing: 65-75 (65); Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*.

⁵ Cavalcanti, “Critical Dystopia”, 66.

⁶ K. McGuire, “Dystopian Fiction: Can it Enable us to Think Critically about Gendered Violence and Power?”, *International Journal of Gender, Sexuality and Law*, 3, 1 (2024): 71-83 (72); L. Haristoy, “‘The Boxed-Up Miseries and Fears, Orbiting Two Miles Up’: Rationing and Rationalizing Emotions in Feminist Speculative Fiction”, *Leaves*, 18, 1 (2024): 1-19 (1-2).

⁷ F. Deotto, “Il tempo del realismo aumentato. Un’idea di letteratura rivolta al ‘futuro prossimo’” [“The Time of Augmented Realism. Towards a Literature that Looks at the ‘Near Future’”], *Il Tascabile* (2018). Accessed January 26, 2026. <https://www.iltascabile.com/letterature/tempo-realismo-aumentato/>.

rica's *Tender Is the Flesh* (*Cadáver exquisito*, 2014), as well as video game series such as CD Projekt Red's *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020, 2023) and Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* (2013, 2020). Beyond their narrative circulation, these works have also generated forms of symbolic political engagement: the three-finger salute from *The Hunger Games* has been adopted in protests against economic inequality and in support of democratic movements in Hong Kong and Thailand⁸, while the Handmaids' costumes have been mobilized in demonstrations opposing restrictions on reproductive rights in the United States and abroad⁹. In reflecting and amplifying such concerns, critical dystopia situates itself within broader global cultural trends as they circulate primarily through English-language media ecosystems¹⁰.

However, in privileging "lived experience"¹¹ and liberation from "convention and oppression, linked to a project of humanitarian equality ('social justice') for minorities"¹², critical dystopian fiction often rests on ontological assumptions rooted in progressivism, articulated as a diminishing confidence in the "grand narrative of Western techno-economic rational modernization"¹³. Consequently, critical dystopian fiction – particularly within the Anglosphere – tends to presuppose a set of positions, perceptions, emphases, and critical priorities that are treated as implicitly universal. Such universalization risks foreclosing the possibility that alternative sensibilities might also inform critical dystopian imaginaries, thereby imposing assumptions that may not hold equivalent significance beyond English-language cultural contexts. What, for instance, prevents the decline or disappearance of Western techno-economic rational modernization itself from being framed as the dystopian development to be avoided? Similarly, what if a work were to frame the disappearance of a polity, together with the erosion of its cultural identity and social functions, as the dystopian condition that motivates reflection and action? Such representations would presume different trajectories and priorities, while still employing a perceptual lens that is both critical

⁸ L. Levitt, "The Hunger Games and the Dystopian Imagination", in *Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination: Case Studies of Creative Social Change*, edited by H. Jenkins, G. Peters-Lazaro, S. Shresthova, New York: New York University Press, 2020: 43-50.

⁹ H.W. Holladay, C.L. Classen, "The Drip, Drip, Drip of Dystopia: The Handmaid's Tale, Temporal Boundaries, and Affective Investment", *Feminist Media Studies*, 21, 3 (2021): 477-492.

¹⁰ B. Neumann, G. Rippl, "Anglophone World Literatures: Introduction", *Anglia*, 135, 1 (2017): 1-20.

¹¹ E. Kaufmann, "The Post-Progressive Condition: Meta-Critical Theory and the Rebalancing of Knowledge", *Theory and Society*, 54, 1 (2025): 139-159 (141).

¹² *Ibid.*, 140.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 141.

– placing contemporary issues up for discussion – and dystopian – articulating them through the representation of a degraded future storyworld. A notable example is dystopian fiction from Japan.

