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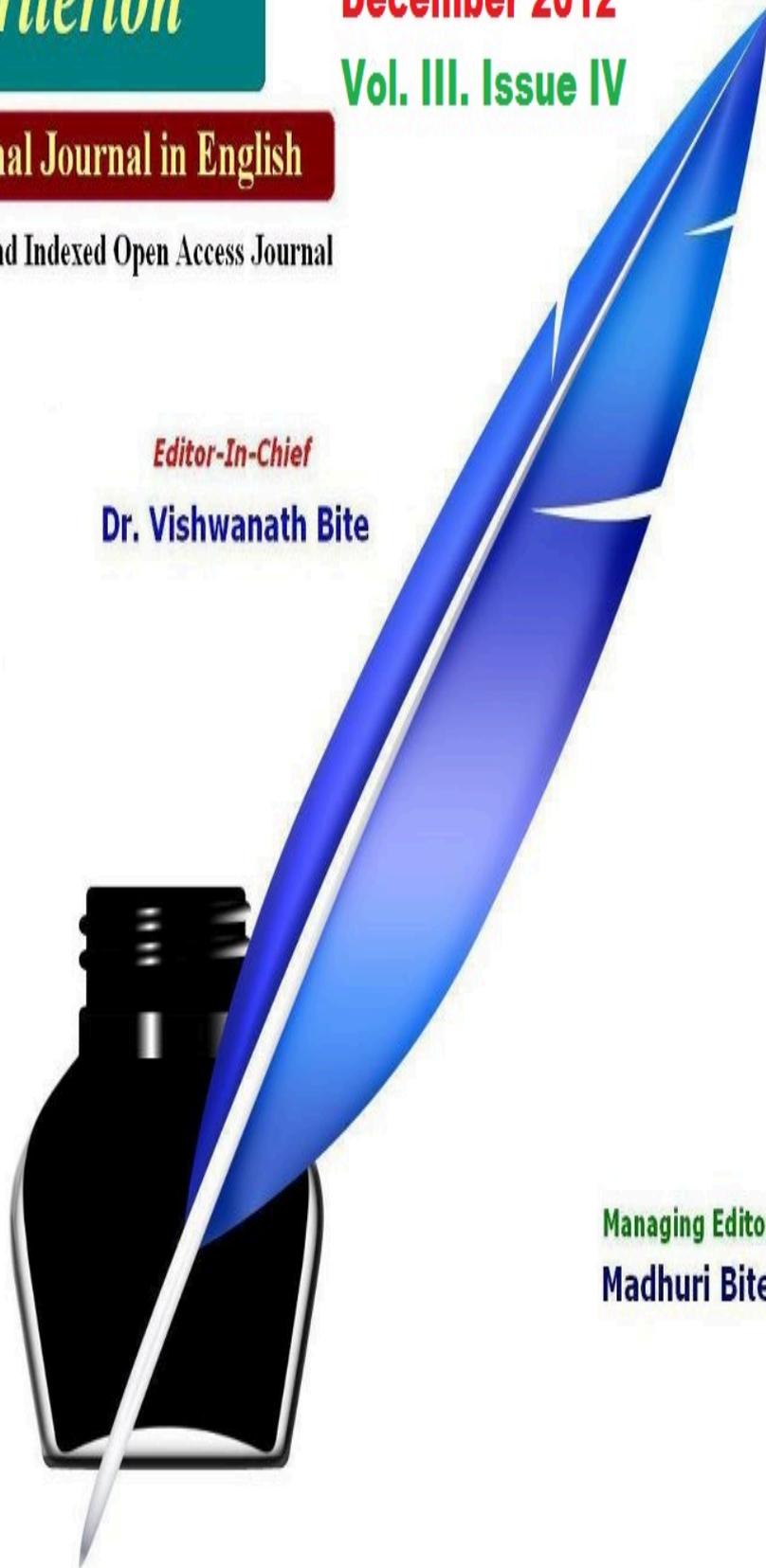
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Bridges to Breakthroughs: Tracing the Genealogy of the Indian Science Fiction and Fantasy Genre in English

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Established genres of the West are constantly being modified, adapted and evolved for the consumption of other nations. Science Fiction and Fantasy (SFF) is one such genre that enjoys unsurpassed popularity prominently because it is a cross-over genre which fuses the impulses and techniques of both science fiction (Sf) and fantasy. Over the years, it has caught the interest of Indian writers in English and the international market is increasingly being proliferated by works of Indian. The paper would trace the watershed moments in the history of Indian Science Fiction (Sf) and fantasy, which are the parent genres of SFF that gradually gave rise to this “bastard” genre, to assimilate their value in the Indian-English literary tradition. Sf and Fantasy in English are considered to be a nascent genre in India although works featuring fantastical elements in India dates back to classical antiquity. The works of some of the prominent Indian fantasy writers have been traced in the paper to provide a rough idea about how the SFF genre evolved in India especially in English. For doing so, I have looked at some important signposts in Bengali Sf and Fantasy as many renowned Indian Sf writers chose Bengali as their language of narration than English. Only after the reading population embraced Sf and fantasy did SFF finally emerge in India with the *Gameworld* trilogy of Samit Basu, who claims to be the first Indian SFF writer in English (samitbasu.com).

