Must there be Apocalypse? An Analysis of South Asian Speculative Fiction

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Apocalypse signifies a revelation, an unveiling of truth and, in everyday language, also signifies the end times. The two significations came about because in the New Testament book of Revelations, John received a revelation about the end of time and the victory of good and evil. Apocalypse, then, has a Christian connotation. This is all well-known. The end of time may be utopic (the thousand-year-long rule of the saints in Christian millenarian eschatology, for example) or dystopic (surely a terrible world from the point of view of those who are seen as sinners in that dispensation). Which of these it is thus depends on one's point of view. The word utopia, to remind ourselves, was a Greek neologism coined by Thomas More in 1516; the word dystopia, meanwhile, was pioneeringly used by John Stuart Mill in a speech before the House of Commons on 12 March 1868, attacking the Conservative government on land-ownership and religious equality in Ireland (Trahair 110). Whether Ireland was a colony of England remains a controversial issue, with many scholars today, including the present writer, holding the view that Ireland did function partly as an English colony (Kenny 1–25).My article focuses on a region, South Asia, which unquestionably *was* a colony of Great Britain since the late eighteenth century until 1947. South Asia is a highly hybrid space, with histories of millennia of cultural contact with multiple civilisations, and a record of being ruled by many colonizers, from the medieval and Renaissance Muslim Mughal rulers to the British rulers. South Asia today has eight countries (including India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), and in this article I speak of three writers who cannot be confined within the limits of one single South Asian nation. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain lived in what would be present-day India (in the metropolis of Kolkata) as well

as in present-day Bangladesh (in her natal province of Rangpur). Amitav Ghosh, though Indian, grew up in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and India, lives in the USA, and has family histories that affiliate him to present-day Bangladesh and Burma. Vandana Singh lives in the USA, though of Indian origin. Hybridity, in the foundational sense of a mixing of different racial, cultural, and national categories, is thus characteristic of these writers.

In 'Sultana's Dream,' Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932) powerfully invents a female-ruled utopian realm that in fact cunningly escapes apocalyptic destruction (Bagchi, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*). Rather than apocalypse, fairy-tale and constructive parable are the revelatory modes that Hossain uses in her writing. In recent times, the acclaimed novelist Amitav Ghosh (1956–) has, in *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), reinflected the notion of apocalyptic revelations, and twisted it cleverly. In a cunning double-take centred round Ronald Ross, who experimented on colonial subjects in quest of the malaria bug, Ghosh posits a lower-caste man, Lakhaan, and a woman, Mangala: two indigenous subjects being exploited by the rational-instrumental power of modern, colonial science. In the end, however, they use the scientist to jumpstart their own continuing attempts to transcend mortality and mutate into new figures through history. Finally, the contemporary Boston-based writer Vandana Singh (date of birth unknown), expresses her powerful pacifism and environmental activism through her short stories, blog, children's fiction, and other, often digitally disseminated writing. In her short stories, her characters play and are played with by non-linearities of space and time. Singh is, however, most famous for her delightful Younguncle series of children's books, where an unruly, pacifist, feminist, creatively scientific male relative becomes the centre of a new utopia for a band of children.

What common characteristics are shared by these writers, born in South Asia, in their speculative fictions? Is apocalypse important in such fiction? I argue that these fictions play with utopia and dystopia as modes, and that they reconfigure and reinvent notions of conventional Western or Eurocentric temporality, crisis, ends of times, and apocalypse. Such reconfigurations, I further argue, have much to do with the historic-cultural time warps to be found in colonial and postcolonial South Asia. By historic-cultural time warps, I refer to the multiple ways in which many temporalities live there in mutual coexistence, sometimes harmoniously, and sometimes not (Patel 48). This article contends, then, that an acute awareness of multiple temporalities mark South Asian utopian writing, and that while crisis and coping with crisis are powerful

themes in such writing, we do not find apocalypse in the conventional sense of doomsday revelations at the end of time.