Works such as Oyamada Hiroko's *The Factory* [*Kōjō*] (2013), Murata Sayaka's *The Birth Murder* [*Satsujin Shussan*] (2014), and Tawada Yōko's *The Emissary* [*Kentōshi*] (2018) are set in speculative future contexts that amplify and interrogate contemporary concerns. Yet these works articulate sensibilities that diverge markedly from the dominant assumptions of Anglosphere critical dystopia. *The Birth Murder* explores a dystopian world in which universal gestation renders conventional distinctions between male and female obsolete, unsettling established social roles. By contrast, *The Emissary* presents an inversion of normative age hierarchies in Japan: the young are afflicted with physical frailty commonly associated with old age, while adults have ceased aging and have returned to youthful vitality. Despite their differing narrative settings, both texts frame the decline or disappearance of the Japanese polity – including its population, traditions, social mores, and role structures – as a dystopian condition. Rather than emphasizing the intensification of hegemonic or overtly oppressive state and social mechanisms, these narratives foreground the erosion of social networks, customs, and relational frameworks, thereby challenging progressivist assumptions underpinning critical dystopian fiction.

The Birth Murder and *The Emissary* represent only two instances within a broader tradition of Japanese dystopian fiction that explores the decline or potential disappearance of the Japanese polity, whether as a consequence of natural catastrophe, demographic transformation, or processes of assimilation and dilution within global society¹⁴. This recurring motif reflects a set of uncertainties and concerns that diverge markedly from the progressivist orientations often foregrounded in Anglosphere critical dystopian literature. This article offers an initial exploration of these divergences by first delineating the progressivist outlook that structures much English-language critical dystopian fiction and then juxtaposing it with four works of contemporary Japanese dystopian writing: *The Emissary*, *The Factory*, *The Birth Murder*, and Kawai Masashi's *Future Chronology* series [*Mirai no Nenpyō*] (2017-2018). Through this comparative approach, the article examines how

¹⁴ A. Specchio, "Women and Queer Kinships: Matsuura Rieko, Fujino Chiya, and Murata Sayaka", in *The Handbook of Modern and Contemporary Japanese Women Writers*, edited by R. Copeland, London: Routledge, 2023: 209-224; V. De Pieri, "Catastrophilia: A Case Study of the Eco-Apocalyptic Japan Sinks' Mediascape", *DIVE-IN - An International Journal on Diversity and Inclusion*, 3, 2 (2023): 181-186

different crises, societal trajectories, and dystopian warnings are articulated in Japanese dystopian fiction, highlighting distinctive features of Japanese dystopian narratives while exposing assumptions that remain implicit or underexamined within dominant English-language frameworks.

2. Critical dystopian fiction and progressivism

How do critical dystopias produced outside the Anglosphere reflect and warn about contemporary crises, and what kinds of crises are translated into dystopian states of affairs? Examining the tensions between Japanese and Anglosphere dystopian fiction offers productive insights into utopian and dystopian imaginaries across different cultural, social, and geographical contexts. As anticipated above, critical dystopia emerges from the interaction between utopian and dystopian traditions in the wake of the global crises of the 1970s and 1980s¹⁵. Operating both as a subgenre of science fiction and as a representational mode, critical dystopia deploys storyworlds structured around the juxtaposition of uncanniness and social satire. Drawing on authorial experience and what Moylan describes as a “parodic inversion” of “transcendent or controlling utopian aspirations”¹⁶, critical dystopian fiction articulates contemporary crises while retaining an “horizon of hope”¹⁷. This residual hope, however fragile, sustains a “call to action”¹⁸, encouraging readers to resist dystopian futures, whether distant or already emerging within the present. In doing so, critical dystopia shapes contemporary imaginaries by dramatizing apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic, eco-catastrophic, technoscientific, and posthumanist conditions characteristic of the current century”¹⁹.

However, what constitutes desirable actions or perspectives in response to “social injustice, climate change, species extinction, gender regulations, and racial prejudice”²⁰ may not be shared uniformly across different contexts of cultural production. As the ethos of progressive and progressive-leaning social science has become increasingly embedded and taken for granted

¹⁵ Cavalcanti, “Critical Dystopia”, 65.

¹⁶ L. Davis, “Dystopia, Utopia, and Sancho Panza”, in *Dystopia (n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, edited by F. Vieira, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013: 23-27 (26).

¹⁷ R. Baccolini, T. Moylan, “Conclusion. Critical Dystopia and Possibilities”, in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, edited by R. Baccolini and T. Moylan, New York-London: Routledge, 2003: 233-250 (238).