Brian Attebery, an academic writer of science fiction (sf) and fantasy, seeks to ascertain the reason behind the popularity of Science Fiction and Fantasy (SFF) in “Science Fantasy and Myth” published in *Intersections: Fantasy and Science Fiction* (1987). He states that one of the answers to its popularity among writers and readers may be found in Maud Bodkin’s classic *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination*, (1934) which posited the fact that human beings seem to observe the world simultaneously from two perspectives, one emotional and the other rational. Bodkin writes:

The belief that fire burns us, that water drowns and cleanses, and will quench our thirst, that earth yields crops for food, and sustains our dwellings, and will hide our bodies at the last, have all a twofold aspect, *emotional as well as intellectual*. We can extend their content by abstract but sensibly verifiable relations till they make up a large part of our scientific knowledge. Or we can transform them into poetry by using them to satisfy our need for emotional expression; as when, with Prometheus, we call upon Earth, the mighty mother, or, with St. Francis, praise God for the many services of Sister Water. In these instances the very intimacy and range of our practical knowledge of earth and water adds power to the ideas as instruments of emotional expression. (Emphasis added, p. 11).

Thus, Bodkin’s idea, about two perspectives of viewing the world, readily gets transposed to our field of discussion. Sf presents its assumptions within the framework of scientific theories. “Fantasy, like poetry, is more concerned with archetype and emotion,” (Attebery, “Science Fantasy and Myth”). SFF is a hybrid literary form that combines the features of science fiction (Sf) and fantasy, which embody the two perspectives of Bodkin’s, namely the intellectual and the emotional. These three literary forms; SFF, Sf and fantasy; fall under Speculative Fiction which is an inclusive, umbrella term

encompassing writings ranging from hard science fiction, epic fantasy, horror, magic realism, slipstream to modern myth-making. The term “speculative fiction,” like most genre names such as Sf or SFF, does not have a universally agreed upon definition. The term appears to have been coined¹ by Robert A. Heinlein, a popular American Sf writer who first used the term in *The Saturday Evening Post* (1947). In an essay entitled “On Writing Speculative Fiction” in 1948, Heinlein used the term speculative fiction as a substitute for Sf. But once the term became popular, editors, critics, readers and academics gradually appropriated it for their own use and later writers developed the tendency to think of speculative fiction as a broad genre covering everything from Sf and fantasy to horror. In short, any work that was not “realistic” in nature fell under the category of speculative fiction.

Tabish Khair in “Indian Pulp Fiction in English: A Preliminary Overview from Dutt to Dé” writes that Indian English **Science Fiction** began “with the publication of K.C. Dutt’s *A Journal of Forty Eight Hours of the Year 1945* in the *Calcutta Literary Gazette* in June 1835. This was largely a work of historical fantasy, in which the author described a war of independence, led by a charismatic leader, which Indians would fight against the British at a time about a century in the future” (published in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*). Another early Indian English text that owes its affinity to Sf is Soshee Chunder’s *The Republic of Orissa: A Page from the Annals of the 20th Century* (1845), “narrates the bid, in 1916, of the people of the state of Orissa to break away from the British Empire” (Khair, “Indian Pulp Fiction in English: A Preliminary Overview from Dutt to Dé”). Khair identifies another similar text, the short story “Sultana’s Dream” (1905) by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. Suchitra Mathur cites the story’s relevance as being a Sf inscribed in the Indian context by asserting, “the label of science fiction, however, could be applied with equal justification [to such texts] not only because of their futuristic utopian/dystopian setting, but more importantly, because of the implicit critique of modern science that informs their more overt engagement with issues of gender and class respectively” (“Caught between the Goddess and the Cyborg: Third-World Women and the Politics of Science in Three Works of Indian Science Fiction”, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*).

