

## **Bombay Fever, the Toujours Vu, and Our Plague Era: A Phenomenology of Reflexivity**

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### **Abstract**

To read popular novelist Sidin Vadukut's medical thriller *Bombay Fever* (2017) any time after Chinese New Year 2020 is in effect to reread the prescient novel. Covid has transformed us as readers (of plague fiction). We're no longer wide-eyed playgoers. Instead, we're squinty-eyed analysts; we've moved from incredulity (OMG!!!) to recognition (real talk). Vadukut's originally speculative novel is presently a realist one—or, rather, a text that (now) elides said modernist genre-division by virtue of the *Toujours Vu*, the reader's sincere detective-like investment in the always-already ongoing and experienced. Affect, here, supplants ironic (pomo) distanciation or remove. This doubly invested (as plague patient; as identifying subject) readerly process results in a critically and emotionally complicated textual experience, one that allows for the fruitful interrogation of the role of reading (plague; fiction) in the face of lived existential anxiety in a post-truth era. Vadukut reflexively addresses the “complicated truths” of our laissez-faire familiarity with pharmacology. Furthermore, addressing plague fiction in the western tradition, Vadukut adds another reflexive level to the first (arguably) plague novel in English: Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722). Where Defoe's innovative style long-confounded even savvy literary critics, however, Vadukut's thriller no-less skilfully enthrals them. *Both* allegorically *and* literally, Vadukut, like few other plague writers, captures the official and unofficial narratives of our *toujours vu* byzantine global present.

**Keywords:** Sidin Vadukut, *Bombay Fever*, Reflexivity, Para-textuality, Affect, Plague Fiction

*Be exquisitely careful.*

–Richard Preston, *The Hot Zone* (1994)

*Chutiyas want to die.*

–Sidin Vadukut, *Bombay Fever* (2017)

In *Bombay Fever* (2017), Sidin Vadukut’s reader encounters her first “fit of coughing” very early in the novel (Vadukut 10), which is the penultimate page of “2” a concise chapter heading rendered doubly ominous by the bloody handprint decal that follows it, as well as the bold-faced lede “86 days before outbreak” (6). The cacophonous word cough erupts eight times in the five-page chapter. The coughs shift and re-centre the narrative. Yet before these ominous eruptions produce a macabre “fit of coughing,” even minimally informed readers inhabiting the already long third-decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (our already interminable 2020s) apprehends the full-blown chaos of a world theatre mostly motivated by “intense fear of an unpleasant death,” to appropriate from Richard Preston’s 1994 non-fiction *The Hot Zone* (313). To be sure, said metaphysical anxiety is generated by the boldfaced “86 days before outbreak” (on the heels of the bloody handprint decals) that lede/lead chapters 1 and 2 (prompting our attuned recognition of a doomsday countdown framing *Bombay Fever*). Given the givens of Covid-19, however, Vadukut’s narrator’s scaffolding is now superfluous. We don’t need it. It’s all *toujours vu*, or the always already (and ongoing) experienced. Albeit, our stock “pomo-complaint,” “I’ve seen this shit before,” doesn’t boringly take hold. For this reader, at least, said fictional familiarity with a future present in which I now live, supplants ironic distantiating (or pomo remove) with invested experience (or sincere affect).

To read popular novelist Vadukut’s medical thriller *Bombay Fever* any time after Chinese New Year 2020 or, six weeks later, following Tom Hanks’s positive Coronavirus diagnosis, which compelled the Global North to acknowledge the contemporary fear and

trembling already entrenched in Asia, is in effect to reread the prescient novel. What we now officially call Covid has transformed us as readers (of plague fiction). We're no longer wide-eyed playgoers. Instead, we're squinty-eyed analysts; we've moved from incredulity (OMG!!!) to recognition (real talk; or IRL; or "True talk," to use Gugh's anxious description in Anand's 1939 novel *The Village* (83)). The coincidental genius of Vadukut's originally speculative text is that it's now a realist one: it instantiates the conditions of our "new normal." Still, there is a universal gesture, one that until this very decade courteously signaled welcome and agreement (and this without any appreciable personal health risk), a gesture that proves even *more terror evoking* than the suspenseful surgical glove backgrounding "*Bombay Fever: It Came, It Saw, Will it Conquer?*" on the novel's front cover (np). This "old normal" civility/gentility courtesy too proves *more* horror-inducing than the para-text of *Bombay Fever's* back cover, where the first descriptive sentence concludes with "her body disintegrating into a puddle of gore" (np). We learn in chapter 3—just three pages after the first mention of "a fit of coughing" (10)—that the explosive bodily collapse described on the book's back characterises what comes officially to be called "meltdown," a medical appellation earmarking the "final stage in the life of the patient" (134). *More terrifying than these horrors*, I continue to feel and to stress (over), is the formerly innocuous formality of "They all shook hands" (4).

