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Navigating Post-Pandemic Narratives: A Techno-Ecocritical Reading on Ling Ma's *Severance*

Dr. A. Shahul Hameed[1] (First and Corresponding Author)
Associate Professor of English
The New College
ashahul97@gmail.com

A. Sathikulameen [2]
Assistant Professor of English
The New College, Chennai-14.
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9633-7585

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Abstract

In the wake of global pandemics and accelerating climate crises, post-apocalyptic fiction has emerged as a vital literary mode for examining contemporary anxieties surrounding capitalism, environmental degradation, and technological dependency. Ling Ma's novel, *Severance* (2018), serves as a compelling example of this intersection, presenting a narrative that intricately weaves together themes of ecological decay, global consumerism, and the mechanisation of digital labour. This study places *Severance* within the emerging field of techno-ecocriticism, a theoretical framework that explores the deeply entangled relationships among technological systems, ecological processes, and capitalist structures. Utilising qualitative literary analysis grounded in close reading and interpretive techniques, the research identifies and explores key motifs, including automation, digital alienation, ecological collapse, and the commodification of life. These elements are thematically coded and analysed to reveal how Ma's narrative employs post-apocalyptic tropes to critique the paradox of technological progress coinciding with environmental neglect. Drawing on insights from post-pandemic theory and environmental humanities, the study demonstrates how *Severance* critiques the exploitation of both human labour and natural resources under capitalist systems, portraying a dystopian society where digital routines persist even in the face of collapse. Ultimately, this research argues that Ma's novel constructs a nuanced techno-ecocritical narrative that exposes how digital capitalism renders both nature and human agency invisible, affirming the significance of techno-ecocriticism as a critical lens through which to interpret literary responses to the pressing environmental and technological challenges of our time.

1. Introduction

Contemporary global crises such as pandemics, climate change, and the proliferation of digital surveillance have redefined how literature engages with the interwoven complexities of technology, ecology, and capitalist systems. These overlapping emergencies have given rise to a growing body of literary scholarship that seeks to understand how fiction reflects, critiques, and reimagines the structural forces shaping our world. In this context, Ling Ma's Severance (2018) stands out as a critical text that interrogates the convergence of digital labour, ecological collapse, and global consumer capitalism. Set against the backdrop of a slow-moving pandemic, the novel dramatises a society in which the routines of digital productivity persist even amid apocalyptic decline, underscoring how deeply ingrained capitalist behaviours and technological dependencies become mechanisms of both survival and erasure. The novel renders ecological awareness almost obsolete, revealing the extent to which environmental degradation is normalised or overlooked within digital economies. As Helmy (2022) and Gullander-Drolet (2021) observe, Ma's narrative highlights the haunting persistence of capitalist logic and technological entrapment, even as social structures unravel. This paper places Severance within the framework of techno-ecocriticism. This theoretical approach interrogates how technological systems mediate environmental experiences and reinforce capitalist ideologies, thereby analysing the deeply entangled relationships among technological advancement, environmental degradation, and exploitative economic structures (Yadav, 2024). By examining the novel through this lens, the study poses a central question: how does Ma's post-pandemic narrative critique the ongoing operations of digital capitalism, the invisibilisation of ecological crises, ¿and the psychological exhaustion induced by automation? Through this inquiry, the paper aims to highlight Severance not merely as a dystopian narrative but as a powerful techno-ecocritical commentary on the conditions of contemporary existence.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Ecocriticism and Post-Pandemic Fiction

Ecocriticism, as a critical field, engages with the intricate and evolving relationship between literature and the environment, foregrounding how human actions impact natural ecosystems while also examining the potential of literary texts to inspire ecological consciousness and critique environmental degradation (Yadav, 2024; Alberro, 2020). This theoretical lens has evolved to accommodate the complexities of the Anthropocene, a period marked by accelerated ecological collapse, prompting scholars to interrogate how narratives