¹⁸ Vieira, “Introduction”, 4.

¹⁹ Cavalcanti, “Critical Dystopia”, 72.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

within both the social sciences and the humanities, progressivist assumptions are often presented as “empirically obvious and morally consensual”²¹. Such assumptions, however, risk obscuring the emergence of alternative priorities, trajectories, and evaluative frameworks. One indication of this limitation can be found in the dystopian lenses employed within radical and reactionary right-wing infotainment, where progressivist trajectories themselves are framed as dystopian developments – a perspective that remains comparatively underapproached²². In this sense, the dominant approach of critical dystopian fiction, much like that of the social sciences more broadly, captures social realities only partially, thereby necessitating a re-examination of its embedded assumptions in order to “recover omitted topics and perspectives”²³. Against this backdrop, Eric Kaufmann’s discussion of progressivism and the emergence of a post-progressivist intellectual zeitgeist prove particularly productive for illuminating the blind spots of critical dystopia, especially when drawing connections across distinct cultural milieus.

[p]rogressivism, as I use it, is synonymous with the hybrid ideology of left-modernism. Namely the overlap of expressive individualism (including avant-garde modernism), cultural egalitarianism and humanitarianism. That is, more Lennonism than Leninism, the cultural face of left-liberalism. Daniel Bell defines modernism as the rejection of tradition and mimesis in favor of the shock of the new, emerging in art towards the end of the nineteenth century (Bell, 1996 [1976]). To this preference for change over tradition, I would add a predilection for difference over commonality. While modernists seek to transgress boundaries of race and ethnicity, they simultaneously value the diversity that bounded minority groups bring, hence the post1910s ‘asymmetrical multiculturalist’ modus vivendi of urging ethnic majorities to transcend their narrower attachments for cosmopolitanism while imploring minorities to preserve theirs (Kaufmann, 2004). Modernism is thus an attempt to break free of both tradition (to realize novelty and change) and national community (to attain diversity and cosmopolitanism). Notice that this use of ‘modernism’, which refers to cultural anti-traditionalism, is very different from how postmodernists defined ‘modernism’ (as techno-economic rationality)²⁴.

Kaufmann’s framing of progressivist ideology finds clear resonance in both canonical and contemporary dystopian works, such as J.G. Ballard’s *High-Rise* (1975) and more recent narratives like *The Last of Us*. Despite being

²¹ Kaufmann, “The Post-Progressive Condition: Meta-Critical Theory and the Rebalancing of Knowledge”, 140.

²² R. Abrahamsen, M.C. Williams, “Radical Right Dystopias in the Global Culture Wars”, *Global Studies Quarterly*, 5, 1 (2025): 1-11.

²³ Kaufmann, “The Post-Progressive Condition: Meta-Critical Theory and the Rebalancing of Knowledge”, 139.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

separated by more than three decades, both texts articulate pointed critiques of tradition, national community, and, more broadly, the social and political ramifications of techno-economic rationality. In *High-Rise*, the hegemonic, neoliberal, middle-class trajectory of success is depicted as the very mechanism that precipitates the collapse of the eponymous building's self-contained community, offering a sustained critique of modernist techno-economic rationality. *The Last of Us*, by contrast, stages the collapse of the United States as a nation following a devastating pandemic that escalates into a zombie apocalypse, with a Federal Disaster Response Agency – a fictionalized FEMA – seizing control of public institutions and enforcing militarized quarantine zones that crystallize technocratic power in overtly oppressive forms. Extending this trajectory, a third example can be found in Kojima Productions' *Death Stranding* (2019), which imagines a world in which humanity is forced underground and rendered dependent on human couriers to reconnect isolated enclaves of civilization. Here, the residual horizon of hope lies in the effort to re-establish tangible, affective community bonds outside the logics of centralized techno-economic systems²⁵.