The earlier works in English by Dutt, Chunder and Hossain depict elements of Sf but fail to qualify as Sfs. Arshad Said Khan writes in an article entitled “Udankhatola Redux” in *Tehelka Magazine* on December 08, 2007 that modern Indian Sf was born in Bengal in the nineteenth century with the short story “Shukra Bhraman” or “Travels to Venus”, by Jagananda Roy in 1879. The colonized Bengali was seen to be in awe of western science and technology and as a corollary soon became fascinated by the genre of science fiction.

Debjani Sengupta² in her essay “Sadhanbabu’s Friends: Science Fiction in Bengal from 1882 to 1974” in the book *Science Fiction, Imperialism and the Third World* writes that “for the urban elite of Calcutta, science stories were a kind of myth formation of the new industrial age. Science was perceived as essentially “Western, an attribute of

¹ Although the term “speculative fiction” was coined by Robert Heinlein as a substitute for Sf but there are earlier citations of this term, such as, a piece in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in 1889, used the term in reference to Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000 – 1887* (1887).

² Debjani Sengupta teaches at the Department of English, Indraprastha College, University of Delhi.

European civilization” (p.115). This genre accommodated Western science fiction genre into an Indian world-view.

The first science fiction novella in Bengali was Hemlal Dutta’s “Rahashya” (“The Mystery”) which was published in two installments in 1882 in the pictorial *Bigyan Darpan* magazine. The story reflected an understanding for the rationalism of science which, according to Isaac Asimov, is a marker of good science fiction. Premendra Mitra was one of Bengal’s most famous practitioners of science fiction. Two of his most famous stories are “Piprey Puran” (“The Annals of the Ants”) and “Mangalbari” (“The Martian Enemies”). From his stories Mitra spells out his purpose clearly. He critiques human life and aspirations and asserts that to survive, human beings must forget their differences and be united.

Satyajit Ray created the legendary figure of Professor Shonku in 1961. The first Sf featuring this eccentric character was written for the magazine *Sandesh* and was titled “Byomjatriri Diary” (“The Diary of the Space Traveler”). In all, thirty-eight complete and two incomplete diaries (the last one was published in 1992) narrate the incredible world of Shonku’s travels and inventions.

Most of these stories are more than science fiction. They are also travelogues, fantasy tales, tales of adventure and romance. As a fictional character Professor Shonku is tremendously real. He is courageous yet forgetful, inquisitive yet self-controlled. His wit and humour makes him very human and his inventions are impressive: Anhihiline, Miracural, Omniscope, Snuffgun, Mangorange, Camperapid, Linguagraph – the list is long and remarkable. Some are drugs, some gadgets, some machines, but they all have human purposes and uses. None are allowed to reign over or be more powerful than the human mind that invented them. (“Sadhanbabu’s Friends: Science Fiction in Bengal from 1882 to 1974”, *Science Fiction, Imperialism and the Third World*, p. 122)

In recent years too, Indian writers in English have written powerful texts in this tradition. Manjula Padmanabhan’s “Harvest” (1995), Vandana Singh’s “Delhi” (2004) and Anil Menon’s *the Beast with Nine Billion Feet* (2009) are some of the texts that belong to the genre.

Indian Sf makes a departure from Western science fiction by incorporating certain noticeable changes. Satyajit Ray used the stereotype of a lonesome protagonist in the service of science like we see in many works of Western science fiction. But the heroes in Bengali Sf, unlike their Western counterpart, do not exist in complete social isolation. They might not have wives but they have pets, friends, neighbors with whom they interact and socialize. Sengupta points out another contrast:

In Bangla SF, the scientist’s world is not only a sterilized or mysterious world of machines and inventions. It is a world where a robot is called lovingly by name and accorded the status of a friend. It is a world accessible to its young readers, a world full of possibilities and real in its human concern. (p.124)

Manjula Padmanabhan through her play *Harvest* staunchly focuses on the third world and the problems it faces. Through the medium of science fiction she goes on to explore socio-economic inequalities in the world and the dangerous effects of biomedical technologies for third world countries. Vandana Singh in her short story “Delhi”, which appeared in the science fiction and fantasy anthology *So Long Been Dreaming* (2004), charts the course of the story’s main protagonist Aseem. Through Aseem’s story she reformulates the concept of history as opposed to the one posited by the Eurocentric

discourse. Anil Menon, a US based Indian Sf writer who has written *Beast With Nine Billion Feet* (2009) and has published stories in most prominent SF magazines, including *Strange Horizons*, *InterZone*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Albedo One*, *Chiaroscuro*, *New Genre*, *Sybil's Garage* and *Apex World SF*, was interviewed by Vandana Singh. When asked, in which languages, Sf in India is flourishing, he answered "English, Bengali and Marathi" ("In Search of Indian Science-Fiction: In Conversation with Anil Menon" published in *Ecstatic Days*).