The handshake—novel global (*t*)error *miserables*—ritually closes Geneva's Salon Internationale de la Haute Horlogerie (SIHH) "watch and jewellery trade show" as the novel opens (2). Ergo, what I above-christened the *Toujours vu*, which adapts the *Déjà vu*-adaptation *Jamais vu*. Whereas the *Jamais vu* concerns being unfamiliar with a situation that is familiar, thus reversing the conditions of *Déjà vu*, where the yet-experienced is recognised as already experienced, the *Toujours vu* occurs when a phenomenon in the midst of being experienced is always already affectively understood—even while still an active phenomenon. Though all-but a global-given in our lingering Covid-19 plague present, compulsive hand-washing, physical distancing, and the salutary politesse of donning a surgical mask whilst trafficking

(in) the public sphere, proved to be appurtenances of the very few. And even if we haven't read Richard Preston's Ebola and Marburg book *The Hot Zone* (1994), the 2020s have literally put paid to Preston's vivid figuration on viral transmission. "One or two viruses," he explained almost three decades ago, "can become a billion viruses in a few days—a China of viruses in a bottle the size of one's thumb" (Preston 176). In other words, we informed readers, are the obverse of *Bombay Fever's* status quo Mumbaikars. One-way Vadukut's narrator addresses the existential terror whelming portions of the Mumbai population involves incorporating occasional italicised interjections. The following mostly rhetorical interrogation one-third through *Bombay Fever* embodies the empirical alarm of Vadukut's characters in the face of (i) "jazz hands '[...] dreaded sign of the Fever's onset" (Vadukut 119) and (ii) "patients melting into puddle[s]" (120): "What the fuck is going on?" (140). Yet it is the IRL (in real life) *Toujours vu* for us invested mavens of this world-historical metaphysical moment. By summer 2020, we were all pretty much attuned to *what the fuck was going on*.

It is therefore no small wonder that the journalist Hormazd (who's forgotten iPad will soon be discovered and returned to him by a Sri Lankan SIHH cleaner) longs simply to read another George Simenon Inspector Maigret novel (5) to while away the time before his return flight to Mumbai. This early attention to what Rita Felski, adapting Paul Ricoeur in *The Limits of Critique* (2015), might call a problematic "hermeneutics of suspicion"—since reading novels does not amount only to unconcealing covert meaning; since reading novels is not only the remit of intuitive and attuned experts—invests *Bombay Fever* with a version of detective fiction's *whodunit*, namely the medical thriller's *what-is-it*. Vadukut's narrator doubles down on this sense of intrigue on the same page he references the detective genre (a genre, we remember, that is *de jure* novelistic, in light of the closure detective fiction pledges). Instead of resting and reading Simenon as he'd planned, Hormazd, apocalyptically conveyed from abbreviated exposition to initial complication, finds himself agreeing to travel to Lausanne with

his fellow journalists before their return flight to India—a decision that “sealed the fate of thousands of lives. Including [Hormazd’s] own” (Vadukut 5).

As already interpolated versions of Inspector Maigret, *Bombay Fever* readers are on the case, prepared to assemble the facts surrounding the “fate” of Hormazd and the lives of “thousands” more, and of how Hormazd becomes the vector for the so-called “Fever” that he must transport the 6,700 kms between Geneva and “Bombay.” And it’s on the very next page, where chapter “2” begins, that we first encounter Kanimozhi, the Sri Lankan SIHH cleaner I deliberately overwrote into the first parenthetical of the paragraph preceding this one. Kanimozhi finds Hormazd’s iPad in the media centre. She takes it with her after work on “Tram No. 13 from Palexpo to a café by Lake Geneva,” where she sits with “a cup of tea ... by the window” (7). These are details we reader-detectives note, especially as we are effectively rereading *Bombay Fever* in our plague era, where we’re all too hyper-aware of the import of “contact tracing,” something that makes amateur epidemiologists of us all. (Epidemiology, after all, is a now all-too-familiar field of study in our plague era. So many of us, via various media, newly cognisant of applicable “risk factors” and “evidence-based practice” and “public health” and interminably inconceivable “policy decisions”). When Kanimozhi therefore begins coughing directly as she opens Hormazd’s iPad, we, newly accustomed as we are to pneumonic “droplets” and R0 transmission factors, tremble (*but a little in relief too!*) at the news on the following page that she’s “just returned” from “4-weeks” in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, where she had had installed two air-conditioners in her grandparents’ home (8).

