



BOOK REVIEW:  
*Science Fiction and Indian Women Writers:  
Exploring Radical Potentials*

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Indian science fiction has witnessed a resurgence in the 2000s. Science fiction (SF) and overall speculative fiction genres experienced a brief hiatus following the country's independence from its British colonizers in 1947, as "serious," "realist" literature was considered to better advocate for and reflect the new sensibilities of the young republic. SF in late nineteenth-century India was at first imitative of the Anglo-western imports and included many direct translations of those English-language classics into various Indian languages. However, the genre quickly added to and mutated with the rich traditions of indigenous speculative literature. Nonetheless, Indian SF stayed in the periphery of literary canons. It was not until the globalizing forces of the early 2000s that science fiction and fantasy literature began to draw national and international attention anew.

Although it has happened slowly, Indian science fiction has gradually also generated significant academic interest. Analyses of colonial dreams, and postcolonial and post-millennial futures have emerged through numerous research articles and a few book-length publications, including works by Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay (2016, 2019), Suparno Banerjee (2020), and Sami Ahmad Khan (2021). In addition, there are also some unpublished doctoral theses, such as Ajay Singh's (2002) that examine SF writing in India's regional languages. These works have primarily sought to delineate the ways in which Indian writers have negotiated the genre of SF (often in relation to the notion of genre fiction), and they have examined the hybridity that marks SF writing in the Indian context. More recently, Shweta Khilnani and Ritwick

Bhattacharjee (2022) and Emma Dawson Varughese (2025) have furthered academic investigations into the genre's tryst with "Indianness" from its postcolonial and post-millennial sites of production, while Taryne J. Taylor, Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay et.al. (2024), as well as Merve Tabur and Sami Ahmad Khan (2025) in their edited volumes locate Indian SF within broader iterations of speculative fiction emerging from historically connected non-western cultures.

Evidently, scholars of Indian SF have their hands full in theorizing it as a genre of both local and national literary productions as well as situating it as a mode of both national and transnational inquiries of the historically linked Global South. In this regard, Urvashi Kuhad's *Science Fiction and Indian Women Writers: Exploring Radical Potentials* (2022) belongs to the camp of national readings of Indian SF. It posits itself as a new addition to scholarship in Indian SF through its dedicated study of Indian women writers of anglophone science fiction, with the aim of focusing on the feminist positions that their works take within the writing tradition. Unfortunately, the book runs into several factual, conceptual, analytical and methodological challenges that undermine its contributions to the larger academic discourse.

Kuhad selects Begum Rokhaya Sakhawat Hossain, Manjula Padmanabhan, Priya Sarukkai Chabria and Vandana Singh because Hossain is currently considered as the first woman writer of SF in (colonial) India, and because of the canonical position that these writers enjoy within English-language Indian SF. The texts Kuhad selects include Hossain's short story "Sultana's Dream" (1905), Padmanabhan's *Escape* (2015), Chabria's *Generation 14* (2008), and Singh's two novellas, *Distances* (2008) and *Love and Other Monsters* (2007). Kuhad's primary focus is "on the ability of the chosen SF texts to sensitize the readers and inspire in them a radical perspective and an acknowledgement of the need for change" (155). She aims to highlight this "radical potential" of SF and its constituent sub-genres as used by these women writers in imagining "alternate setting to discuss sensitive political, social or ecological issues and give voice to those who are marginalized, such as women, people of colour, transgender or bisexuals" (155).

However, this multitude of focal points suffers from a lack of a clear approach. It is only in the concluding chapter that Kuhad describes her cultural materialist approach to the discussed SF texts, but even there it primarily seems to comprise of situating these works against the authors' spatio-temporal locations, their literary oeuvre, and their activism within and through the education system. However, the close readings presented in the analyses seldom benefit from these locating points, thus neutralizing the potential of the cultural materialist approach to adequately historicize and politicize these literary works. At the same time, the introductory chapter also does not define what the author means by the "radical potential" of SF that the book's title promises to explore. Unfortunately, this results in ambiguity throughout the book on what exactly Kuhad proposes is radical about SF by Indian women, and what kinds of things it has the potential to change. Based on the directions suggested by the book, Kuhad views the genre as an effective medium for these SF writers to critique the current political climate, the social position of women and people with marginalized sexualities, the climate crisis, and the dilemma of advancing technologies. Consequently, she asserts that the selected SF texts

convey the author's intent of "social criticism" aimed to evoke responses in its contemporary reader (157).