Today we have Sf not just in English and Bengali but also in various other Indian languages. With writers like Amar Sidhu and DP Singh, Punjab is one of the states in the north of India where Sf is emerging as a popular genre with a dedicated readership. In the west of India too, Maharashtra is touted as a state that has many Sf writers, though none have achieved the celebrity status of Jayant Narlikar (who writes both in English and Marathi). Another well known Sf figure who writes in Marathi is Y.H. Deshpande who has contributed to the growth of Marathi Sf.

Arshad Said Khan explores in his article "Udankhatola Redux" that it is in the southern states of Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu that regional language Sf writing has the most following. Another indicator of Sf's popularity in the south is the Mysore based Indian Association for Science Fiction Studies (IASFS), which came into existence in 1998 and organizes annual conferences to popularize science fiction. Finally, budding science fiction writers from North-East states are also eager to contribute to the genre. The Assamese writer Shakeel Jamal has written two novels in Sf and believes that the familiarity of local flavors is more essential than acquainting the readers with the Sf jargon.

Fantasy in India goes back to classical antiquity and one of the foremost texts of fantasy written in India are Valmiki's *Ramayana* (ca. 500 B.C.E.) and Vyasa's *Mahabharata* (ca. 400 B.C.E.). These are the two main Sanskrit epics. These epics have rich reserves of age-old tales that have been tapped in by different writers. The writers have incorporated ancient myths, folktales and legends of these epics into modern storytelling and have provided new flavors to the existing fantasy genre which has been getting, more or less, monopolized, attractively packaged and sold in major fantasy-producing countries like America and Britain.

India has also produced rich compendiums like *Puranas*, *Panchatantra*, *Jataka*, *Betaal Pachisi*, *Chandrakanta*, *Hitopdesha*, *Kathasaritsagara*, *Amar Chitra Katha* etcetera. Although these texts contain fantastical elements but they are not perceived as being part of the fantasy genre per se. Apart from containing fantastical tropes these texts are rich in other elements too. For instance, *Mahabharata* is often talked of as the first science fiction as it expounds tales of flying aircrafts and powerful weapons that allude to today's nuclear weapons and explains the presence of aliens in these epics (*Dialogics of Self, the Mahabharata and Culture: The History of Understanding and Understanding of History* by Lakshmi Bandlamudi). But again writers like Y.H. Deshpande have critiqued *Mahabharata* for being called the first science fiction work as he believes that these features were only incidental to the epic and not instrumental in providing a form to the epic. Today all these texts of antiquity have been translated in different languages and provide a rich source for writers who in turn incorporate elements from these stories in their works. In the nineteenth century, Sukumar Ray, wrote *HaJaBaRaLa*, a novella

which owes its affinity to the nonsense genre. The story has similarities with Lewis Carroll's *Alice in the Wonderland's* plot organization and denouement and features many fantastical elements. Satyajit Ray's great grandfather, Upendra Kishore Roy Chowdhary also wrote a fantasy tale called "Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne."

Salman Rushdie's first novel *Grimus* (1975) is another example of fantasy fiction. Samit Basu in his article "Indian SFF" writes that it "was straightforward genre fantasy, based on the 12th-century Sufi poem 'The Conference of Birds.' Grimus is an anagram of the name 'Simurg,' the omniscient bird of ancient Persian myth (sffworld.com). He also points out that Rushdie's most prominent fantasy work is *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) "with its swashbuckling colorful landscape and tongue-in-cheek tributes to fantastical literature from Baghdad to Bengal." Another work that owes allegiance to the fantasy genre and also uses Indian mythology is Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjay: The Death Conqueror* (1989). The book is a philosophical and psychological insight into *Mahabharata* in which the tale is told from Karna's tragic viewpoint. The epic *Mahabharata* has fascinated the writers for centuries and authors from all over the world have tried to make use of its rich collection of stories. Synthesis of Indian epic in contemporary literature can also be witnessed in the works of Harilal Upadhyay, K. M. Munshi, and C. Rajagopalchari besides many others.

Women writers such as Suniti Namjoshi, Saira Ramasastry, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni use fantasy to explore sensitive issues such as women's empowerment, sexuality, gender roles, marriage and family. Robin Anne Reid writes in *Women in Science Fiction and Fantasy: Overviews* (2008) that "Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices* (1998) and Ramasastry's *Heir to Govandhara* (2000) blend the supernatural with meditations on the emotional and physical sacrifices often expected of women" (p.170). Namjoshi's feminist fantasies include *Conversations of Cow* (1985) and *The Mothers of Maya Diip* (1991).