The modicum of relief that registers as we, doubly enlisted contact tracers (due at once to Covid-19 and to *Bombay Fever*), read on is emotionally complicated. As her coughs coarsen and quicken, we, downmarket Sherlocks, deduce that she’s newly symptomatic, so perhaps only just now becoming infectious. Maybe we don’t need to trace her steps. Perhaps the opening two sentences of the novel are indeed reliable. (If anything, epidemiological culture,

which includes evolving origin narratives—a pangolin, a wet-market, a lab leak—continues to teach us to distrust official narratives). The opening two-sentence paragraph of *Bombay Fever* reads: “Everything has a beginning. And Bombay Fever began in Geneva, Switzerland” (1). These simple sentences offer a perverse sense of relief. We need not look back. Fatefully gaze forwardly the doomsday clock chapter ledes chime. But what’s ahead, Covid, for one, continues to teach us. For two, the book’s back cover para-textually “spoilers” what must be Kanimozhi’s death in order to hook potential readers. For my own part, I just couldn’t help returning to the first question emblazoned at book-back top: “Where did it come from?” (np). The ominous answer, in its entirety, right there under the medical thriller key enquiry, reads: “In Switzerland, a woman collapses in the arms of an Indian journalist, her body disintegrating into a puddle of gore. She is the first victim of a monstrous disease that will soon kill hundreds with relentless fury” (np). “Hundreds”? Only hundreds, we, weirdly wounded, wince. The predicaments of our present plague-bound experience work in direct contrast to our simultaneous desire for fictional gravitas, for a serious “Bombay Fever” that will somehow validate why we were seduced to read this plague novel in the midst of a plague in the first place. Don’t we need the novel to instantiate our individual and collective eschatology, that mode of human meaning and completion, that spiritual fulfilment only quenched by the science of individual and cultural endings?

So, we peruse forwardly, our gumshoe notebooks handy and ready, the doomsday clock indexing “86 days” and counting of deadly incubation; and here we are merely in chapter 2 of a novel with 51 of them, not including the additional para-texts that bookend the novel (an epigram; a map; an epilogue; an author interview). But, as de facto Covid sophisticates, can we help hearkening back for novelistic clues? Those air-conditioners Kanimozhi had had installed in Jaffna (8-9)? Why this detail? It must be pregnant; Kanimozhi, we remember, waffles over selling Hormazd’s iPad in order to recuperate the cost of the two ACs. And, so

we learn in chapter “3”— “85 days before the outbreak” (12)—the plague we are guiltily yet eagerly anticipating is indeed inaugurated by Kanimozhi’s “meltdown” in Hormazd’s arms. Her haemorrhagic paroxysm, especially on the heels of 2014’s quickly contained international Ebola outbreak, evokes the nearly instantaneous liquefaction of infected bodies Preston harrowingly details in *The Hot Zone*. “The monkeys that were dying,” Preston coolly yet viscerally avers, “had become essentially a heap of mush and bones in a skin bag” (Preston 302). If only Kanimozhi had overlooked her civic duty. Whether or not we’re familiar with Preston’s apocalyptic (or hyper-accelerated Bhopalian) nuclear description of infection flashpoints— “A tiny amount of airborne Ebola could nuke a building full of people if it got into the air-conditioning system. The stuff could be like plutonium. The stuff,” Preston continues, “could be worse than plutonium because it could replicate” (224)—Covid, not unlike the common cold, but on fissile steroids, has conditioned us to comprehend the far-flung consequences of Kanimozhi’s near-spontaneous combustion.

The “Jets of dark, thick blood erupting simultaneously from her mouth, ears, nose and rectum,” perforce “drenching” the horror-stricken Hormazd (Vadukut 14), seal his fate, along with that of “thousands” of effectively radioactivated Mumbaikars. Assiduous readers of plague fiction might detect here a nod to Daniel Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722/1886), a text that similarly inhabited (and crowned) a complex critical space. *Bombay Fever*, so I have attested, is at once a speculative *and* a realist novel. The text effectively skips sub-genres. And *Journal of the Plague Year*, for its part, skips between actual genres after inaugurating the English novel (or establishing the new genre of fiction on the heels of 1719’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe’s first—and arguably English’s first—novel). Defoe’s plague “memoir” prompted scholarly disputes over reliability beyond 1835, that is, well over a century-and-a-half after Defoe published the 1722 “eye-witness account of the Great Bubonic Plague” (Defoe np). Said plague, it’s imperative to recollect, ravaged & savaged London in