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reflect and respond to the pressures of environmental transformation. Within this discourse, techno-ecocriticism has emerged as a significant subfield, expanding traditional ecocritical analysis by incorporating the influence of digital technologies on ecological perception. It emphasises how technological mediation not only alters human engagement with nature but also fosters new forms of emotional and psychological responses such as "eco-anxiety" and "eco-grief," which reflect the affective toll of living amidst compounded crises (Slovic & Slovic, 2015; Hutner, 2015).In this context, post-pandemic fiction serves as a particularly salient site for techno-ecocritical inquiry, offering speculative frameworks that foreground the entanglements of environmental collapse, viral contagion, and digital capitalism. Ling Ma's Severance has been widely recognised for its "remarkable prescience" in envisioning a world destabilised by overlapping ecological and epidemiological disasters (Helmy, 2022; Pyykkö, 2022). The novel's central trope, the fictional "Shen Fever," functions allegorically, articulating the pervasive impact of late-stage capitalism and the dehumanising nature of digitised labour. Critics such as Gullander-Drolet (2021) have highlighted the novel's incisive critique of global consumerism, while others underscore its portrayal of labour that is racialised, invisible, and relentlessly repetitive, reflective of systemic inequities embedded in capitalist production systems (Helmy, 2022; Liang, 2025). Through these interpretive frameworks, Severance exemplifies how post-pandemic fiction can illuminate the psychological and ecological consequences of techno-capitalist societies, making it a crucial text for understanding the literary mediation of contemporary global crises.

2.2 Techno-Ecocriticism and Capitalist Critique

Techno-ecocriticism represents an important evolution of traditional ecocritical thought by shifting the analytical focus toward how technological systems mediate, distort, and sometimes occlude human relationships with the natural world. Rather than viewing ecological degradation in isolation, this framework emphasises the intricate interdependence between technological infrastructures and ecological awareness, positing that digital capitalism, characterised by relentless automation, datafication, and algorithmic governance, plays a central role in shaping environmental consciousness and material outcomes (Slovic & Slovic, 2015; Yadav, 2024). Through this lens, nature is no longer perceived as an external or passive backdrop but is instead actively constructed and interpreted through the apparatuses of digital culture. These mediations often obscure the immediacy and urgency of ecological crises, rendering environmental degradation invisible or secondary to economic and technological imperatives. This analytical repositioning has profound implications for the interpretation of contemporary literature, particularly in post-apocalyptic and speculative fiction. Texts such as Ling Ma's Severance exemplify this entanglement by encoding digital routines, emails, automated workflows, and algorithm-driven consumptions central to the novel's dystopian logic. The concept of ecological amnesia, or the collective forgetting and

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sidelining of environmental concerns in the face of technological convenience and capitalist repetition, becomes a prominent thematic axis in the narrative. Scholars have noted that Severance dramatises this paradox even as society collapses, technological systems and digital labour persist, suggesting that technological advancement does not resolve but rather intensifies environmental neglect (Gullander-Drolet, 2021).

Furthermore, techno-ecocriticism calls for a multidisciplinary and integrative approach to ecological thought, advocating for the convergence of media studies, critical theory, and environmental humanities. This interdisciplinary synthesis allows for a more robust understanding of how cultural narratives, digital infrastructures, and ecological conditions co-produce lived realities and literary representations (Hutner, 2015; Cox, 2007). By foregrounding the feedback loops between media technologies and ecological discourse, techno-ecocriticism enriches the analytical vocabulary available to scholars and deepens the interpretive possibilities for literary texts. It underscores the necessity of addressing the techno-material conditions that underlie both environmental crisis and narrative form, positioning literature as a key site for critically engaging with the systemic forces that shape the contemporary ecological imagination.

2.3 Techno-Ecocriticism: Genealogy and Theoretical Grounding

The emergence of techno-ecocriticism as a distinct critical framework signals an important evolution in the discourse surrounding literature, environment, and technological mediation. It builds upon the foundational principles of ecocriticism while integrating insights from media theory, science and technology studies, and environmental philosophy. This section delineates the intellectual genealogy of techno-ecocriticism by tracing its origins in classical ecocriticism, its expansion through post-Anthropocene thought, and its contemporary articulation through the work of interdisciplinary theorists such as Scott Slovic, Timothy Morton, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, and Jussi Parikka. Ecocriticism, in its earliest phase during the late twentieth century, was primarily concerned with the representation of nature in literature and the ethical implications of environmental destruction. Foundational texts by scholars such as Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell framed ecocriticism as a literary approach that foregrounds the interconnectedness between human culture and the physical environment, often emphasising nature as a moral and aesthetic ideal threatened by industrial modernity (Glotfelty, 1996; Buell, 1995). Early ecocritical work sought to recuperate the presence of the natural world in literary studies and argued for the ethical imperative of environmental consciousness. However, this initial phase tended to prioritise wilderness narratives and often overlooked the entangled complexities of urbanisation, technology, and global capitalism.

