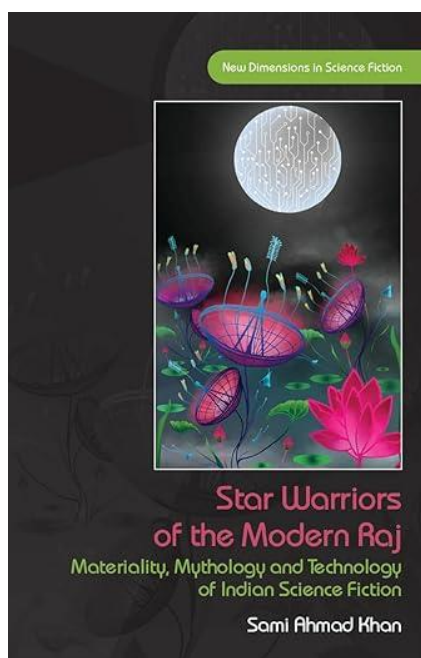




Book Review

Sami Ahmad Khan's *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj: Materiality, Mythology and Technology of Indian Science Fiction*



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Sami Ahmad Khan's *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj: Materiality, Mythology and Technology of Indian Science Fiction* sets the tone of playful yet incisive humour at the outset, as the writer recounts his takeaway from having to deal with his proposed area, which has lately accrued attention for reasons which are not always the 'right' ones. The contemporary trend of 'revisiting' the inexhaustible storehouse of foundational myths and stories that inform the great Indian epics, as well as a diversity of texts with theological and allegorical messages, can be a welcome addition to scholarship, but complications begin when such fantasies are deliberately invested with a sort of non-existent scientific legitimacy. While aware of this incipient ethno-academic phenomenon, Khan has carefully steered clear of launching a more controversial critique that might have mutated into a political one. Each chapter or 'part' of this book is further subdivided into sections, with intelligently chosen titles offering a thematic overview of the contents.

'Part 1' is focused on the cultural malleability of the genre of SF and the way the rubric 'Indian SF' cannot be justifiably construed as simply modelled upon its Western counterpart. Khan argues that much like the methodological field of science itself, SF needs to be understood as tethered to a particular cultural fold as well, as the 'perception' concerning SF keeps changing. The idea that SF cannot be pinned down to a sort of fixed, nomothetic set of generic parameters is not new, though. This genre, along with its astounding variations, has been described as particularly difficult to pin down generically, as it revels in a sort of hybrid exchanges and articulations that play themselves out through "...clusters of meaning and yet-unplayed actions, with emotional reverberations which have little connection with the same physical objects represented..." (Sobchack 4).

Khan alludes to a good many critics and SF writers as he attempts an inclusive and comprehensive *definition* of this genre, moves on to diverse 'modifications' of the genre like speculative fiction and science fantasy, and argues that for a country like India, with its conscious engagement with a mythic past which makes it very tricky to separate historical fact from fantasy, SF is "even more undefinable" (15). As the chapter progresses, Khan delves deeper into the evolutionary specifics of the extremely broad rubric of 'Indian SF' and the way this genre, in India in particular, is rendered 'native' through an act of conflation that projects the 'golden past' as fantastic and yet probable, since it represented a sort of sufficiently advanced science which appears indistinguishable from magic. While Khan acknowledges his debt to Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay's conceptualisations on 'mythologerm' or "myth as a special form of history within which national science and its origins may be located" (Chattopadhyay 106), he links this typical act of valorisation with the "gestalten whole" (114) of an inclusive, comprehensive Indianness. Khan moves on to explore the way the deep-seated prejudices involved in the *othering* of sites that have traditionally served as the source of the uncanny and the uncomfortable have been incorporated within the overarching corpus of the ISFE (Indian Science Fiction in English). Thus, he seeks to arrive at a particular, *definable* structure of ISFE in which, notwithstanding the customary semantics of the established generic specifics of an SF, the *syntax* is 'Indianized' through a diversity of tropes that are metaphysical and subjective (27). What Khan manages to achieve in this chapter is a very convenient register of all significant critical inroads into what *informs* the insanely assorted spectrum of the ISFE as a distinct corpus. What needs to be negotiated, he maintains, is a conceptual *trialectic* of mythology, technology and materiality (40) in order to formulate a functional notion of how ISFE has manifested itself across such an extensive, diverse spectrum.