Kuhad begins by tracing a history of the origin of SF in England and North America to highlight the contested definitions of "science fiction" and its marked distinction from fantasy as a literary category. This also leads to the popular debate on labelling Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) as the precursor of modern SF. Although this brief history hints at the gender imbalance within the production of SF, it does not discuss it. Kuhad asserts that Indian SF inherited the "hard" and "soft" SF distinction from its colonial roots and continues to use them unchanged. However, existing scholarship on Indian science fiction shows that Indian SF writers have historically challenged these generic definitions and distinctions of western science and science fiction (Chattopadhyay 2016, Banerjee 2020). The genre underwent hybridizations, for example, through its cultural contact with local modes of telling, and through the broad and varied understanding of "science" in India. These reconfigurations remain unaddressed in Kuhad's work.

Even as she ties together the histories of Indian SF with Anglo-American SF via colonialism in this introductory chapter, Kuhad seems to overlook previous research on how Indian SF writers have challenged the genre. This previous research includes, for example, analysis of twentieth-century SF from across Indian languages where, as Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay notes in his essay "On the Mythologerm: Kalpavigyan and the Question of Imperial Science" (2016), the concept of "vigyan" from Indian epistemologies transforms the genre of SF, rather than being informed by western "science," and opens avenues for "discarded 'alternative sciences'" (437) from the mythic and historical pasts. Suparno Banerjee's *Indian Science Fiction: Patterns, History and Hybridity* (2020), further elucidates how such linguistic and epistemological difference to "science fiction" and its genre conventions resists imperial visions of modernity and progress. A further work that would be necessary to include in such definitional discourse is Vandana Singh's "Speculative Manifesto" (2008) where she champions the use of the broader term "speculative fiction" over science fiction because of the engendered bias in western science as well as the primacy of imagination over scientific fact in thinking about alternative realities. Instead of engaging with Singh's own discussion on identifying her work as speculative fiction, Kuhad uses Robert Heinlein's (1941) and David Bowlin's definition of the same term to locate the text as such (113). At the same time, authors like Amitav Ghosh (in his *The Great Derangement*, 2015) blatantly dismiss the genre in entirety, particularly its sub-genre of climate fiction, because of its alleged inability to critically reflect on the climate crisis and the historical and political reasons for it. In this way, Ghosh is in fact reinstating the label of escapist literature associated with genre fictions to SF. Indeed, it is concerning how Kuhad seems to base the defining parameters of the genre solely on the anglophone understanding of the genre, as seen in her categorical inclusion of Darko Suvin, Robert Scholes, Damien Broderick and Samuel Delaney, while excluding Indian scholarship on Indian SF. This gap in the book's research background seems to further stall a critical textual analysis of the fictional works in the subsequent chapters.

The second chapter, "Indian Science Fiction," presents a concise history of SF in India, from the late nineteenth century to the present day. The comprehensive account of SF – in popular print and in visual formats in

different Indian languages across the country – is the strength of this chapter. Based on the presented overview, Kuhad identifies common themes shared by SF in Indian languages, including ecological crisis, developments in technology, science and society, confluence with mythology and spirituality, and social concerns such as gender. She also identifies a few recognizable subgenres such as utopias, dystopias, and alternate histories in Indian SF writing, and she introduces the key institutions and organizations that drive academic and public interest in Indian SF. Although Kuhad briefly points in the direction of the early stages of academic inquiry into Indian SF, several recent key contributors to the field, as mentioned above, remain curiously unacknowledged.