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In response to these limitations, ecocriticism expanded in the early twenty-first century to include more nuanced understandings of the Anthropocene geological epoch, characterised by significant human impact on Earth's ecosystems. This shift led to the incorporation of posthumanist and materialist theories that interrogate the boundaries between human and non-human agency, challenging anthropocentric assumptions embedded in earlier environmental thought. The post-Anthropocene turn in ecocriticism emphasises hybridity, entanglement, and the co-constitution of humans and technological-nature assemblages, laying the groundwork for techno-ecocritical inquiry. A significant intermediary in this evolution is the field of media ecology, which examines how communication technologies influence human perception and ecological relationships. Media ecology scholars have highlighted how digital infrastructures mediate environmental knowledge, shape public discourse on ecological crises, and alter the sensory and affective experience of nature. The convergence of media studies and ecocriticism has led to the recognition that the environment is no longer encountered directly but is increasingly perceived through screens, data visualisations, and algorithmic interfaces. In this context, techno-ecocriticism emerges as a critical methodology that interrogates the interface between ecological processes and the technological systems that structure perception, representation, and action. Techno-ecocriticism thus represents an interdisciplinary response to the challenges posed by technologically saturated environments. Scott Slovic (2015) has argued for the importance of addressing the affective and epistemological dimensions of environmental information in the digital age. He emphasises that the abstraction and quantification of ecological data through technological media can lead to emotional disengagement and ecological numbness. This phenomenon, often described as "eco-anxiety" or "eco-grief," reflects the difficulty of comprehending slow and large-scale ecological changes through fragmented and depersonalised digital representations. Slovic's work underscores the need for critical frameworks that can interrogate the psychological and cultural implications of technologically mediated ecological knowledge.

Timothy Morton's concept of "hyper objects" further advances the theoretical apparatus of techno-ecocriticism by describing phenomena such as climate change as entities that are massively distributed in time and space, defying traditional modes of representation and comprehension (Morton, 2013). Hyper objects are real but not locally accessible, challenging the human capacity to engage with ecological reality through conventional sensory or cognitive frameworks. Morton contends that the entanglement of technological systems and ecological crises necessitates a radical rethinking of subjectivity, ontology, and representation principles that are central to techno-ecocritical analysis. Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (ANT) provides another cornerstone for techno-ecocriticism by decentering

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human agency and emphasising the distributed agency of networks comprising both human and non-human actors, including machines, infrastructures, and ecological forces. Latour's work dismantles the modernist separation between nature and society, revealing how technological artefacts participate in the construction of environmental meaning and materiality. In techno-ecocritical terms, this perspective highlights the importance of examining how literary texts represent the agency of technologies in shaping ecological realities. Similarly, Donna Haraway's notion of "natureculture" and her theory of cyborg ontology disrupt binary distinctions between the natural and the artificial, the organic and the mechanical. Haraway's work anticipates the techno-ecocritical concern with hybridity and the ethical implications of living within systems where biological life and technological infrastructure are inseparably intertwined. Her critique of anthropocentrism and advocacy for multispecies relationality aligns with techno-ecocriticism's emphasis on the co-constitution of ecological and technological systems.

Jussi Parikka, through his work on "media natures," adds a media-archaeological perspective to techno-ecocriticism by tracing the material histories of technological media about environmental degradation. Parikka argues that digital media are not immaterial; they are embedded in extractive processes and ecological networks involving rare earth minerals, toxic waste, and global labour chains. This insight is crucial for understanding how technologies themselves are ecological actors that participate in and shape planetary crises. Together, these theoretical contributions construct a comprehensive foundation for techno-ecocriticism as an analytical framework that interrogates the entangled operations of digital technologies, capitalist infrastructures, and ecological systems. Unlike traditional ecocriticism, which often centres on nature as a visible and coherent entity, techno-ecocriticism emphasises how nature is rendered invisible, abstracted, or reconfigured through technological mediation. It focuses on the socio-technical conditions under which ecological awareness is formed, obstructed, or commodified, making it particularly suited to the analysis of contemporary literature that addresses digital labour, environmental degradation, and capitalist alienation. In sum, techno-ecocriticism is not merely a thematic extension of ecocriticism but a methodological shift that responds to the material and epistemic transformations wrought by digital capitalism and environmental collapse. It compels scholars to attend to the infrastructures, interfaces, and algorithms that mediate ecological experience and to critically examine how literary texts reflect, resist, or reproduce these structures. As such, techno-ecocriticism offers a powerful lens for understanding the cultural production of environmental meaning in the age of ubiquitous technology.