1665—when Defoe, the author of the necessarily “fictionalised memoir,” was but five-years old. The following influential passage from *Journal of the Plague Year* concerns “walking Destroyer[s],” meaning contagion & containment. It appears at the three-quarter point of the “memoir” and is to my mind the most harrowing figuration of Defoe’s “memoir”: “to what purpose are all the Schemes for shutting up or removing the sick People? those Schemes cannot take place, but upon those that appear to be sick, or to be infected; whereas there are among them, at the same time, Thousands of People, who seem to be well, but are all that while carrying Death with them into all Companies which they come into” (257). We *Toujours-vu* readers brace ourselves for the oncoming complication of this phenomenologically shared morally complex exposition. We crave the closure our Covid-contingent Zeno’s-arrow-or-Kafka’s-*The Trial*-everyday continues to postpone as the virus continues to evade (its) biomedical containment by steadfastly mutating down the Greek alphabet.

Counterintuitively, then, perhaps it’s really hope, that Kierkegaardian faithful leap to wittingly redress existential despair, that attunes Covid-plagued readers to the para-textually promised horror-realism of *Bombay Fever*. The biomedical horrors of our pandemic every day, we can but hope, are not merely protracting what amounts to a zero-sum game of human life, where only the virus (and the *pharmakon*) gains. Vadukut’s prescient narrator grasps this existentially affirmative plague-narrative attunement. Chapter “4,” just one-and-a-half-pages following Kanimozhi’s *Bombay Fever*-engendering “meltdown,” finds us in an indeterminate time in the near future reading from a “Commission of Inquiry” transcript recorded at the “*Provisional Lok Sabha Complex*” in Port Blair, in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Vadukut 16). We, besieged actual and fictionally aligned plague subjects, levy sighs of phenomenological and reflexive relief—authentic and affective—when we quickly learn that the subject of the “Justice Kashyap Commission of Inquiry” (16) is Aayush Vajpeyi, who was “posted in Mumbai as a social medical officer” at “the time of the outbreak” (16). Quite apart



from the now-gratuitous opening para-texts of *Bombay Fever*, ones echoing those in *The Hot Zone* (a map; biohazard symbology), this reflexive remove from the action of Bombay's Fever via glimpses of official post-plague state documents from an indeterminate time in the future affords reader-detectives with the promise of narrative closure, that is, the very novelistic resolution eluding us in our own plague present.

We may therefore continue reading *Bombay Fever* less guiltily, partly reconciled by the narrator's offering of reassuring reflexive removes, ones instantiating a post-plague universe that is not apocalyptic. Nor post-apocalyptic. Unlike in, for instance, the almost equally contemporary plague novel *Station Eleven* (2014), by Emily St John Mandel, readers don't find themselves interpellated into some post-apocalyptic new "old world" pastoral order, one sparsely populated by select survivors and their progeny. This same ironic idyll technique, this narrative reset, is used to similar, naturalistic effect in a host of plague and/or post-apocalyptic novels, including Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978/1991), Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2004), Kevin Brockmeier's *The Brief History of the Dead* (2006), and James Tam's *Man's Last Song* (2013). Vadukut resists the figurations his popular contemporaries tend to fetishise, even if negatively, as with Cormac McCarthy's taut *The Road* (2006). Yet there are formal resonances of Connie Willis's *The Doomsday Book*, a 1992 science-fiction novel speculatively nested *not* in an indeterminate near future (Vadukut's Port Blair "Commission of Inquiry," after the eradication of widespread antibiotic self-medication, *deus ex machina* for Bombay Fever!) but rather specifically in mid-2050s London (where time-travel and regular retroviral injections are normalised). Both authors gesture toward pharmacological control mechanisms, which don't preclude vaccine, quarantine, and other bio-political injunctions.

The fractional non-(post-)apocalyptic *and* anti-pastoral appeasement that Vadukut offers early, via the indexical (and maybe notional) remove/reprieve of the Port Blair

Provisional Lok Sabha “Commission of Inquiry,” also works, by stark contrast, to accentuate underworld “gangwar”—to employ “the Bombaiyaa inflection” of the activity Suketu Mehta in *Maximum City* describes as “[t]he heart of Bombay” (Mehta 144, 133, 144)—gangwar activities, ones made famous in/by English Mumbai fiction, most recently, for instance, in Jeet Thayil’s *Narcopolis* (2012) and Vikram Chandra’s *Sacred Games* (2006). More above-board, than below-, however, *Bombay Fever* foregrounds four main, intertwined narrative strands: (i) Ministerial official diktat, (ii) Prime Ministerial beta-protocol secreting, (iii) *BuzzFeed*-modelled *BuzzWire*’s circulation of officially unofficial news, and (iv) the management of officially official news.