In each of these three works, we witness the fading influence of traditional dominant institutions, which paves the way for a renewed focus on forming personal relationships and rebuilding beyond old state-based or tradition-driven sources of power and belief systems. The dystopian future is techno-economic rationality gone mad, leading to the erasure of diversity in favor of forced uniformity, ultimately causing its own collapse (*High-Rise*), the erosion of bodily autonomy through authoritarian biopolitical control (*The Last of Us*), and the removal of authentic, tangible human connection in favor of mediated exchange (*Death Stranding*). These narrative patterns are familiar across the regions and cultures connected to the Anglosphere. Yet, their common theme of breaking away from inherited structures as a way to (re)gain hope and new possibilities reflects a cultural perspective on dystopia that may not apply universally across cultural production contexts.

²⁵ Although *Death Stranding* is a video game developed in Japan, it features an international cast and is designed from the outset for global circulation, engaging with and responding to themes and trends in globally circulating English-speaking cultural production. As shown below, there are significant differences in perspectives and trajectories between 'global' and 'local' Japanese works.

3. Japanese dystopian fiction and (non)progressivism

Where critical dystopian fiction often delineates a clear opposition to prevailing societal conditions, striving toward expressive individualism, cultural egalitarianism, and humanitarianism, Japanese dystopian fiction frequently follows alternative trajectories. A seminal example is Komatsu Sakyō's *Japan Sinks* [*Nihon Chinbotsu*] (1964), which depicts Japan's destruction through a geological cataclysm that ultimately leads to the disappearance of the archipelago itself. The catastrophe – and the arguably dystopian condition it produces – functions as a pretext for examining whether the Japanese can survive as a nation once their ancestral lands are lost, foregrounding tensions between “Japanese identity and its encounter with the foreigner, questioning the socio-political perspectives of domesticity versus internationality, centrality versus periphery, diaspora and social fragmentation”²⁶. The work's repeated adaptations across media forms, including live-action films, anime, manga, and satire²⁷, testify to the enduring relevance of these concerns. At the same time, the dystopian anxiety articulated in *Japan Sinks* runs counter to dominant discourses of liberation from convention, as well as to the skepticism toward traditional political and social institutions that characterizes Anglosphere critical dystopian fiction.

At the same time, it is important to note that there are substantial differences between Japanese works that circulate globally and may be meant to do so (e.g. *Death Stranding*) and Japanese works that do not and may not be meant to do so (e.g. *Japan Sinks*, *Future Chronology*). For example, Japanese authors such as Murata Sayaka and Ono Miyuki, whose works are available in English, employ dystopian narratives to interrogate representations of the female body and desire, foregrounding posthuman themes within hyper-capitalist social formations, with Japan often serving as a paradigmatic case. These works have frequently been interpreted as participating in a broader, transnational literary conversation²⁸. The same can be said for approaches

²⁶ De Pieri. “Catastrophilia: A Case Study of the Eco-Apocalyptic Japan Sinks’ Mediascape”, 181-186.

²⁷ A short story parody of the original novel by Yasutaka Tsutsui, *Everybody but Japan Sinks* [*Nihon Igai Zenbu Chinbotsu*] (1973), also receiving a movie adaptation in 2006, turns the premise on its head, with the entire world having to take shelter in Japan after the archipelago becomes the sole remaining habitable landmass, exposes tensions between Japan and the rest of the world. The story, which still concludes with Japan sinking into the Pacific, sees foreign refugees incapable of learning Japanese and Japanese customs punished with death at sea.

²⁸ A. Specchio, “Consumed Bodies and Unhinged Women. The Dystopian Worlds of Murata Sayaka’s *Seimeishiki* (Life Ceremony, 2013) and Ono Miyuki’s *Karada o uru koto*

highlighting the perspective of woman-centered viewpoints regarding desire in relation to contemporary, male-dominated, patriarchal Japanese society²⁹. Conversely, a significant proportion of Japanese dystopian literature remains untranslated and thus circulates primarily within Japanese-speaking communities. Addressing predominantly domestic audiences, these texts articulate different priorities in relation to global concerns – such as climate change, demographic decline, technological transformation, and neoliberalist dominance – than those of English-language dystopian fiction, while still presenting storyworlds “inhabited by people who are to the text’s readers spectres of a world which is narrated as legible, as a possibility germinating in the present, and which therefore takes on the guise, if not of a warning, then of a rebuke of some kind to the reader’s present”³⁰.