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3. Method

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in literary analysis, with a particular emphasis on close reading as a means of uncovering the nuanced interplay between textual form and thematic content in Ling Ma's *Severance*. Central to this analysis is the identification and examination of key recurring motifs, specifically, automation, capitalist routines, ecological collapse, and the commodification of human and non-human life, which collectively structure the novel's techno-ecocritical narrative (Helmy, 2022). Through the thematic coding of selected passages, the research aligns textual patterns with a conceptual framework that synthesises insights from techno-ecocriticism, post-pandemic theory, and environmental humanities (Yadav, 2024; Pyykkö, 2022). The methodological design of this study is further supported by the integration of secondary scholarship that elucidates specific critical dimensions of the novel. Notably, Gullander-Drolet (2021) offers a comprehensive analysis of labour and digital alienation, illuminating how Ma's representation of repetitive office work, algorithmic routines, and disembodied communication technologies critiques the dehumanising effects of late capitalist labour structures. This analysis is instrumental in framing the novel's depiction of workplace monotony and its psychological toll as symptomatic of broader socio-technical entrapments.

Helmy (2022) contributes to the conceptualisation of environmental amnesia and capitalist monotony, arguing that *Severance* dramatises the erasure of ecological consciousness through its portrayal of urban decay, waste accumulation, and the relentless drive for productivity. These observations reinforce the study's argument that ecological degradation in the novel is not merely a narrative backdrop but a critical site of capitalist indifference and systemic forgetting. Liang (2025) furthers this discourse by interrogating the commodification of life within global supply chains, emphasising how the novel's focus on mass-produced Bibles and outsourced manufacturing symbolises the pervasive logic of extractive capitalism. This insight is essential to understanding how *Severance* maps the devaluation of both labour and life under transnational capitalist operations. Together, these scholarly contributions enhance the depth and scope of the interpretive analysis by grounding textual observations in a robust critical framework. The integration of these sources allows for a more precise articulation of how *Severance* constructs a layered critique of digital capitalism, ecological invisibility, and biopolitical control within a post-apocalyptic context.

3.1 Analytical Findings

A key analytical finding of this study concerns the representation of routine monotony and digital alienation as fundamental mechanisms of critique within *Severance*. The narrative's depiction of protagonist Candace Chen, along with the afflicted individuals referred to as the "fevered," illustrates a dystopian condition wherein daily tasks are performed repetitively, stripped of conscious engagement or purpose. This compulsive

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adherence to routine functions as an allegory for the psychological and existential erosion resulting from capitalist systems that elevate productivity above ecological awareness or individual agency (Ma, 2018; Helmy, 2022). The fevered serve as symbolic figures of this condition, embodying a loss of subjectivity that mirrors the logic of algorithmic labour and digitally programmed workflows, which persist even in the absence of social infrastructure. Gullander-Drolet (2021) offers a pertinent reading of this phenomenon, identifying the novel's portrayal of digital labour as indicative of broader capitalist abstractions that reduce human existence to mechanised functions within interconnected technological systems. In this framework, the fevered enact a literalisation of this reduction; they move through familiar spaces and perform tasks without consciousness, demonstrating how deeply ingrained capitalist routines can become even when the structures that once sustained them have disintegrated. Ma's portrayal thus suggests that subjectivity has not only been marginalised but has been replaced by behavioural scripts conditioned by labour repetition and technological mediation. The persistence of these routines in the face of societal collapse exemplifies a central irony within the text: despite the breakdown of civilisation, the compulsion to work continues unabated. This narrative choice underscores the extent to which capitalist temporality and digital conditioning have embedded themselves into the fabric of human behaviour, rendering them virtually inescapable even in a post-apocalyptic setting.