Utopia is a mode and a resonance in human thought and imagination. (Bagchi, *The Politics of the (Im)possible* 2, 7). The concept of utopia has been a marker of modernity: in times of felt and experienced historical change and transition to a 'new' age from an 'old' one, humanity imagines utopian possible worlds (Lowe 11). These tend to be poised between hope and fear, reality and imagination, aspiration and irony. It is widely accepted in the scholarly community today that utopia and dystopia can be translated across cultures and periods. Dutton has recently argued that "based on the evidence available to us regarding the diverse belief systems and worldviews, cultural manifestations and socio-political movements that demonstrate fundamentally utopian visions, it seems that the desire for a better way of being in the world is indeed a universal concept" (Dutton 250).

In the Hindu mythology and worldview, the cosmos goes through four recurring cycles, or 'yugas': *Satya Yuga, Treta Yuga, Dvapara Yuga, and Kaliyuga*, corresponding very roughly to the Golden, Silver, Bronze, and Iron Ages to be found in Greco-Roman mythology. South Asian fiction in the colonial period (from the mid nineteenth century onwards in particular) showed much awareness and anxiety about the Kaliyuga:

> Kaliyuga is the fourth and most corrupt age of Hindu cosmology and became a prolific, occasionally powerful, metaphor, which the emerging literati deployed to condemn the processes of modernization wrought by colonialism (...) Kaliyuga was a paradigmatic dystopia, (...) a recurrent and powerful motif for voicing high-caste male anxieties. Coming after the Mahabharata War,[1] Kaliyuga signaled oppressive rulers, corrupt and impure Brahmins, powerful Shudras [lower castes], girls choosing their own partners, disobedient wives having intercourse with menials, slaves, and even animals. The reversal of social order—caste and gender, with women asserting themselves and Brahminism[2] growing weaker—was the hallmark of this phase in the mythical cycle of time. From this range, nineteenth-century writers made their own selection, focusing on the New Women, the emerging power of the Shudras, modern/Western corruption, the 'modern' craze for money, and, most importantly, the breakdown of the marriage system leading to sexual anarchy. (Sen 123–125)

The noted cultural historian Sumit Sarkar has powerfully argued how the emerging (largely, though not entirely, upper-caste) middle classes in

colonial, nineteenth-century Bengal (straddling present-day Bangladesh and India) felt themselves to be in the chains of 'chakri' (waged work or service). Chained to a newer, linear, more rigid modern ('Western') temporality, they also saw themselves as inserted in this dark 'Kaliyuga', where lower castes and women were seen as becoming dominant. Many such members of the middle classes found redemption in newer patterns of religious devotion or *bhakti*, exemplified by the figure of Ramakrishna in Bengal; a rural, upper-caste, folksy man who emerged as a major guru of the middle classes. Such redemptive figures offered promises of another, cyclical transition from Kaliyuga to a far more utopic Satya Yuga (Sarkar 1565).

1. The Mahabharata War: At the heart of the *Mahabharata*, a major Indian epic poem originally written in Sanskrit, the Mahabharata is a war between two royal clans, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, who are cousins.
2. Brahminism: in the orthodox religious and social system associated with Hinduism, there are four castes. Among these, the highest in the hierarchy are the Brahmins, who enjoy significantly better privileges than the other three. Brahminism is thus also an ideology of upper-caste supremacy.