As a result, it’s not enough to simply apply progressivist assumption from Anglosphere critical dystopian fiction directly to Japanese dystopian literature; this principle likely holds true for other cultures as well. Japanese dystopian stories present a unique call to action, one that diverges from the “reconfigurations of dystopian expressions in response to the recent critical moves provoked by the intersectional, decolonial, and Anthropocene-informed views debated in the arenas of feminism, gender and queer studies, ecocriticism, critical race studies, and others”³¹. The Japanese literary context, characterized by a relative condition of (dis)connection – or what has been described as “trans-insularity”³² – from the broader English-speaking and English-translated global sphere, has fostered the articulation of dystopian perspectives shaped by localized historical, social, and demographic conditions.

Experiences of displacement and the loss of hegemonic worldviews have also occurred within English-speaking contexts; however, these crises have been articulated in Japan through dominant national imaginaries uncritically presuming a stable cultural and ethnic core³³, also fueled by increas-

(“*Selling the Body*”, 2020), *DIVE-IN—An International Journal on Diversity and Inclusion*, 3, 2 (2023): 135-158.

²⁹ N. Cornyetz, R. Copeland, eds., *Reading Desire in a New Generation of Japanese Women Writers*, New York-London: Routledge, 2023.

³⁰ P. McManus, *Critical Theory and Dystopia*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022, 1.

³¹ Cavalcanti, “Critical Dystopia”, 71.

³² M. Fiadotau, “Isolated Connectedness: Applying the Concept of Transinsularity to Japan’s Game History”, *REPLAYING JAPAN*, 3 (2021): 33-41.

³³ E. Oguma, *The Origins of the Single Race Myth: A Genealogy of Self-Portraits of the ‘Japanese’* [*Tan’itsu Minzoku Shinwa no Kigen – ‘Nihonjin’ no Jigazō no Keifu*], Tōkyō: Shin’yōsha 1995.

ing postwar corporatization³⁴. This contrasts with historical contexts such as the Civil Rights Movement in the United States or France's war in Algeria, where questions of belonging, plurality, and internal differentiation were already foregrounded within national discourse. Subsequent historical flash-points – including the defeat of the Japanese Empire in World War II, the collapse of the asset bubble in the early 1990s, and the compounded natural and nuclear disasters of March 11, 2011 – have further unsettled collective understandings of what “Japan” signifies and what it means for those who inhabit it. Beyond giving rise to identifiable trends in cultural production, such as *seikaikei*³⁵, these accumulated experiences have shaped distinctive dystopian trajectories concerned with societal and cultural decline.

The recurring depiction of Japan's decline or dissolution as a polity – accompanied by the erosion, transformation, or replacement of dominant social norms and role structures – stands in tension with discourses of liberation from convention and with the skepticism toward traditional political and social institutions that characterizes critical dystopian fiction in the Anglosphere. In this sense, Japanese dystopian narratives challenge several of the genre's dominant tenets by reframing social continuity, rather than its dismantling, as the object of dystopian anxiety. While a critique of the ethnonationalist undertones – whether implicit or explicit – that may inform such representations is more than warranted, the configuration of Japan's decline or disappearance as the central dystopian crisis nevertheless constitutes a distinct deployment of the dystopian lens in addressing the crises of the present.

By emphasizing the loss of the Japanese polity as the process through which dystopian conditions are progressively or abruptly realized, Japanese dystopian fiction calls into question the hegemonic assumptions that structure much critical dystopian discourse, prompting a reconsideration of what ‘dystopian’ might signify across different cultural contexts. Central to these narratives is an understanding of Japan as both a physical territory and a socially organized collective, whose fragility and potential dissolution are foregrounded as primary sources of dystopian anxiety. Within this framework, ruin is not universalized or abstracted to a global scale³⁶, but rendered

³⁴ O. Masataka, “Ethnic Identities within Japanese Nationals [Nihonjin naibu no minzoku ishiki to gainen no konran]”, *Journal of the Faculty of Integrated Human Studies and Social Sciences [Fukuokakenritsudaigaku ningenshakaigakubu kiyō]*, 19, 2 (2011): 77-98 (94-95).

³⁵ M. Tanaka, *Apocalypse in Japanese Science Fiction*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 26-30.