There is also a rather major issue in this chapter in the attempt to track the “origins of SF in India” (24) through the Hindi-language SF of Pandit Ambika Dutt Vyas and Keshav Prasad Singh in 1884 and 1888, especially as earlier research (and Kuhad’s own account of Bengali science fiction) later dates Jagadananda Ray’s short story “Shukra Bhraman” or “Travel to Venus [as being] published in 1879” (31), showing the factual error of this statement. Indeed, previous research indicates that at least three linguistic traditions within India, namely, Bengali, Hindi and Marathi were simultaneously producing SF in colonial India, either in the mentioned languages or by speakers of these languages in English. This is comprehensively discussed by, for example, Suparno Banerjee (2010, 2020) and Hans Harder (2001), along with several prefaces to anthologies of translated SF, such as Shiv Gopal Mishra’s prelude to an anthology of Hindi science writings in fiction (2002) and Bal Phondke’s preface to the anthology of Indian SF in English translation, *It Happened Tomorrow* (1993). Considering the complex influence and multiple contacts that western literature, especially SF, had with India’s different linguistic circles, it seems rather problematic to attribute primacy to any single linguistic tradition.

The third chapter, “Contemporary Indian science fiction writers and their works,” utilizes a biographical method to underline the socio-political context of each of the writers and the resulting “literary, political and educational activism” that shapes their extrapolation of women and queer identities in fictional futures. Even though this helps to contextualize the proposed radical potential of the selected texts by responding to the current state of women and queer identities in the country, the analysis suffers from its cursory engagement with relevant theories – (Indian) feminisms, gender, ecocriticism, and posthumanism. The strongest analysis in the chapter is on Hossain’s short story where Kuhad effectively discusses the gender politics that were at work in colonial India and sidelined the education of women, specifically Muslim women, at the time. In this analysis, Kuhad insightfully combines discussion on Hossain’s personal rebellion with the use of the dream narrative as a way to access an analysis of how the work builds a techno-scientific, feminist utopia with an inversed society, which in turn works to comment on the social and political processes that suppress Indian (Muslim) women. The postcolonial and post-millennial contexts in which Padmanabhan, Chabria and Singh’s works, discussed in this chapter, exist, is underexplored and it has potential to mark poignant shifts in women’s SF writing. However, because Kuhad’s analysis does not engage with relevant previous research on Indian SF, this analysis unfortunately lacks depth in exploring the mythopoeisis

and mythologem evident especially in the works of Priya S. Chabria and Vandana Singh.

The fourth and fifth chapters read as outliers due to their linguistic approach to analyzing the worldbuilding in the selected texts. Kuhad's use of conjunction and its grammatical functions to indicate connections and disjunctions does not seem an appropriate method for analyzing "the literary quality of the text" in a way that would "link the imaginary world of SF with the living world" (131). The textual evidence that Kuhad mines from the texts to present semantic analysis (of words, phrases, idioms, sentences, and so on) and narratological analysis (of literary devices, themes, characters and plot structures) to argue for the centrality of conjunctions and disjunctions in science fictionalization of contemporary issues of gender, is unfortunately not very convincing. These discussions are followed by a concluding chapter where she encapsulates the hypothesis of reading Indian SF as radical literature and viewing the selected texts to "possess the ability to initiate a movement towards increased responsibility, especially amongst the younger generation, so as to analyze future changes from a critical perspective" (157). It is only in this final chapter that Kuhad broadly elaborates on her intention to show the genre as a subversive medium that Indian women SF writers use to comment and warn their audience on the precarity of Indian women and queer identities in technodystopian and ecologically compromised futures.

Because of its issues in terms of current research and the substantially limited use of cultural materialist, feminist, ecocritical, posthumanist and other critical lenses in the textual analysis of the selected SF works, Kuhad's book unfortunately does not significantly qualify the proposed "radical potential" of SF or explain how it "instills in the reader the ideas for change and the ways in which they can bring about the extreme change which is necessary to change or model the existing conditions" (155). While Kuhad's book does not seem to achieve all of the aims it set out to achieve, it does fulfill the aim to serve as a general introduction to Indian science fiction and to canonical women SF writers and their works for those who are at their early stages of exploring the genre's presence in the subcontinent (156).

*Biography:* Anna Juhi John is a doctoral scholar in the Department of English Studies, Central University of Gujarat. Her research focuses on South Asian science fiction written in, and translated into English, particularly in the twenty-first century. Her ongoing research investigates posthuman themes in anglophone South Asian science fiction as they intersect with environmental humanities, gender and sexuality studies and dystopian studies. She has previously published a book review in the *South Asian Review*.

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