Parables and Fables: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

What happens, however, when a feisty colonial, Muslim woman plays with possible worlds, utopias, the crisis of colonialism, and ways of averting crisis? Positing a dual crisis posed by colonialism and patriarchy, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain speaks of pacific, educative, female-ruled worlds, and creates fairytale-like depictions of the plight of the nation (bedevilled by colonialism and patriarchy). Even if there is social, military or political crisis in the background, Hossain's fables plead for a gradualist, meliorist future. Processual, prolonged change is valorized instead of jagged, piercing revelatory moments.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was an educator, creative writer, essayist, and feminist. A pioneer in girls' and women's education in South Asia, she founded a school for girls in Kolkata, in 1911, which exists till today. She was an extraordinary fabulist and polemicist: her fable 'Sultana's

Dream,' (1905) written in English, is a masterpiece of utopian feminist writing, as is her Bengali novella *Padmarag* (1924). The latter envisages a utopian community of reformist women set in Kolkata in Hossain's time. In her Bengali-language narrative 'Jnanaphala ,' which would translate into 'The Fruit of Knowledge,' (1922) (Hossain 175–82), Hossain combined critiques of colonialism and patriarchy. Hossain showed in 'The Fruit of Knowledge' that British colonialism perpetuated itself by using lies (which disguised as moral welfarism the fact that imperialism deindustrialised India), and that it offered few resources for ameliorating education or health or the welfare of Indians. In these narratives, Hossain made women's education the cornerstone of freedom for India, and posited causal links between women's education, women's agency, and political freedom.

In 'The Fruit of Knowledge,' Hossain regards the eating of the fruit of knowledge in the garden of Eden, through the agency of Eve, in a positive light: Hossain thus reworks, from a colonial South Asian perspective, a 'fortunate Fall' political paradigm. In Hossain's parable, one fruit from the Tree of Knowledge falls onto the earth, and a tree is born from it, though human beings are by and large ignorant of the effects of this fruit. Inhabitants of a country called Paristan or Land of Fairies (allegory for Britain and other colonizing countries) get to drink the juice of some of these fruits and gain knowledge. Becoming imperialist traders, they exploit the great wealth of Kanakadvipa, the Island of Gold (allegory for India and other colonized countries), which overflows with food crops, but whose inhabitants live in a state of innocence. Eventually recognising that their country is being drained of its wealth through unequal commerce with Paristan, some of the people of Kanakadvipa get to taste the juice of the Fruit of Knowledge. They then go in search of the original tree that bore the Fruit of Knowledge. To do this, they have to withstand opposition from the inhabitants of Paristan, an allegory of the opposition of imperialists to the colonized gaining emancipatory knowledge. After a long search, the search party finds the tree—it is withered and near-dead, and cannot be made to revive, despite much effort. In a dream, a sage appears to the Kanakadvipa explorers, and tells them that if they want to revive the tree of knowledge, they need to make sure that women both nurture and get the fruits of the tree of knowledge.

With its underlying political message, 'The Fruit of Knowledge' is a parable. It was written at a time when the Non-Cooperation movement led by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was sweeping India. Hossain's

narrative is part of that political mood and moment. The parable is about female (and male) civic participation in a colonial country where the inhabitants have no citizenship rights. Crisis, it is proposed in the text, is to be confronted and dealt with, not by proposing doomsday scenarios, but by agency and educative work, in which women and men take equal leads.

An earlier work by Hossain, 'Srishtitattva,' which would translate into 'The Story of Creation,' 1920 (Hossain 109–111) also shows Hossain's daring, playful wit and humour. In this work she represents contemporary Bengali women from multiple religions playing with Hindu creation myths, going into humorous dialogue with gods who come to visit them, and proposing revisionist feminist rewritings of established myths about the creation of man and woman. This essay complements an earlier essay by Hossain, 'Narisrishti,' translatable as 'The Creation of Woman,' (1919) (Hossain 135–139). In the earlier essay, the creator had stated that he combined all kinds of paradoxical qualities in creating woman. This earlier essay, Hossain states, is a free translation of a piece she read in English, itself translated from Sanskrit: 'A Hindu Legend of the Creation of Woman.' In that English version, the story goes as follows:

