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STAR WARRIORS OF THE MODERN RAJ (2021) BY SAMI AHMAD KHAN

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Khan, Sami Ahmad. *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj: Materiality, Mythology and Technology of Indian Science Fiction*. University of Wales Press, 2021.

Sami Ahmad Khan's *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj: Materiality, Mythology, and Technology of Indian Science Fiction* (2021) offers an ambitious endeavour as a "fan's alternative to a Eurocentric perspective of SF, a beginner's guide which avoids an essentialist understanding of the genre [...] meant for those who may not have had much interface with SF, in general, and Indian SF in English, in particular" (xiii). While commendable for its attempt at decolonising studies in the Fantastika genres, Khan's objective is wrapped in complications; how does a scholar divorce themselves from the Eurocentric criticism that has come before while simultaneously acknowledging the existing scholarly field? Khan accomplishes this by presenting an extensive survey of Science Fiction (SF) criticism in his introductory chapters, touching on – amongst others, contemporary scholars such as Mark Bould, Pawel Freluk, Paul Kincaid, Patrick Sharp, and Sherryl Vint. Thus, Khan demonstrates a rigorous and layered comprehension of the works in question while simultaneously putting SF produced outside of India to one side. The effect this leaves on the reader is that Khan is certainly familiar with the field but that the study exists in a closed space, one which avoids taking part in or extending the existing conversation in SF criticism to include Indian authors and scholars. For instance, Khan begins Chapter 3, "Prayers in the Rain," with the statement that "Perhaps only *Indian* SF can be concerned with the *atman* (soul)" (33, emphasis original). Posing India as a "deeply religious country" (33), Khan avoids the intersection of SF with other religious traditions, a fact that would be taken at surface value if the intended audience of this book is indeed targeted towards those who "may not have had much interface with SF" (xiii). And yet, while Khan avoids Eurocentric scholarship in his own analysis, a significant strength of the book is Khan's presentation of several Indian-centric scholars in literature and Science Fiction, bringing much-needed attention to global scholarship in the field. Although Khan professes that this guide is intended for scholars who have had little immersion in SF, it certainly serves as an important eye-opener into global criticism in Science Fiction.

Khan's decision to present an alternative to a Eurocentric discussion of Science Fiction rests on his argument that Indian Science Fiction does *not* exist as a response to the current Western tradition but that it arose organically within India itself in parallel to other Science Fiction traditions. However, *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj* does not take this as its central position but assumes it as an evident fact shored up by Bal Phondke's argument for four stages of SF which can be seen in other global traditions.¹ I am not entirely convinced of this position, especially as the book

deliberately focuses on the fourth stage, or works produced in the new millennium, avoiding analysis of earlier texts which may have formed the first three stages. Consequently, the reader must assume that Khan's leap in logic is correct, as we do not witness the evaluation of how these stages may correspond to earlier Indian Science Fiction. That said, while Khan's framing may not convince me, it does not detract from the overall work, which offers an analysis of a range of Indian Science Fiction in English-Language (or ISFE, to use Khan's acronym) with both breadth and depth.

To explore ISFE alongside a mutating "technoscientific and socio-cultural transformation [... Khan] adopt[s] the "IN situ Model, which traverses the realms of space, time and being" (22). Utilising this model, Khan presents a parallel for ISFE: transMIT for space, antekaal for time, and neoMonsters for being. *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj* focuses primarily on the first of these, the transMIT, and thus does not spend much time explaining the other two models except fleetingly in later chapters. While this framing may be confusing – presenting an overly complicated model and jargon which does not add much overall to the central themes of the book – one assumes (and hopes) that Khan will address these gaps with later research. In *Star Warriors*, Khan proposes that:

the 'transMIT thesis' evidences how Indian SF (and, therefore, ISFE, specifically) exists across the intersecting domains of technology, materiality/politics/ideology and mythology within the emergent genre space of a developing country. *Through* its body, not only does ISFE *transmit* to its readers (emergent) technology, (sedimented) mythology and (mutating) ideology (in terms of its functionality), but, even more important, the basic operations of its texts operate across/beyond the three sets. (22, emphasis original)