Another critical analytical finding centres on the theme of ecological amnesia and the representation of urban decay in Severance. The novel constructs a visual and atmospheric landscape characterised by deteriorating urban environments, pervasive pollution, and the accumulation of waste materials. These elements collectively signify a form of ecological presence that is paradoxically omnipresent and invisible. Nature, in this context, is not foregrounded but rather rendered subordinate to the imperatives of production, consumption, and technological engagement (Pyykkö, 2022). The narrative presents ecological degradation not as an unintended consequence but as a structural outcome of global capitalism's continuous demand for productivity and consumer attention (Yadav, 2024). This dynamic is reinforced through the novel's spatial descriptions, which situate the reader in settings where ecological disrepair is so normalised that it ceases to register as remarkable. The polluted air and urban wastelands serve not as moments of ecological crisis but as the unacknowledged background to everyday digital routines. The displacement of environmental awareness by digitally mediated experiences reflects a broader cultural tendency to marginalise ecological concerns in favour of technological convenience and capitalist performance metrics. As the commodification of nature intensifies, the natural world is increasingly abstracted and aestheticised, stripped of agency and visibility. The novel thus illustrates how environmental decline becomes integrated into capitalist logics that

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transform all aspects of life, including ecological conditions, into consumable and ignorable commodities.

By portraying urban decay as both a symptom and a product of systemic economic and technological processes, Severance advances a critical view of ecological amnesia. This thematic emphasis aligns with the principles of techno-ecocriticism, which highlight how technological and capitalist frameworks mediate, obscure, and ultimately neutralise ecological urgency. In rendering nature both materially degraded and discursively invisible, the novel underscores the profound disconnect between environmental reality and cultural perception in a digitally saturated capitalist society. A further analytical dimension of Severance involves its critique of capitalist exploitation and the commodification of both labour and ecological systems. The occupation of the protagonist, Candace Chen, who oversees the production of Bibles through a transnational supply chain, operates as a central symbolic framework within the narrative. This role encapsulates the prioritisation of capitalist efficiency, standardisation, and output over human well-being and ecological integrity (Helmy, 2022). The novel's emphasis on the repetitive, impersonal, and digitally mediated nature of this labour illustrates the abstraction of work under conditions of late capitalism, wherein production is increasingly managed through remote communication technologies and governed by algorithms and consumer demand. The monotony associated with digital labour in the text manifested through a continuous stream of emails, automated orders, and systemic surveillance reinforces a sense of alienation, detaching workers from the material and environmental consequences of their labour. Gullander-Drolet (2021) observes that this alienation is compounded by the invisibility of the ecological toll exacted by global supply chains. The smooth operation of digital interfaces and the ideological normalisation of convenience and efficiency systematically obscures the ecological costs embedded in production processes. Through Candace's professional experiences, the novel presents a critique of how technological mediation conceals the exploitative foundations of capitalist production, masking both the devaluation of labour and the environmental damage that sustains consumer markets.

This portrayal aligns with the techno-ecocritical framework by foregrounding the entangled operations of digital capitalism and ecological degradation. By situating Candace's work within a global system that commodifies religious texts, the novel underscores the breadth of capitalist reach and the extent to which even spiritual or symbolic artefacts are subsumed within economic logic. The resulting alienation from both ecological consciousness and meaningful labour serves to illustrate how capitalism not only restructures material relations but also conditions affective and cognitive disconnection from the natural world and others. Through this lens, Severance elucidates the mechanisms by which capitalist systems perpetuate ecological harm and human disenfranchisement, presenting

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commodification as a central force in the degradation of both environments and subjectivities. An additional analytical focus within Severance is the novel's portrayal of survival as a condition intricately shaped by capitalist discipline and biopolitical governance. The text presents a post-pandemic society in which the endurance of human life is not merely a biological imperative but is deeply embedded within structures of economic and technological control. The continued adherence to consumer routines among the survivors, even in the aftermath of social collapse, underscores the extent to which market logic remains operative as a determinant of behaviour. These routines are maintained not for necessity, but as vestiges of a system that has conditioned individuals to equate survival with productivity and consumption. This persistence highlights the internalisation of capitalist structures that continue to govern conduct in the absence of formal economic systems.