Twenty-first century looks brighter for fantasy genre as many new writers are dabbling in fantasy and producing newer varieties of Indian fantasies. Sonja Chandrachud mostly writes for children and whips up magic, potion and spells in her book *The Potion of Eternity* (2007) which has arguably been influenced by the Harry Potter series. Ashwin Sanghi's *The Rozabal Line* (2007) brings Gods back from their heavenly abodes to play action games on earth. *Chanakya's Chant* (2010) draws a parallel between the practices implemented during the reign of Chadrugupt Maurya and today's time. Recently, Amish Tripathi has published two of his books, namely *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010) and *The Secret of the Nagas* (2011), from the Shiva trilogy. The last decade has seen a steep rise in the demand for fantasy books in India.

Science Fiction and Fantasy (SFF) genre in India fuses these two impulses of Sf and fantasy genres. It's a comparatively unexplored genre in India. Samit Basu's *Gameworld* trilogy comprising *The Simoqin Prophecies* (2004), *The Manticore's Secret* (2005) and *The Unwaba Revelations* (2007) is often called the first Indian SFF in English. But Basu himself negates this idea in "Indian SFF." He says that his trilogy is not the first SFF in English but "it was just the first book that was marketed as an unabashed genre novel, that didn't need to be hidden under a cloak, and smuggled into Literature's halls." Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) is also considered by some as the first Indian SFF work in English which also won the Arthur C. Clarke Science Fiction Award in 1997 (Khair, "Indian Pulp Fiction in English: A Preliminary

Overview from Dutt to Dé”). Samit Basu further delineates that another interesting case in the history of SFF is Ashok Banker’s seven-part *Ramayana* series (2003-2010). It is a retelling of the epic *Ramayana*. Basu writes that Banker “is the only Indian writer you’ll find discussed on international SFF websites.” Basu is also impressed with the way Banker takes “the most incredibly material-rich epic in the world and add to it popular SF elements and monsters from well-known contemporary western writers” which has signaled “India’s first entry into the big-league international SFF publishing market”. Basu’s own trilogy has succeeded in impressing Indian readership and penetrating other markets as well. Samit Basu can be seen as someone who borrows a great deal from the western SFF variety, but his employment, if not deployment, of Indian epics, mythologies, folktales, and other popular narratives including comic books, alongside mythologies of other cultures namely, Greek, Roman, English etcetera, can be seen as a move which clearly hopes to target an urban Indian reading public which is well-versed with narratives from the West and their own tradition. His borrowings can be seen as playful, albeit with a purpose. In his alternate fictive world, kings and queens have Indian names. It is crowded with storks who are Tamil Brahmins; three princes who are given names of Bengali children’s games: Chorpulis, Kumirdanga and Lukochuri; an eagle is named Lalmohan etcetera. There is also a princess Rukmini of Durg who has quite a prominent role in the series. Kol, which is one of the most prominent places mentioned in the series is actually a Bengali word which means lap or “cradle of civilization” (in Basu’s terms). The “Indianness” is not just sprinkled in the trilogy for flavoring but it felicitates commentary on the issues that have been deftly woven together to create an “Indian SFF” variety. His series is playful unlike other SFF writers who have a humourless obsession with their fictional universe. On the one hand, he is often claimed to be the first Indian SFF writer but on the other he himself subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) satirizes/spoofs the SFF genre in his writings, in terms of both its western and Indian elements.

At one level, it seems that the storyline of Basu’s trilogy follows the staple science fiction and fantasy formula: there is a quest, and the quest needs a hero, who must go forth with a band of loyal warriors of various species, and delve into adventures and save the world. However, at another level, it does not follow the formulaic pattern in any straightforward sense. For instance, in this series there are no real heroes and no real villains. The gods too are shown as avaricious and power-hungry; they bicker and fight amongst themselves and are willing to destroy the world. The living beings inhabiting the world are presented as mere pawns in their hands. The world in Samit Basu’s series is a world that gods have created as a game, where they control the key players and wager their outcome. He comments on some of the most important issues that assail Indian conscience, gods being one of them. All of this will be explored in the later chapters.

Samit Basu has ventured into this nascent field of SFF and to a certain extent has even become successful in his effort. *World Literature Today* magazine of the University of Oklahoma has awarded Gameworld trilogy third spot in an article entitled “60 Essential English-Language Works of Modern Indian Literature.” The future of SFF seems unpredictable but hopeful with many talented writers picking up the pen to pen down more for the budding genre.

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