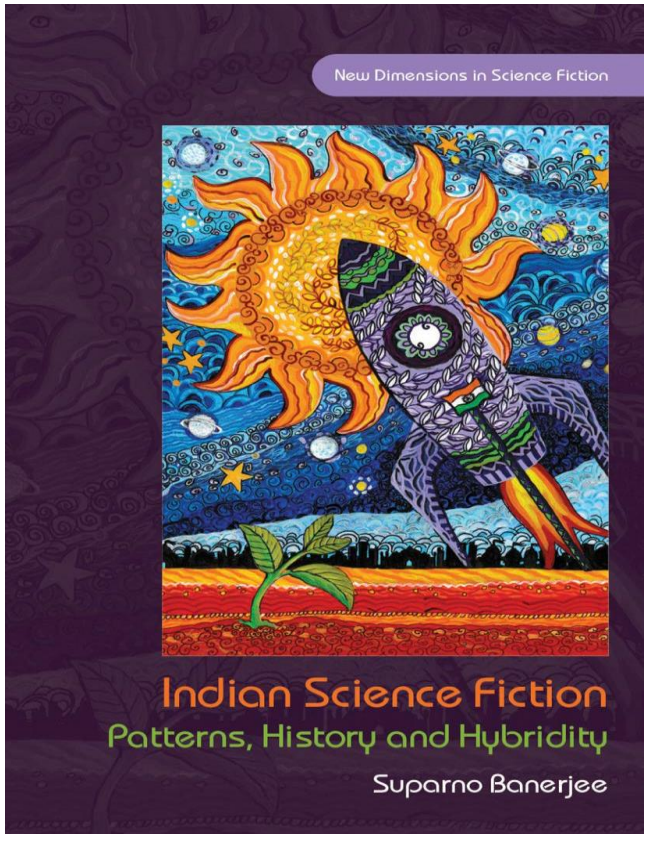
Suparno Banerjee. *Indian Science Fiction: Patterns, History and Hybridity*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2020. xvi+256 pp. ISBN: 978-1-78683-666-3.



Placed outside the pale of canonical genres, Science-Fiction (SF) did not figure in the mainstream critical discourses for a long time. Even when such discourses took place, they focussed on Euro-American works. As SF moved gradually inside the hallowed academic sphere, critical works on the genre began to proliferate. It is only very recently that scholars have started paying regular attention to SF, including those from non-Western countries, and academic journals on the genre have even brought out issues exclusively on non-Western SF. Widely termed as "alternative" SF, these works tend to offer an ideal field for critical investigation focussed on thematic variations, ideological moorings, and dynamics of representation. This is a major step towards the dissemination of a more comprehensive knowledge about the genre and creation of an archive of

SF produced in post-colonial countries. That will partly address the epistemological vacuum.

Fortunately, despite the gap, scholars interested in the field have recently made attempts to connect SF with national histories and post/colonial conditions. As a result, Indian SF too appears as a major field of critical investigation. Suparno Banerjee's book *Indian Science Fiction: Patterns, History and Hybridity* (2020), perhaps the first of its kind, is the most critical and comprehensive volume written so far in this area, covering the corpus of Indian SF written originally in English and Indian regional languages. It is true that Banerjee does not cover all the Indian languages which, in any case, is an impossible task for an individual author, but he has included within the span of his discussion important SF written in those *Bhasa* literatures (such as Bengali, Marathi, or Hindi) which produced most of the significant SF works in the country. These narratives are approached largely through the lens of postcolonialism. Indian SF, as an academically accepted genre, has now found an early footing in the global academic scenario.

Banerjee locates Indian SF in the multilingual, multicultural traditions of post/colonial India and argues that the genre has evolved in the interstices of these intersectional traditions. Positing it in the discourses of the "national literature," he analyses the intricacies involved in the issue of "Indianness" that has been a topic of debate in Indian English literature for a long time. He points out that the concept of "India" is problematic since there are many Indias, and explores the viability of theories of "nation state," "state-nation" and "civilisational collective." The geo-cultural location of Indian diasporic writers who have published a large corpus of SF is also important in this regard. Banerjee is inclusive in his approach and has brought under the purview of his book not only works produced in post-independence India but also those written in British India that included the modern-day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh as well as diasporic authors.