Moreover, the regulation of bodies within this dystopian landscape is achieved through imposed routines, mechanisms of surveillance, and the deliberate exclusion of the "fevered," illustrating a form of biopolitical control in which life itself becomes a function of its compatibility with capitalist and technological norms (Fisher, 2018; Liang, 2025). Those who do not conform to these norms, such as the fevered who deviate from expected behavioural scripts, are rendered disposable or excluded from the community. This regulatory framework reflects the novel's concern with the technopolitical conditions of post-apocalyptic survival, wherein subjectivity and corporeality are mediated through systems designed to optimise control, order, and economic rationality. The framing of survival in both biopolitical and digital terms aligns with the principles of techno-ecocriticism, which emphasise how technology and market-driven governance extend into the regulation of life itself. In this context, nature is no longer a space of refuge or renewal but is instead subordinated to technological infrastructures that manage and commodify existence. Subjectivity, likewise, is fragmented and reorganised to serve the imperatives of efficiency, compliance, and surveillance. Through this depiction, Severance critiques the extent to which late capitalism reshapes the conditions of living and dying, revealing that in a post-pandemic world, survival is less about biological resilience and more about alignment with the logics of control and consumption. The narrative architecture of Severance operates through a deliberate fusion of post-apocalyptic conventions and a sustained critique of the entanglements between technology, ecology, and capitalism. By presenting a world in which digital labour and capitalist routines endure even in the face of systemic collapse, Ling Ma foregrounds the persistence of structural forces that continue to shape individual and collective life. This continuity suggests that environmental degradation and psychosocial alienation are not incidental byproducts of modernity but are intrinsic to the design and operation of global capitalist and technological systems (Helmy, 2022). The novel thus functions as a critical case study within techno-ecocritical discourse, offering a nuanced

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exploration of how the automation of human labour and the digital mediation of reality contribute to the normalisation and concealment of ecological destruction.

Through this lens, techno-ecocriticism proves an essential interpretive framework, revealing the deep interdependencies between economic rationality, technological systems, and environmental conditions. It articulates the danger inherent in the increasing automation of human existence, wherein subjectivity is diminished and the natural world is rendered peripheral or invisible. Ma's portrayal of these dynamics challenges the prevailing narratives of technological progress, instead suggesting that such developments are implicated in the very crises they purport to solve. Significantly, the narrative of Severance withholds the possibility of redemptive closure. Rather than offering a transformative or restorative resolution, the text presents survival as a continuous engagement with entrenched systems of power and control. This survival is conditioned by the same digital, capitalist, and ecological forces that precipitated the collapse, highlighting the inescapability of the structures under critique. In doing so, the novel invites a reassessment of the assumptions surrounding resilience and adaptation in post-apocalyptic contexts. As Pyykkö (2022) and Cox (2007) assert, such a narrative trajectory advocates for a critical reimagining of the relationship between human beings, technological apparatuses, and the natural environment. It demands a reconfiguration of community, not as a site of nostalgic return or utopian renewal, but as a space for negotiating the ethical and ecological implications of contemporary existence. Through this depiction, Severance contributes meaningfully to the discourse on planetary crisis, technological saturation, and the possibilities for future ecological consciousness.

4. Discussion

Ling Ma's *Severance* offers a deeply textured portrayal of post-pandemic existence, where capitalist routines and technological mediation persist even as social and ecological infrastructures collapse. Through the protagonist's lived experience, the novel reveals how the rhythms of late capitalism permeate survival, rendering the apocalypse less a rupture than a grim continuity. Early in the narrative, Candace reflects on her work in outsourced Bible production, detailing the disconnection between labour and material consequence. As she recounts:

> *"My position was Senior Product Coordinator of the Bibles division. No one can work in Bibles that long without coming to a certain respect for the object itself… Of any book, the Bible embodies the purest form of product packaging, the same content repackaged a million times over, in new combinations ad infinitum. Every season, I was trotted out to publisher clients to expound on the latest trends in synthetic leathers, the newest developments in foil embossing and gilding… It is the best-selling book of the year, every year."* (p. 56)

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This passage encapsulates the novel's critique of capitalist production as a process of endless recombination and commodification, where the object's meaning is subordinated to its market adaptability. The ecological and human costs of such production are hinted at but structurally effaced, a pattern made explicit in the "Gemstone Bible" episode, in which worker mortality is met with commercial intransigence. Here, Ma stages the moral dissonance between human suffering and consumer imperatives, resonating with techno-ecocritical concerns about the invisibility of labour and environmental exploitation in global supply chains. The novel also constructs "the fevered" as a haunting metaphor for the routinisation of labour and the erasure of agency under technological capitalism. The survivors' observations underscore this:

> *"For the most part, from what we had seen, the fevered were creatures of habit, mimicking old routines and gestures they must have inhabited for years, decades. The lizard brain is a powerful thing. They could operate the mouse of a dead PC, they could drive stick in a jacked sedan, they could run an empty dishwasher, they could water dead houseplants… But it was not the emotional content of the songs that they registered, we deduced, only the rhythm, the percussive patterns that had worn grooves inside their brains."* (p. 146)