Firstly, ministerial official diktat at the height of Bombay Fever is uncharacteristically (& unacceptably) delivered in “English” rather than Marathi, so Mumbai Minister Nishtha Sharma opines. She feels, she is, “invaded by the [dis-informative] words of another,” to appropriate from Georges Poulet’s “Phenomenology of Reading,” so that she can preempt the material terror of her constituents, the Mumbai hoi polloi (Vadukut 198). Secondly, India’s uniquely named Prime Minister in *Bombay Fever*, Nitin Phadnavis, which is an innovative near-anagram or a disharmonic echo of Sidin Vadukut himself, affords the author the freedom not to have his detective novel reflexively/detectively read as a *roman à clef*. Vadukut admits as much in the “Exclusive Simon & Schuster Q&A with the author, Sidin Vadukut,” a paratext appended after the novel (“Exclusive Simon & Schuster Q&A” 365-371). This is one reason, so the author also admits, why he sets *Bombay Fever* in an uncertain future (one admittedly not too—allegorically—distant from the novel’s 2017 publication date).

Thirdly, the English language *BuzzWire*, the virtual platform where news, celebrity, and entertainment intersect, and without the appurtenances of putatively transparent network news, also proves to be a reflexive critique of the English novel *Bombay Fever*. Just as *BuzzWire*’s naming of the virus evokes anglophone (if not even colonial) asymmetrical power relations, that the novel is itself in English bespeaks the representative shared linguistic apprehensions

of both the Indian English novelist Sidin Vadukut and his Marathi State Minister, Nishtha Sharma. Fourthly, and to conclude these two paragraphs on narrative strands in *Bombay Fever*, before moving to my brief conclusion, Vadukut avers the same media verity that Preston does in *The Hot Zone*, where the latter author includes the discomfiting declaration that “Half of [most any] bio-containment operation [is] ... news containment” (Preston 287). The Foreign Secretary in *Bombay Fever* meets Prime Minister Nitin Phadnavis’ secrecy query, namely the ironically naïve “What are the possible fuck ups, here?” (Vadukut 236), directly with the rejoinder “Media, sir” (236).

Certainly, we’re all conditioned to the tenets—or, perhaps more preferably/fittingly, the vagaries—of our post-truth epoch. Ever wary of disinformation, and of monocacy, but even more metaphysically wary of the plague still in the indefatigable making all around us, we invest in *Bombay Fever*, optimistically seduced by the closure the detective genre augurs, and that our collective narrative ethos, our eschatological drive, at times, and perhaps most suitably in world-historical times of existential distress, cannot but confirm. We read on. In ironic affirmation—ironic because, for this reader at least, Vadukut promises the obverse of the fateful “a melancholy conclusion” that Franz Kafka’s Josef K. finally comes to in the cathedral scene of *The Trial* (1925), a conclusion intimating the bank clerk’s summary capital punishment. We read on; we read on “because” (or is it “despite”?) Vadukut’s narrator, who first hooks us with para-textual surgical gloves and portentous questions, includes a paean to stories in the after-world just three page-flips from the cardboard of *Bombay Fever*’s front-cover.

We thereby encounter an opening epigram that functions first as poignant epitaph and then as unending epilogue. These beautifully dreadful lines from Boccaccio’s medieval plague epic *The Decameron* educe the human-all-too-human prerequisite for story, story as innate sustenance. “How many valiant men, how many fair ladies, how many sprightly youths,” Boccaccio’s speaker wonders, “breakfasted in the morning with their kinsfolk, comrades and

friends and that same night supped with their ancestors in the other world?” (Vadukut, np). Boccaccio’s lines, despite the funereal quality that threatens to overdetermine any familial reference to the dead, his lines leave us wanting more, wanting story; wanting Boccaccio’s “story” as well as, so strategically set up by the epigram/taph/graph, Vadukut’s substitute plague “story.” What resonates from Boccaccio and Vadukut alike is the behest to invest in fiction. Death is never the central theme in plague fiction. Survival is. And survival is story. Isn’t this why we read *Bombay Fever* notwithstanding the “relentless fury” we’re assured we’ll encounter? Isn’t this also why the sad lines from *The Decameron* quoted above are in fact happy lines, lines that celebrate the sharing of stories across languages, across nations and epochs—and worlds?

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