³⁶ P. Sands, “Utopias and Dystopias”, in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary*

as local and situated, unfolding within a socially and culturally specific horizon of meaning. This narrative orientation stands in contrast to the globally projected imaginaries characteristic of Anglosphere dystopian fiction and prepares the ground for a closer examination of the cultural logics that underpin such divergences.

4. Japanocentric critical dystopias?

The strong situatedness of Japanese dystopian literature, while certainly engaged in dialogue with global fiction, also tends – perhaps unconsciously – to incorporate elements characteristic of what has been termed the *Theories of Japaneseness* [*Nihonjinron*]. These theories comprise “a body of discourse which purports to demonstrate Japan’s cultural differences from other cultures and Japan’s cultural uniqueness in the world, and thus seeks to establish Japan’s cultural identity”³⁷. Central to such arguments are a set of ethno-cultural and national assumptions: the conception of an ethnically homogeneous Japanese polity as a uniquely differentiated entity; the belief that Japan’s geographical insularity has produced distinctive societal traits shaping modes of thought; the assertion that the Japanese language constitutes a unique linguistic phenomenon that evolved largely in isolation, fostering a singular worldview; the claim that Japanese psychological and social relations blur the boundaries between Self and Other; and the characterization of Japanese society as vertically structured, continuously organized around family- or group-oriented units rather than individuals³⁸. The presumption of a singular Japanese national character has become sufficiently pervasive within public discourse that it has been described as a “popular consumer item” [*taishūshōhizai*]³⁹, leading to specific worldviews, as well as illusions of homogeneity⁴⁰.

As such, the Theories of Japaneseness continue to play a significant role

Worlds, edited by M.J.P. Wolf, Milton Park: Routledge, 2017: 180-182.

³⁷ H. Befu, K. Manabe, “Empirical Status of Nihonjinron: How Real is the Myth?”, in *Rethinking Japan Vol. 2: Social Sciences, Ideology and Thought* [1995], edited by A. Boscaro, F. Gatti, M. Raveri, London: Routledge, 2018: 124-133 (124).

³⁸ P.N. Dale, *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness*, London: Routledge, 1988.

³⁹ R. Goodman, “Anthropology, Policy and the Study of Japan”, in *Family and Social Policy in Japan: Anthropological Approaches*, edited by R. Goodman, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002: 1-28 (5).

⁴⁰ C. Burgess, “The ‘Illusion’ of Homogeneous Japan and National Character: Discourse as a Tool to Transcend the ‘Myth’ vs. ‘Reality’ Binary”, *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 9, 1 (2010): 1-23 (3).

in shaping forms of “common sense” within Japanese media discourse, influencing perceptions of (Japanese) race, gender, and national identity. Notably, understandings of Japan’s position within the broader global context, as well as distinctions drawn between Japanese subjects and others, may be inflected by Nihonjinron discourses even in the absence of explicit reference. The recurrent framing of Japan’s disappearance as a dystopian catastrophe – one that deprives individuals of social connections, spatial belonging, and socially legible roles – can therefore be read in relation to these discursive formations. While it would be inaccurate to suggest that Nihonjinron permeates all Japanese cultural production, implicit or explicit assumptions of Japanese distinctiveness recur across a range of dystopian works. Taken together, these tendencies articulate what may be described as a *Japanocentric dystopia*: a dystopia that explicitly or implicitly embeds *Japaneseness* ethno-cultural-nationalist principles.

In *The Emissary*, a future Japan facing climate change, children are born with the frailties and ailments commonly associated with old age, while adults have ceased aging and have returned to their physical prime. When globalization-dependent trappings – such as the internet, digital hardware and wireless transmissions – fail, the government and the populace appear to be content with abandoning them to maintain isolation rather than re-establishing contact with the unknown outside. The novel’s central characters, Yoshiro and Mumei, experience a reversal of hegemonic Japanese senior-junior roles: eight-year-old Mumei suffers from the infirmities of old age and must be cared for constantly, whereas one-hundred-and-seven-year-old Yoshiro retains the vitality of and prime of youth. Consequently, it falls to Yoshiro, the great-great-grandfather, to care for Mumei as he navigates childhood, rather than Mumei tending to Yoshiro through his elder years. Echoes of Japan’s historical three-century isolation from the outside world [*sakoku*] notwithstanding, the depiction of an inward-looking Japan is certainly different from the contextualization of the world’s ruin seen in ‘global’ works such as P.D. James’ *The Children of Men* (1992) or the manifold futures expressed in *Black Mirror* (2016-2025).