By stripping the fevered of intentionality while preserving their capacity for repetitive action, the text literalises the alienation of labour in the digital age. In a techno-ecocritical reading, these figures embody the persistence of algorithmic, machine-like behaviour, even when the infrastructures that originally sustained them have dissolved. The survivors' decision to kill the fevered "in the heads but not the faces" further complicates the ethics of survival in a depopulated, ecologically degraded world. Urban and environmental decay, while pervasive, is frequently normalised in the text, rendered as a backdrop to routines rather than a site of urgent action. In a striking moment of disorientation, Candace describes her walk through Greenpoint:

> *"All the pedestrians in Greenpoint were bundled up in their cold-weather finery, red autumnal plaids and flourishes of thick, lustrous flannel, even though it was summer. For a moment I wondered if I hadn't just slept for months… I would arrive to find someone else sitting in my office, my belongings in a box… I would start over."* (p. 41)

This surreal shift in seasonal signifiers gestures toward the ecological uncanny—the sense that environmental cues have become unreliable in an age of climate disruption and infrastructural breakdown. Yet rather than provoking sustained reflection, these disturbances are quickly subsumed by the demands of work and the navigation of urban space, exemplifying what the academic literature has termed "ecological amnesia". The persistence

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of consumer and corporate logics, even in the face of collapse, is further illuminated in the scene where Spectra responds to the Shen Fever outbreak:

> *"Inside, you'll find some protective tools, such as gloves and masks to use when handling prototypes… There were two sets of N95 face masks and latex gloves, each imprinted with the Spectra logo… Last, at the bottom of the box, lay a cache of nutrition bars from a health company for which we'd produced a cookbook…"* (p. 53)

Here, the apparatus of corporate branding co-opts the language of care and survival, commodifying protection itself. This aligns with the novel's broader techno-ecocritical indictment: that in a capitalist system, even life-preserving measures are subsumed under marketing strategies and supply-chain dependencies. The survival kit is less an expression of genuine concern than a continuation of the same circuits of production and consumption that contribute to systemic fragility.

Taken together, these moments demonstrate how *Severance* resists framing the apocalypse as a clean break from the pre-collapse order. Instead, Ma's narrative insists on the tenacity of existing economic and technological structures, which reassert themselves in altered but recognisable forms. The fevered continue to enact old habits; survivors continue to trade, brand, and produce; urban environments continue to degrade without provoking meaningful change. Within a techno-ecocritical framework, this continuity underscores the difficulty of disentangling ecological recovery from the logics of digital capitalism, a difficulty compounded by the affective pull of routine and the normalisation of exploitation. Furthermore, the novel's refusal to resolve these tensions through utopian closure challenges the reader to confront the persistence of structural violence beyond the immediate crisis. The acts of walking through altered cityscapes, engaging in repetitive labour, and negotiating survival under corporate logic all point to a world where collapse has not dismantled the apparatus of exploitation, but simply revealed its durability. In doing so, *Severance* offers a pointed commentary on the systemic nature of ecological and social crises, urging us to question whether survival within such systems constitutes resilience or merely complicity.

5. Conclusion

Ling Ma's Severance withholds the comfort of utopian closure, refusing to offer redemption, transcendence, or ecological restoration in the aftermath of systemic collapse. This narrative strategy, rather than signifying pessimism or narrative exhaustion, functions as a deliberate critique of the ideological structures that underwrite both techno-capitalist rationality and neoliberal environmentalism. By refusing resolution, Ma foregrounds the persistent entrapment within structures of production, surveillance, and ecological disregard even in conditions of apparent social disintegration. In doing so, Severance challenges its readers to confront not only the mechanisms of collapse but also the ontological and

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epistemological limitations imposed by existing technological and capitalist imaginaries. This refusal of narrative closure opens space for a different kind of critical engagement, one that does not seek resolution within the dominant paradigms but instead gestures toward speculative reimagining of ecological futures. In this context, the critical lens of eco-utopian theory becomes particularly instructive. Eco-utopianism does not prescribe idealised futures but instead explores alternative modes of relationality, dwelling, and collective life that resist extractive logics (Garrard, 2012). It engages the imagination as an ethical and political faculty, enabling a vision of ecological relations predicated on interdependence, care, and multispecies coexistence. Within this frame, speculative fiction, particularly post-apocalyptic narratives like Severance, emerges as a vital cultural form through which the limits of existing paradigms can be interrogated and transcended (Trexler, 2015).