The transMIT thesis is divided into three attributes: technology, ideology, and mythology (although, as the text's subtitle indicates, Khan replaces ideology with materiality), all of which give ISFE its defining characteristics. As evident in this presentation, Khan sprinkles scientific jargon alongside non-Anglophone slang throughout the book. While he helpfully provides a glossary of non-English-language terms at the back of the book, antekaal is notably missing from it. It should also be noted that the glossary does not specify what *language* these words originate from. As India has over twenty official languages (and an estimate of two hundred to two thousand regional dialects), it is an appalling gap to ignore the author's own subjective perspectives in the analysis of ISFE. As Khan is a novelist, the peppering of slang within his creative work would be inspiring and impactful. However, it falls outside the academic rigour anticipated from scholarship presented in the English language. By failing to acknowledge the linguistic nuances that inform ISFE, the book creates a homogenous 'India,' one that follows the colonial paradigm that it seeks to work against.

Thus, the jargon has the unfortunate side-effect of alienating people of Indian descent who do not identify with the author's own background (and perhaps also alienates the audience's presumably English reader), while also indicating that Khan's analysis of ISFE might be subjective

and rife with biases. For instance, Khan begins the section on “Materiality,” which an encapsulation of Indian identity:

The Union of India is not just a country which is – as per its eclectic, progressive constitution – a sovereign, secular, socialist, democratic, republic. It is also a geographically diverse entity of ‘Hindustan’ (the land of the Indus or ‘Sindhu’) and an ancient civilisation of ‘Bharat’ (or Aryavrata) which comprises multiple ‘nations’ within its territories. India, Bharat or Hindustan, three names for the same country, represent varying forces that seek to construct the idea(s) of India, and manifest conflicting approaches toward *bhartiyata* (or Indianness). These battles continue to rage in India of 2020s – and exhibit various strategies of defining, inscribing, and *being* Indian. (42, emphasis original).

Khan then presents three grades of Other, stipulating that “[a] higher grade corresponds to a more subversive and disruptive degree of alterity” (44). Grade III is The Civilisation Other: “The most dangerous form of Other, it emerges from a fusion of the national, political and religious Other, thereby becoming the Civilisational Other [...] an India caught between a Maoist China, Islamic Pakistan and the Capitalist west” (44-45). While Khan rightfully aligns Science Fiction as a genre which explores Othered identities, for Khan, India’s postcolonial literature appears to have less to do with Britain’s colonisation (from which the English part of ISFE originates) and, instead focuses on Hindu-Muslim relations dating back to the medieval ages. As Khan deliberately selects texts presenting these non-Hindu identities as the Other to demonstrate his transMIT thesis, the reader cannot confirm if these selections are representative of ISFE. A nod to ISFE written by Indian authors who do not identify as Hindu would have been welcome here. The remainder of the section on Materiality considers the other two grades of Other. Grade II is The Social Other, “compris[ing] caste and class paradigms. It is a source of threat to society, but somehow still regarded as ‘one of us’ who has gone ‘astray,’ and hence requires ‘checking’ and ‘correction’” (45). While the two, caste and class, are nearly indistinguishable from each other, a distinction still exists, as India’s caste-system has religious underpinnings. Khan’s analysis of tropes with clones, Artificial Intelligence (AI)/robots, and mutants focuses on the “class” of Social Other, sidestepping this connection to religion. In the Grade I, The Gender(ed) Other, “represent[ing] the least degree of disruption, one that can be relatively easily contained” (45), Khan briefly nods to the interconnection between the connection between gender unbalance and religious systems. He includes as examples here women (biological sex), “liberated” women (sexually empowered), and the LGBTQIA+ community. As with the discussion of class, the analysis of gender unbalance here is intrinsically connected to the discussion of religion and Social Other, which comes before it, and would have benefited from an intersectional analysis. For instance, one example in the section considers a character attempting to find a suitable bride for his firstborn son. While the social paradigm of marriage is bound up with social protocols of religion and class, Khan presents this conversation as one that is removed from current social constructs, focusing on a post-apocalyptic, imaginary society without mentioning religion or caste. Considering