> At the beginning of time, Twashtri—the Vulcan of the Hindu mythology—created the world. But when he wished to create a woman he found that he had employed all his materials in the creation of man. There did not remain one solid element. Then Twashtri, perplexed, fell into a profound meditation. He roused himself to do as follows. He took the roundness of the moon, the undulations of the serpent, the entwinement of climbing plants, the trembling of the grass, the slenderness of the rose-vine, and the velvet of the flower, the lightness of the leaf and the glance of the fawn, the gayety of the sun's rays and tears of the mist, the inconstancy of the wind and the timidity of the hare, the vanity of the peacock and the softness of the down on the throat of the swallow, the hardness of the diamond, the sweet flavor of honey and the cruelty of the tiger, the warmth of fire, the chill of snow, the chatter of the jay, and the cooing of the turtle dove. He united all this and formed a woman. Then he made a present of her to man. Eight days later the man came to Twashtri and said:
> "My lord, the creature you gave me poisons my existence. She chatters without rest, she takes all my time, she laments for nothing at all, and is always ill." And Twashtri received the woman again.
> But eight days later the man came again to the god and said: "My lord, my life is very solitary since I returned this creature. I remember she danced

> before me, singing. I recall how she glanced at me from the corner of her eye, that she played with me, clung to me."And Twashtri returned the woman to him. Three days only passed and Twashtri saw the man coming to him again. "My lord," said he, "I do not understand exactly how, but I am sure that the woman causes me more annoyance than pleasure. I beg of you to relieve me of her."
> But Twashtri cried: "Go your way and do your best." And the man cried : "I cannot live with her!" " Neither can you live without her," replied Twashtri.
> And the man was sorrowful, murmuring: "Woe is me, I can neither live with or without her." (*A Hindu Legend of the Creation of Woman*)

Hossain undoubtedly transcreated this story in her Bengali version, adding, for example, key elements: her list includes 33 elements in all, including, humorously and bitingly, the sourness of tamarind, the bitterness of quinine, the fiery taste of chilies, the absentmindedness of philosophers, the proneness to error of politicians, and the liquidity of water: a more complex and localized list, with the original story undergoing fascinating processes of re-translation, and the emergent female identity that is created also seen in far more varied, colourful light.

In Hossain's later essay, 'The Story of Creation', we get a fascinating picture of women from various religions sitting together in conviviality in Hossain's contemporary time in Bengal. Twashtri or Tvashtri or Tvastri or Tvasti (all four are transcriptions of the Sanskrit word, with Hossain using the last variant) appears before the women. (In Vedic religion, Tvastri is the 'heavenly builder,' the maker of divine implements. The word means 'carpenter' and 'chariot maker.' He is a Proto-Indo-Iranian divinity. Tvasti, whom we see as a tired, elderly man who is trying to get the ladies to take notes to record his story, sees a need for revising the original story of creation:

> We saw that poor Lord Tvasti was overwhelmed by sleep. At times he was speaking in a low voice while yawning, with eyelids nearly closed; at yet other times he was rubbing his eyes and speaking in a loud voice, and was testing whether Bina had written things down correctly. If there were mistakes, he was making her cross them out and write again. It was as if he was trying to prove by the elaborateness of his words that he was not assailed by sleep. At one point he roared and said:
> "Do you know, my children, when I was creating woman I had no objects in

> hand: I had to collect the smell of one substance, the taste of one, and the vapour of one. But during the creation of man I did not have to worry at all. I had many objects in my treasury—I took what came to me when I stretched out my hand. Such as, when I was creating teeth, I took the whole poison-fang of the snake; to prepare hands, feet, nails, etc. I took the whole claw of the tiger; at the time of filling the brain cells I used the whole brain of the donkey. ['Cells' in English in the original.—Translator] At the time of the creation of woman, I took only the heat of fire. In the case of men I took a piece of burning coal. Child! Write this."
> Bina wrote, 'Burning coal.'
> Tvasti: "Children! Listen attentively, in the case of women I took only the cold of snow, while in the case of men I used pieces of ice, and even the whole Kanchenjungha peak. Have you written this, Bina?" (my unpublished translation of 'Srishtitattva' ['The Story of Creation'])

This is clearly polemical feminism, and writing as a Muslim woman, Hossain makes a Hindu god posit that revisionist view. Again, we have no doomsday scenarios, though we have refreshingly humorous and daring playfulness as regards religious myths. Hossain makes us inhabit mythical as well as realistic temporalities, mingles gods and women, and creates fables and allegories that dare to posit how female agency can cope with and ameliorate the crises created by colonialism, imperialism, and patriarchy.