In *The Birth Murder*, Murata Sayaka explores a world in which the intrinsic links between womanhood, gestation, and childbirth are dissolved, rendering sex and gender largely irrelevant as markers of identity. By framing this transformation through a dystopian lens, Murata interrogates dominant assumptions surrounding social roles and interpersonal relations in Japan. As connections between womanhood and biological sex are severed, (Japanese) women attain equality with (Japanese) men, yet simultaneously lose the capacity to identify themselves as (Japanese) women within a so-

cially legible framework. Through this configuration, Murata depicts a subtly degraded Japanese society in which emancipation is accompanied by a profound loss of relational meaning. The dystopian condition, in this case, lies not in the physical ruination of Japan as a collection of places and people, but in the erosion of the social relationships and role structures that sustain (Japanese) social life.

Oyamada Hiroko's *The Factory* [*Kōjō*] offers a further illustration of how the decline of the Japanese polity recurs as a central motif in Japanese dystopian imaginaries, here transposed into the setting of a vast, unnamed, and totalitarian factory complex. Of the novel's three central characters, Ushiyama Yoshiko – a recent communications graduate – feels persistently unworthy of her position within the ostensibly prestigious institution. Furufue Yoshio, the second character, finds himself the sole member of his department and is required to live onsite in a two-story building, with the ground floor designated as his laboratory. The third character, Yoshiko's unnamed brother, works at the factory as a temporary employee following the loss of his previous position as a systems engineer. Over time, all three experience a progressive erosion of identity and social embeddedness, as their labor within the Factory strips their lives of meaning and relational purpose: Yoshiko becomes increasingly isolated from social relationships, Yoshio comes to view his work and research as futile, and Yoshiko's brother clings to his romantic relationship for validation – a dependency his sister resents in light of her own precarious work position. As individual worth is diluted and ultimately absorbed into the logic of the Factory, so too are socially legible positions within Japanese society. In this dystopian configuration, social roles do not merely collapse; they are rendered *irrelevant* within the impersonal hierarchy of the nameless factory complex.

The divergence between this strand of Japanese dystopian fiction and Anglosphere critical dystopian narratives becomes even more pronounced when works such as Kawai Masashi's *Future Chronology – This Is What Happens to Japan in Population Decline* [*Mirai no Nenpyō – Jinkō Genshō Nihon de Korekara Okiru Koto*] series (2017–2018) are taken into account. Applying a dystopian lens to contemporary demographic data, *Future Chronology* projects the eventual dissolution of Japan as a nation-state, implicitly equating the Japanese polity with the numerical persistence of an ethnically conceived Japanese population. After outlining current demographic trends, Kawai asserts that “the ‘birthrate decline’ cannot be stopped. Even if future child-rearing support measures are effective and the total fertility rate (the estimated number of children per woman in her lifetime) improves in some

way, there will not be an increase in the number of births (for reasons I will explain later)”⁴¹.

And while it certainly unconventional to compare *Future Chronology* – a work of non-fiction – with prose narrative, the way in which it employs a critical dystopian lens directed at the present is akin to the form of “augmented realism” through which dystopian narratives increasingly describe contemporary conditions rather than project distant futures⁴². Furthermore, the usage of statistic data in pop-argumentative fashion makes it closer to infotainment products, a media tipology that remains devoid of approach from studies of dystopia. The implication underlying *Future Chronology* is that only ethnic Japanese – understood in a commonsense, unexamined fashion with ethnonationalist implications – are capable of sustaining the Japanese population and, by extension, the Japanese polity⁴³. Immigration or assimilation as potential contributors to demographic continuity are notably absent, a silence that aligns *Future Chronology* with dystopian framings found in reactionary infotainment products circulating within English-speaking right-wing cultural networks⁴⁴. Given its documented use by Japanese conservative political actors as substantiation for their policy positions⁴⁵, *Future Chronology* reveals a set of anxieties embedded within contemporary Japanese public discourse. In this configuration, the decline of the Japanese polity – encompassing traditional institutions, patterns of interpersonal relation, and its constituent population – is neither framed as emancipatory nor as a neutral transformation, but rather as an uncanny and deeply threatening prospect.