Equally relevant is the discourse of resilience, a concept frequently mobilised in ecological, infrastructural, and psychological contexts. While often co-opted into neoliberal frameworks that valorise individual adaptability, resilience also holds radical potential when rearticulated through a collective and ecological lens. In the world of Severance, the persistence of digital routines and capitalist behaviours is portrayed not as resilience but as compulsion, suggesting that true resilience requires the capacity to disengage from destructive systems and to envision new modes of existence. Ecological resilience, in this sense, involves the revaluation of slowness, relationality, and local atonement in opposition to speed, scalability, and abstraction principles central to what has been termed slow ecology (Stengers, 2015). Slow ecology emphasises duration, situatedness, and care as guiding values for ecological engagement. It critiques the accelerationist imperatives of techno-capitalism, which demand rapid innovation, perpetual productivity, and the commodification of time. Ma's depiction of repetitive labour, routine survival, and dislocated subjectivity illustrates the antithesis of slow ecological consciousness: a world in which time is not lived but spent, managed, and optimised. In resisting the seduction of narrative acceleration and offering no final rupture with capitalist systems, Severance implicitly affirms the need for a temporal and ethical recalibration. It prompts readers to consider how narrative form itself can become a site of resistance to hegemonic temporalities (Stengers, 2015). Moreover, speculative fiction such as Severance plays an indispensable role in articulating ecological ethics not by offering solutions, but by framing ethical questions that remain unresolved within dominant discourses. The novel foregrounds themes of disposability, ecological invisibility, and techno-biopolitical control, raising critical concerns about whose lives and environments are rendered expendable in the name of progress or efficiency. In portraying a world where ecological collapse is naturalised and survival is tethered to capitalist logics, the narrative demands a rethinking of ethics not as a system of regulation, but as a mode of attentiveness

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to the relational entanglements of life, labour, and landscape (Garrard, 2012).

Finally, Ma's work invites readers and critics alike to reimagine the role of literature in the broader discourse of ecological crisis. Rather than reinforcing familiar narratives of catastrophe or redemption, Severance disrupts narrative expectations and insists on the co-presence of collapse and continuity. In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of speculative literature that enacts what might be termed post-capitalist imagination, refusal to naturalise the current system and a commitment to imagining other ways of being, relating, and inhabiting the world (Trexler, 2015). The absence of utopian closure in Severance should not be mistaken for fatalism. Rather, it constitutes a form of literary and ethical provocation, one that demands critical engagement with the structural determinants of ecological degradation and psychological alienation. By drawing on eco-utopian theory, resilience discourse, and slow ecology, the novel gestures toward the necessity of ecological reimagination, positioning speculative fiction not merely as a mirror to crisis, but as a catalyst for ethical and conceptual transformation. Through this lens, literature becomes an essential domain for envisioning futures that resist techno-capitalist entrapment and affirm the possibilities of ecological and collective renewal.

Ling Ma's Severance emerges as a compelling literary artefact that exemplifies the critical potential of techno-ecocriticism in elucidating the complexities of post-pandemic narratives. The novel offers a nuanced interrogation of the interwoven dynamics of digital capitalism, ecological amnesia, and labour alienation, thereby situating itself within a broader discourse on the socio-environmental and technological conditions that characterise contemporary crisis. By exposing the mechanisms through which capitalist logics and digital infrastructures sustain themselves amid collapse, Severance foregrounds the structural nature of environmental degradation and psychological disaffection, emphasising that these phenomena are not anomalous disruptions but are deeply embedded in prevailing systems of governance and production (Helmy, 2022; Yadav, 2024). This study affirms that techno-ecocriticism provides a critical framework capable of advancing literary analysis beyond descriptive or thematic interpretation. It facilitates a deeper engagement with how texts mediate the experience of crisis, not only by reflecting sociopolitical anxieties but also by offering diagnostic insights into the cultural and technological configurations that perpetuate such crises. In analysing Severance through this lens, the research underscores the capacity of literature to interrogate and reimagine the terms of survival, relationality, and community under conditions of environmental and technological upheaval. Techno-ecocriticism thus proves essential for interpreting literary responses to planetary crisis, enabling a rethinking

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of disaster not merely as an event, but as an ongoing condition that challenges the foundational assumptions of modern existence.

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