Mutant Narratives: Amitav Ghosh

Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* won the prestigious Arthur C. Clarke Science Fiction Award in 1997. The novel combines speculative fiction about science, specifically Western medical science, with ghost stories and tales of immortality. It posits the agency of the lower-caste man, Lakhaan, and a woman, Mangala. Bishnupriya Ghosh offers a superb summary of the spectral windings and other intricate, complex movements in Amitav Ghosh's novel:

> It is in this novel that Ghosh most elaborately deploys the tropology of the specter through his ethical spectrology (ghosting) and epistemological excavation (grafting), twin processes that can be considered, I shall argue, key postcolonial imperatives. Haunting is central to the text's interrogation of a colonial truth: Ronald Ross's discovery of the cure for malaria. Versed in medical journalism, Ghosh embarks on an arduous explanation of

> chromosomes and their functions. At full speed in this breakneck romp through medical discoveries, folk rituals, murders, hallucinations, transmigrating souls, and scary panoptical computers owned by futuristic megacorporations, we encounter a syphilitic homeless woman, Mangala, an untrained genius who, in pursuit of the little-known scientific discovery that the malaria bug could be used to regenerate decaying brain tissue in the last stages of syphilis, stumbles upon a DNA conglomerate that she cannot name: the 'calcutta chromosome.' A chromosome only by analogy, this genetic bundle, we are told with grave objectivity, would amount to a 'biological correlate' to the 'human soul' (206). Residing only in non-regenerative human tissue (the brain), the 'chromosome' survives only through incessant mutations, recombining the traits designating the uniqueness of each individual. But the ability to cut and splice DNA is precisely one of the pernicious features of the malaria bug, as Mangala accidentally discovers; and in the process of cutting and splicing human DNA, the bug can actually digest (and thus retain) this otherwise untransmissible genetic blueprint. An infected person's brain can thus be rewired to fit an original mold. Material souls, in this novel, migrate not through but by the transmission of disease. Hence the scientific 'discovery' in this novel is the truth about transmigratory souls (Mangala's practice of corporeal immortality), a ghost story foisted upon the reader of a medical thriller. (Bishnupriya Ghosh 198)

Science and the supernatural, then, come together in this riveting tale, with the malaria bug offering the gendered and lower-caste subalterns opportunities to find immortality. Though there are mutations and temporal crises in the novel, there is always a future, even an immortal one, to which the intricate turns of the narrative gesture. Suchitra Mathur argues enthusiastically that Amitav Ghosh's narrative represents a coming-of-age in our contemporary postmodern, posthuman, and postcyborg world:

> The novel, thus, does map out the 'postcolonial new human' (...) this new human combines past, present and future, male and female, goddess, human and machine, first and third world in a single hybrid identity (...) Antar, the sole survivor of a malaria epidemic in a small Egyptian hamlet who now lives a marginal existence as an immigrant worker in a western metropolis, is, at the end of the novel, poised to become this 'postcolonial new human.' Supported by empowering voices that have been silenced by

> the refusal (or inability) of the dominant scientific regime to listen to them, Antar is ready to cross over into the third space, into a community that transcends space and time and promises the bliss of ultimate homecoming. (Mathur 137)

In Ghosh's work, the notion of revelation and crisis key to Western ideas of apocalypse are cunningly twisted: in the secret cult at the heart of *The Calcutta Chromosome*, the subaltern, the woman, and the colonial subject fuse religion and science and try to script narratives in which there are a whole series of mutations, which enable them to cross over into other human forms. Antar realizes that Mangala and Lakhaan are indeed trying to 'reveal' a story and an experiment in which he and others are participants, a story which must have a particular ending and a particular mutation so that the cult members keep on crossing over into future temporalities and indeed into continuous immortality.