'Part 2' goes deeper into the issue of 'Indianness' and the multiplicity of ways it has made use of the established tropes of SF, including the process of *othering*, which includes the blatantly overworked idea of the undead. Khan assumes an overtly political stance as he argues that the emerging menace of historical revisionism and ethno-cultural revivalism are feeding an extreme, belligerent form of right-wing politics in India. Such a revivalist-turned-orthodox project professes ideological opposition to a sort of insipid homogenisation which abhors difference but is simultaneously mutated into that which it loathes, and this strange dyad is represented through a staple SF motif: zombification. Khan gives special attention to Islam and its projection as a sort of 'civilizational other', especially as envisioned and projected through the perspective of SF, commonly construed as a *westernized* genre. We are reminded of Youssef Choueiri, who defined radical Islam, the chief site of unease for the Western consumer or, in this case, reader, as a "politico-cultural movement that postulates a qualitative contradiction between Western civilisation and the religion of Islam" (qtd. in Bonnett 150). Entrenched fears and established sites of discomfort are accommodated and presented as staple SF 'monsters' (zombies and aliens and ultra-religious sects that seek to usher in a rightist dystopia), which, in the Indian context, has overt ethno-political associations that have accrued growing, not to say menacing relevance. The chapter continues to build up on the customary theoretical framework(s) of SF as a literary genre and attempts thematic analyses of various processes of *othering* across a number of contemporary ISFE texts and structures of envisioning a veritable dystopia through 'monsterisation' of different sorts that maintain relevance in the Indian context (including Manik Dhar's *Zombiestan*, the main plotline of which was later adapted into a Bangla movie first of its kind- "*Zombiesthaan*").

'Part 3' seeks to trace the role of traditional belief systems and structures of mythology that are almost always there as a sort of ideational baggage when the 'hard sciences' and technological strides emanating from them are considered. Myth and its philosophical support structure, as it were, serve as an alternative knowledge system which, Khan maintains as he echoes the critical stance of scholars like Baldev Raj Nayar, functions as a kind of counterweight against the technical knowledge of drab scientism, *transplanted* from the west. The massive extensiveness of the Indian mythical systems is studded with a mind-bogglingly diverse and abundant number of stories, and they have afforded the millennial ISFE writers a wonderful opportunity of weaving yarns. They have adroitly adopted the established SF tropes like visiting-aliens-as-gods or depictions of WMD in the great epics as nuclear weapons and made use of such convenient patterns to make a science-fictional sense of present crises like, for instance, a brand new, cutting-edge fighter jet going missing. But the imaginative reach of ISFE hasn't restricted itself within the reimagining of 'divine' exploits in terms of interplanetary or interdimensional power-struggles, there are texts like "*Sita's Descent*" (by Indrapramit Das) and Pervin Saket's "*Test of Fire*" that have sought to address the thorny issues of the nature of patriarchy in India along with its socio-domestic manifestations from within the operational fold of an SF. ISFE, Khan argues, *dilutes* the borderline between the faith-based interpretation of the noumena and empirically-defined processing as it offers fictional strategies that possess the potential of transcending such fundamental binaries.

'Part 4' traces the way technology is represented in SF in general and ISFE in particular, as it investigates into specific sites of *novum* (points of technological shift that characterize the difference between the readers' reality and the textual reality that customarily serve as staple SF

tropes as well. Stock SF elements of technological disaster like global engineering, climate-manipulation techniques, gene-splicing and recombinant DNA and genetic engineering, ecological engineering and eco-catastrophes used as narratological devices are referred to as 'novum'-s, to employ the terminology coined by Darko Suvin (*Metamorphoses* 63-84) and preferred by Khan. He has effectively meshed these motifs with neo-colonial and neoliberal aggression and structures of normative capital, as ISFE has time and again proved itself to be mature enough to deal with issues of the contorted psyche and fractured consciousness that are constantly in a state of trauma in and through which humans are *already* turning into non-humans, with selves reduced to abstractions (O'Connell, 286). Khan launches a stringent critique of 'hypercapitalism' (173) and the ways it generates a prevalent sense of national crisis involving WMDs of nuclear and biological nature and effectively turns such synthetic predicaments into global ones. As the growing viewership and critical acclaim for a new generation of Indian web series amply demonstrate, this 'model' has been more than satisfying for the contemporary youth who seek a sleek plotline that promises both thrill and tremendously high stakes.

'Part 5' also serves as the conclusion and here refers to what he considers as the 'subjunctive' nature of ISFE (206) and maintains that the syncretic nature of ISFE content makes it possible to view science along with its ontological parameters as a *process which* is contingent upon factors that are not necessarily unrelated to influences like the individual's preferred mode of *reading* one's own mythological past or ethnic accompaniments. Khan has tried to connect this ontological issue with the production and distribution of ISFE in India and its 'niche' domestic market, which is, for better or worse, persuading this genre to be more experimental with the enormous and yet-to-be-adequately-tapped network of native mythology and fantasy-fictions.

Star Warriors is going to be a significant addition to the constantly expanding corpus of investigative and critical forays into the increasing number of science fiction and science fantasies being attempted in India. This study has endeavoured to arrest points of thematic congruity across a diversity of texts and has been quite ambitious in underlining narratorial preoccupations that demonstrate how a text which is identified as science fiction can be as ethno-politically invested and committed as any other 'mainstream' literary genre.

All references to the book under review are from:

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