Banerjee argues that Indian SF as a genre has become truly hybrid because of the confluence of multiple linguistic and cultural factors and the colonial past of the country. The ideologically distinct locations of the authors have provided a rich variety of strains. The colonial history of the country and its Vedic past, its exploitation of the Western episteme and the "alternative" indigenous knowledge systems, its dependence on Western modernity and its discovery of "alternative Indian modernities" make the genre intellectually stimulating. However, as mentioned earlier, mapping the field is no easy task because of several factors such as the multiplicity of languages and cultures, vast corpus of works produced so far, and lack of access to local archives. Despite the challenges mentioned above, Banerjee has laid the foundation for more such analytical works to come. The brief chronology of Indian SF will provide scholars and lay readers alike a rough picture of the trajectories of development in the

field. He also undertakes the difficult task of defining the Indian SF which inherits distinct concepts like *vijnana* (special knowledge), *kalpavijnan* (imagined science), and *ajgubi* (weird). All these terms convey a sense of what Darko Suvin calls "cognitive estrangement" and achieves the effect of what Victor Shklovsky terms "defamiliarisation." Born and developed in the interstices of competing epistemologies, Indian SF shows the inevitable impact of "western techno-science," "Vedic science," and "the nebulous realm of regional subaltern knowledge." Banerjee's analysis of SF stories and novels such as J.C.Bose's Bengali story "Niruddesher Kahini" (The Story of Disappearance [1896]), Satyajit Ray's Professor Shanku series of narratives (1961-92), Narlikar's *The Return of Vaman* (translated from Marathi in 1989), Dinesh Chandra Goswami's collection of Assamese stories *The Hair Timer* (translated in 2011) and Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995) shows how intensely these knowledge systems characterise the texture of Indian SF texts.

The book explores the corpus of Indian SF published between 1835 (the year that produced the first speculative fiction) and 2019 (the year of submission of the manuscript of the book). Banerjee divides the corpus of SF into four historical periods: 1835-1905, 1905-1947, 1947-1995, and 1995-2019. It locates the origin of the genre in Kylas Chunder Dutt's "A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945," the first speculative, futuristic narrative by an Indian fictional writer published in 1835, the second period begins with the publication of Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* (1905), the third period with the independence of India in 1947 and the last one with the publication of Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995).

The author relates the birth and growth of the genre with the introduction of English education in India and development of a scientific temperament, British colonialism, and reactions to it, impacting upon the genre throughout the period. Right from its inception, it shows unmistakable signs of resistance against colonial oppression and other hegemonic forces as Kylas Chunder Dutt's "A Journal" and his cousin Shoshee Chunder Dutt's "The Republic of Orissa: A Page from the Annals of the 20th Century" go to suggest. Indian SF writers often employed Indian myths and epics as a narrative device which also indicates a conscious attempt of the authors to showcase an old epistemic system and "superior" civilisation that can be pitted against the civilisational resources of the West. However, as Banerjee argues, in later narratives "reinterpretation of myths through SF becomes a device of challenging the Hindu patriarchal narrative" (16). Some narratives such as Premendra Mitra's Ghanada stories and Satyajit Ray's Shanku stories also show the "inverted power relationship" and superior intellectual power of Indian characters. Banerjee points out a major difference between Indian SF and Western SF – he observes that "unlike Euro-American SF, Indian SF rarely presents an expansionist universe and colonizing missions" (18). He cites the examples of Jagadananda

Roy's "Shukra Bhraman" (written 1892, published 1914) and Satyajit Ray's "Byom Jatrir Diary" (1963) to claim that "although exploratory and dangerous, space travel in Indian SF is more like adventure tourism than colonialism" (18). Banerjee interprets the figures of aliens, robots, cyborgs, and "other Others" in Indian SF in terms of the marginalised sections of the Indian population and Indian immigrants in the diaspora, and places the discussion in a Self-Other split in which the issue of alterity is not fixed.

The book explores the issues of language of representation, translation of SF from *Bhasa* literatures, "writing back" narratives, literary experimentations, emergence of popular magazines and Indian SF anthologies. It shows that Indian SF worked through several ideological, political, and social locations such as postcolonial, nativist, feminist, and socialist utopian ones. The genre thus constitutes a complex, variegated corpus written from multiple perspectives. At the present historical juncture, it seems to be heading for a more challenging future. As "India is mutating – explosively" (Khan 479), and "experiencing exponential technological change," (James Gunn qtd. in Khan 493), more and more SF narratives will emerge, and SF criticism is likely to play a more significant role in an interdisciplinary academic curriculum in the future. SF "has much to say about the direction of [the] change and how we can shape our future world for human habitability" (James Gunn qtd. in Khan 493). The feedback from the imagined future as we find in Indian SF will be helpful for future world building. To keep tabs on the future-oriented ideas and insights, we need to access all SF works, written in English and regional languages. Translation of works will undoubtedly facilitate the process. Thus, as Banerjee suggests, "more publication, translation and scholarship on individual *bhasa* SF and its dissemination across linguistic lines is necessary" (193).

Written in a lucid language, *Indian Science Fiction: Patterns, History and Hybridity* is a refined, highly discursive exploration of the history and representational dynamics of Indian SF. It will motivate scholars engaged in the study of the Indian SF to explore further into the field.

Reference

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