Khan's framing in Part 1 that: "Perhaps only Indian SF can be concerned with the atman (soul)" (33), the sidestepping of religious intricacies in Part 2 feels like a crucial missing step.

Khan picks up the underpinning religious thread in Part 3, "Mythology," arguing that "India views science not as profane but as an extension of the divine" (96). Extending this perception to ISFE, Khan notes three paradigms: "(a) Gods as extraterrestrials (from other planets); (b) Gods as social-political indictments (from other temporal locations); and (c) Gods as hyperintelligences (from other technological axes)" (96). Part 3 is divided into these three sections, with an additional fourth chapter dedicated to "Mythic <=> Scientific." Together, "Mythology" functions to belatedly return to the argument on the question of whether Indian SF is an import, concluding that ISFE "employs the narrative structures and tropes of other genres with so much panache that the appropriation becomes utterly natural" (144). Thus, ISFE, and Indian fiction genre, arise from a mishmash of tradition with borrowed global literatures, resynthesizing the two together to create a new entity.

Finally, Part 4, "Technology," considers how ISFE deals with new technologies, or "how it appropriates, abrogates, resists and/or collaborates with new 'Empire(s)': hegemonic power structures that are no longer former-imperial nations but also current institutions" (150). This section has the most chapters, covering genetic manipulation, digital technology, biowarfare, aliens, and climate change. The result is an enticing introduction to the range of topics and ideas covered in ISFE, serving to wet the reader's appetite to dip their toes into ISFE themselves.

In the conclusion, "ISFE: A New Hope," Khan evokes the 'IN situ model' to return to his transMIT thesis, placing technology, mythology, and ideology as a triangular graph, with spheres of varying sizes representing SF texts. While each text may vary in its depiction of technology, mythology, and ideology, all three attributes, Khan argues, are essential features of ISFE, its atman or soul. Indeed, *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj* does a fantastic job of convincing the reader of the importance of all three attributes when considering ISFE or SF in general. As a result, the book serves as an excellent primer into an introduction to Indian Science Fiction, providing a structured overview of the genre's essential elements. However, with its explicit focus on English-language texts and its implicit perspective which frames major religions practiced in India as the Other, I would caution any scholar or fan from reading the book in isolation. *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj* is best read with other emerging criticism in the field, including another University of Wales Press production, Suparno Banarjee's *Indian Science Fiction: Patterns, History and Hybridity* (2020), alongside Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee's *Final Frontiers: Science Fiction and Techno-Science in Non-Aligned India* (Liverpool University Press, 2020). These works together signal an important turn into discussions of global SF more broadly and Indian SF specifically, and I anticipate more scholarly work to come.

NOTES

1. Phondke's four stages includes: first, the birth and evolution of SF; second, science as a primary component and a quasi-scientific framework; third, disaster leading to a jolt out of scientific-romances; and fourth, a shift from SF for social purposes which focuses on content to SF which centres on form and style (paraphrased from Khan 19).

BIONOTE

C. Palmer-Patel (she/her) is the founder and Co-Head-Editor of *Fantastika Journal*. Her first monograph, *The Shape of Fantasy* (Routledge, 2020), investigates the narrative structures of Epic Fantasy, incorporating ideas from science, philosophy, and literary theory. Her current research project, *Negotiating Motherhood and Maternity in American Fantasy Fiction* (Edinburgh University Press), investigates heteropatriarchal and colonial structures in Fantasy produced by a wide remit of American identities.