> Someone's trying to get us to make some connections; they're trying to tell us something; something thay don't want to put together themselves, so that when we get to the end we'll have a whole new story. (Ghosh 216–217)

> Let me tell you how this works: they have to be very careful to pick the right time to turn the last page. See, for them, writing 'The End' to this story is the way they hope to trigger the quantum leap into the next. But for that to happen two things have to coincide precisely: the end credits have to come up at exactly the same instant that the story is revealed to whoever they're keeping it for. (Ghosh 219)

The resistant, subaltern, gendered subjects thus play with science, religion, and narrativity, in which there are recurring series of apocalyptic moments and mutations.

Paradigm Shifts and Decolonizing the Mind: Vandana Singh

Vandana Singh was born and brought up in New Delhi. She teaches and researches physics, lives in Boston, and writes science fiction and fantasy. Her most acclaimed books to date are two novels for children, *Younguncle Comes to Town*, and *Younguncle in the Himalayas*. Both were first published in India, under the joint imprint of the feminist publisher Zubaan Books and Puffin/Penguin India. Ursula le Guin, one of the foremost and most innovative writers of utopian and dystopian fiction and

one of Singh's favourite authors, provided a cover blurb. Le Guin, I would argue, sees utopia in Younguncle's 'teacup full of rain':

> Vandana Singh is a most promising and original young writer (...) From the moment Younguncle appears with his teacup full of rain, I was enchanted. And as long as I could follow him through his marvelous world to meet (...) all the other extraordinary ordinary people there, I was perfectly happy. I think anyone who reads this book will be perfectly happy too.—Ursula K. Le Guin, National Book Award-winning author (Singh, "Younguncle US")

Younguncle is a zany, affectionate, pacifist, scientifically-minded man who enchants his three nephews and nieces. Landlords, patriarchal males, corporate corruption: these are some of the targets in the stories, each of which is steeped in humour and irreverence. This world is situated in contemporary India, and as in Hossain's writing, there is a determined sense that imaginative, feisty individuals can exercise agency in trying to turn things round in combatting forces such as patriarchy—crisis hovers, but is usually stopped by Singh's band of irreverent vigilantes. Again, we have no doomsday, end of time scenario.

Singh has also published a collection of short stories entitled *The Woman Who Thought She Was A Planet and Other Stories*. Suparno Bannerjee writes about some of these stories thus:

> One major theme in recent Anglophone Indian science fiction is the specter of an alienated postcolonial subject caught in the flux of historical eddies. Such subjects are torn by the forces of a rapid industrial progress, caught in the lure of immigrating to the 'first world' and by the traps of traditional Indian values, resulting in severe anxiety and multilevel alienation. Vandana Singh uses science fictional strategies to make the reader confront these estrangements from a different perspective that is less constrained than realistic narrative. Singh's narratives also seek alternatives to such alienated existences through radical estrangements of normal space and time, probably suggesting that only a radical shift in social consciousness can engender a hope for dis-alienation of these marginalized subjects. (Bannerjee 283)

Multiple temporalities, time travel, metamorphoses from human into planet—dizzying movements and displacements are indeed to be found

in Singh's short stories. For example, in the title story of the collection under discussion, 'The Woman Who Thought She Was A Planet', Ramnath Mishra, a retired, conventional man finds one day that Kamala, his equally conventional wife, has self-declaredly turned into a planet. Many traits in her character change: she now has a deeper, more authoritative voice, addresses her husband by his first name in contrast to the usual practice of the couple, and speaks to him about the joy of being a nurturing substrate and environment for new lives (the inhabitants of the planet that she now is). She floats up into the atmosphere one day. This is her liberation. To his utter horror, at the very end of the story, Ramnath too gets colonized by insect-like inhabitants who climb into his body. For the woman, then, planethood, represented in a highly defamiliarizing way, offers a route out. This is a reinvention of apocalypse from the perspective of the female postcolonial author of speculative fiction, in which, indeed, unusual, world-shifting and self-shifting changes of state are posited as alternatives to an alienated reality.

