
Sami Ahmad Khan’s *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj* was published in June 2021, and is, by its own admission, “a fan’s alternative,” “a beginner’s guide,” and “a critical catalogue” of twenty-first-century Indian Science Fiction originally written in English (ISFE) for the uninitiated with “SF, in general, and Indian SF in English, in particular” (xiii). The “catalogue” spans an impressive breadth of contemporary ISFE and abstains from engagement with the questions of aesthetics and literariness of ISFE as its “critical” focus is to lay bare the ideological/material, mythological, and technological forces that the 21st-century ISFE is imbricated in and engages with. Deeply conscious of the plurality that ISFE itself hosts and the “congruences and conflicts” (xiii) generated in transposing global SF structures onto India’s SF output, Khan not only “flits across [theoretical] vantage points that arise out of markedly different contexts” (xiv) but also offers an “IN situ Model” that frames his manuscript. The model and its three theses—“transMIT thesis,” “antekaal thesis” and “neoMONSTERS thesis”—are explained in text and through a flowchart in the second chapter of the introductory first section. Khan primarily employs the “transMIT thesis” in this monograph, which also informs its three core divisions—(Ideology/)Materiality, Mythology, Technology; these are bookended by a forty-page introduction and a short concluding chapter.

The first of the five sections is called *SF-101* and has three chapters that lay the groundwork for the central three sections of the book. The first chapter, titled “Whoever Loses, SF Wins,” comprehensively charts the longstanding global debates about and difficulties in defining the genre of SF. It shows how the conversations have moved from understanding SF as a genre with fixed boundaries to a mode where the “actants” and “communities of practice” of SF keep it fluid and mutating (15). This chapter is quotation heavy but seamlessly woven together largely from Western critics’ works, contributions from Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay being the exception, to trace the movements and oscillations of SF criticism.
The second chapter, “INS Forward unto Delhi,” is a rich, rigorous, and valuable contribution to SF criticism on Indian SF. Beyond justifying his study’s temporal, geographical, and generic limits, in this chapter Khan brings in critics of Indian and other indigenous SF to pose possible answers to pertinent questions about Indian SF. He explores the two dominant and politically extreme lenses of mapping the history of Indian SF and instead moves beyond both to locate the Indian-ness of Indian SF in the socio-politico-cultural milieu of India. The chapter also usefully lists the research on Indian SF in regional and English languages so far and enumerates convincing reasons for the dearth of Indian SF in English. However, Khan claims that the twenty-first century has seen a rise in ISFE, which he attributes to the rise of technical education in India in the 2000s. Therefore, he offers the indigenous IN Situ Model with the three theses to study this literature.

Chapter 3, “Prayers in the Rain,” employs reworked metaphors from Indian metaphysics (atman, paramatman, Vaikuntha), philosophy (dualism, manifestations, transcendence), and math (kilo, mega, yotta) in an attempt to define ISFE by identifying its various distinct features while also searching for its core/soul. The riot of metaphors in this short chapter demonstrates that the constituent components of ISFE—India, science, science fiction, and the English language—are themselves changing, contested, and escape easy definitions. Further, in a convoluted fashion, he recasts Roger Luckhurst's argument in “The Many Deaths of Science Fiction: A Polemic“ that Anglo-American science fiction is ashamed of its pulp origins and wishes to be legitimised by being accepted in the mainstream literary canon; Luckhurst calls this SF’s death wish. Khan expands Luckhurst’s argument by activating the metaphors of atman and paramatman and Plato’s theory of forms to state that all tangible manifestations of regional, national, and global SF aim to be merged with a higher transcendental conception/spirit of World Literature—essentially all SF, including ISFE, desires to leave its generic identity behind to meet and be validated by global literary standards.

The second section of the book, Materiality, has three chapters. This part outlines his classification of the three orders of Others/alterity that ISFE works with. Grade III, or the Civilizational Other, is an amalgam of India’s religious, political, and national threats outside the border; Grade II, or the Social Other, is the overlap of the internal class and caste structures; and Grade I, or the Gender(ed) Other, is constituted by the concerns raised in the sphere of sex and orientations. The three chapters in this section examine various ISFE texts and how these Others are “(re)interpreted and (re)created” (45).

The third section, Mythology, begins with Khan’s three portrayals of god(s) in ISFE—gods as extraterrestrials (from other planets), gods as socio-political indictments (from other temporal locations), and gods as hyperintelligences (from other technological axes) —and the first three of the four chapters of the section discuss ISFE texts relevant to these depictions.

The five chapters in the fourth section, Technology, deal with the broad areas of emerging technological advancement that occupy the Indian science fictional imagination and their
varied uses in the selected narratives: genetic engineering; cyber threats; chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons; alien hyperintelligences; and global climate change.

The concluding chapter, “ISFE: A New Hope,” ties together the previous three sections, demonstrating that the post-2000 ISFE is conscious of and responding to the networks of power and discourses they are embroiled in. Despite having his transMIT thesis attested, Khan alerts readers against any essentialising qualities of ISFE and admits that many ISFE might not have any immediate political entanglements.

The book’s three main sections progress in an orderly fashion, and their larger pattern of organisation becomes immediately perceptible to the reader. The chapters in these three sections include detailed summaries of the texts being discussed, enabling the readers to follow the argument. Broadly, too, the book is accessible, at times because of and at other times in spite of its easy gliding through SF theoretical terms and frames, Indian lexicon, popular western SF, and math and scientific references. Khan neatly delivers what he promises and additionally gives an overview of an indigenous critical framework for Indian SF, even though his incessant application of “science to SF criticism” (4) can be befuddling. His critical survey of Indian SF and its broad recurring themes is a timely and meaningful addition to the recent flood of the body of works on Indian SF, such as Shweta Khilnani and Ritwick Bhattacharjee’s Science Fiction in India: Parallel Worlds and Postcolonial Paradigms (2022), Urvashi Kuhad’s Science Fiction and Indian Women Writers (2021), Suparno Banerjee’s Indian Science Fiction: Patterns, History and Hybridity (2020), and Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee’s Final Frontiers: Science Fiction and Techno-Science in Non-Aligned India (2020). Khan’s extant corpus of fictional and critical writings blooms with this work and will be a great beginning resource for readers and researchers looking to orient themselves with regard to twenty-first-century ISFE and its thematic engagements.

Works Cited


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