Overall, the works discussed in this chapter reveal a recurring dystopian configuration in which anxiety centers on the decline or disappearance of the Japanese polity. Whether articulated through speculative fiction or through infotainment-adjacent, para-analytic commentary, these narratives mobilize a critical dystopian lens to frame demographic contraction, social disaggregation, and the erosion of socially legible roles as urgent conditions unfolding in the present. In adopting this orientation, they depart from pro-

⁴¹ M. Kawai, *Future Chronology – This is What Happens to Japan in Population Decline* [*Mirai no Nenpyō - Jinkō Genshō Nihon de Korekara Okiru Koto*], Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2017, 4. Translation of the cited passage by the author.

⁴² Deotto, “Il tempo del realismo aumentato”.

⁴³ C. Yamaura, “An Imagined Shrinking Community: Japanese Nationalism and the Chronology of the Future”, *Japanese Studies*, 44, 1 (2024), 25-47 (26); Kawai, *Future Chronology*, 9.

⁴⁴ Abrahamsen, Williams, “Radical Right Dystopias in the Global Culture Wars”, 7-8.

⁴⁵ Yamaura, “An Imagined Shrinking Community”, 26-27.

gressivist trajectories that construe dystopia primarily as the intensification of hegemonic-bound hierarchies, instead positioning the loss of continuity itself as the dystopian state of affairs.

The notion of a *Japanocentric critical dystopia* advanced here should not be taken as an endorsement of *Nihonjinron* or similar ethnonationalist premises. Rather, it seeks to designate a recurring mode of dystopian imagination shaped by situated anxieties concerning national persistence, social cohesion, and the fragility of collective forms of life – anxieties that intersect with, but are not reducible to, discourses of Japaneseness. At the same time, the proximity of certain dystopian framings to reactionary political narratives foregrounds the ethical and analytical stakes of treating polity loss as an unquestioned dystopian absolute. Recognizing this configuration complicates the implicitly universalist claims of critical dystopian paradigms and underscores the need for culturally situated comparative approaches to the employment of dystopia as a lens for engaging with the crises of the present.

5. Conclusions

While the works examined here remain a limited corpus, they highlight the need to further attention to how non ‘global’ dystopian fiction may respond to themes proper of critical dystopia. Japanese dystopian narratives articulate concerns that diverge from dominant progressivist configurations of critical dystopia, particularly through an emphasis on the dilution, degradation, or disappearance of socially embedded identities and collective forms of life. These concerns manifest through different dystopian lenses: the demographic and ethnonational framing of decline in *Future Chronology*; the erosion of communal and occupational meaning in *The Factory*; the destabilization of sex–gender prerogatives in *The Birth Murder*; and the inversion of socio-biological structures in *The Emissary*. Juxtaposition with globally circulating dystopian works such as *The Hunger Games*, *Tender Is the Flesh*, *The Last of Us*, or *Cyberpunk 2077* suggests the extent to which these Japanese texts articulate alternative dystopian priorities rather than peripheral variations. The Japanese case is particularly instructive insofar as it emerges from a cultural production context that is globally visible yet structurally distinct from the Anglosphere. Whereas much English-language dystopian fiction engages global crises through intersectional, decolonial, and queer critical frameworks, Japanese dystopian narratives frequently foreground culturally embedded constraints that precede or complicate such perspectives. The recurrent framing of Japan as a polity possessing defining characteristics

that regulate worldview, social roles, and interpersonal relations – often operating implicitly rather than programmatically – functions as a structuring condition for dystopian imagination. The existence of Japan-centric critical dystopias, not exclusively tied to reactionary discourses, underscores the need for more culturally situated and comparative approaches to dystopia as a mode of critique in the twenty-first century.