Singh is concerned about the environment and is an environmental activist. She links her early, formative experience of environmental activism in the Himalayas in India, in the Chipko movement, with the imperative that she, like so many postcolonial writers, feels to decolonize one's mind:

> Continuing on the theme of paradigm shifts—there are, of course, those that occur as a result of particular experiences by particular people. Among the most significant ones I've experienced occurred when I was a 17-year-old fresh out of high school. In that dizzying period of freedom between the end of high school and the beginning of college, I went to the Himalayas on a trek. I was part of a recently formed group called Kalpavriksh, a loose-knit, unstructured collection of students interested in the environment (later to become one of India's major environment groups (...) The lot of us, mostly New Delhi-based teenagers and a few college students in their twenties, took off that summer to study the Chipko movement. This is one of the most famous grassroots environmental movements in the world. Illiterate village women are its backbone—it is a non-violent movement that has no single leader. For the most part it is an attempt by the local people to save their remaining forests from the depredations of timber-hungry industries and the government, but it has also evolved into a movement for social change. Villagers in the Himalayas depend on the forest for survival, so to them this struggle is not about an abstract philosophical or sentimental

> idea. The word Chipko means 'to stick to' in Hindi, and in fact the desperate tactic of the activists has been to put their arms around the trees and stand between them and the man with the axe (...) Decolonizing the mind (...) involves approaching your own marginalized cultural paradigms as well as those of the dominant establishment with the same curiosity, appreciation, skepticism, interest, engagement and reserve (...) My own half-formed thoughts on the decolonization of the mind were first birthed in that high Himalayan valley. Realizing the implications is the work of a lifetime. This has taken my family and me in various unusual directions and kept us in an interesting place at the edge of mainstream culture (whether here or in India) (...) The edge of the river has turned out to be a fascinating place: here are strange eddies and flow patterns, and unexpected topographies that make it a far more interesting place than the middle of the stream. It is also a nice place from which to write speculative fiction. (Singh, "The Decolonization of the Mind")

Singh thus revels in strange eddies and flow patterns at the edge of a metaphorical river and in the unexpected topographies of non-mainstream speculative fiction. The revelations that she finds and offers to readers do not valorize doomsday, end-of-time scenarios, but unusual, unexpected patterns of fictional agency exercised, in her fiction, by extraordinarily ordinary men, women, and children. Apocalypse is averted here as in the work of the other South Asian writers I have analysed in this article. All three exercise "curiosity, appreciation, skepticism, interest, engagement and reserve," as Singh states in the passage quoted above, in their speculative fictions, which are arguably major oeuvres in the ongoing narrative of the decolonization of the mind.

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ABSTRACT

This article will focus on colonial and postcolonial speculative fiction from South Asia, and ask how, in a geographical region which is culturally and religiously hybrid, we can 'translate' the originally Eurocentric terms apocalypse, utopia, and dystopia, and how these can be related. In the nineteenth century, the Hindu notion of cyclical cosmic time, and specifically the last age in that cycle, *Kaliyuga*, became embedded in historic-cultural anxiety. Fears about the power that women and lower castes were mythically supposed to enjoy in that age found obvious historical, real-life correlates in the growth of women's and lower-caste agency. In this context, my article will focus on three South Asian writers of speculative fiction, each of whom makes gender-egalitarian and subaltern agency central in their work: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, the colonial Bengali Muslim writer of speculative fiction from India/Bangladesh, Amitav Ghosh, the contemporary diasporic Indian postcolonial writer, and Vandana Singh, also a contemporary Indo-American writer of science fiction, speculative fiction, and children's fiction.

BIOGRAPHY

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