



BOOK REVIEW:

*Star Warriors of the British Raj:
Materiality, Mythology and Technology of
Indian Science Fiction*

Steven Mollmann

Khan, Sami Ahmad. *Star Warriors of the British Raj: Materiality, Mythology and Technology of Indian Science Fiction*. U of Wales P, 2021. ISBN 978-1786837622.

A few years ago at the Science Fiction Research Association's annual conference, I was on a panel about Indian SF; as I chatted with my co-presenter afterward, I remember bemoaning the lack of an entry for India in the *Science Fiction Encyclopedia* – there was no readily accessible broad overview of Indian SF, despite a tradition going back to the 19th century. The last few years have seen attempts to alleviate this, with Suparno Banerjee's *Indian Science Fiction: Patterns, History and Hybridity* (2020) and now Sami Ahmad Khan's *Star Warriors of the British Raj*.

Khan's monograph explores what he calls ISFE (Indian SF in English), largely from 1999 to the present. Though Khan protests that his book has no pretensions to being either comprehensive or exhaustive (xii), *Star Warriors of the British Raj* nonetheless feels, at times, as if Khan were attempting to cram every work by every single writer of ISFE into the text; even individual short stories often receive multiple pages of discussion. This expansiveness drives the book's strengths and weaknesses alike. The task he has set out for himself is incredibly difficult as little unites these works except genre and country of composition. What kind of overall thesis or perspective can one have on decades of SF from across an entire country? Khan foregrounds this difficulty in his introduction, telling a story of two different approaches he *could* have taken if

he had been politically motivated. The right-wing approach would be to claim that Indian SF goes back thousands of years because the *Ramayana* is actually SF; the left-wing approach would be to reject religion and depict ISFE as something totally new and unprecedented. He sums up all political framings as simplistic: “The right wanted to reclaim a golden past, the left wished for a red future, and the centre did not know which colour it sought” (xii, italics removed). He concludes that his book is “aware that there can be no single -ism or any grand unified theory that can explain the divergences of ISFE – and hence [it] flits across vantage points that arise out of markedly different contexts” (xiv). The strength of Khan’s book is its avoidance of a single overall frame, letting each story operate in its own context.

Khan classifies different sets of stories into common approaches, usually based around how SF can serve as a metaphor for real-world political anxieties. For instance, he includes sections on clones and mutants as allegories for caste issues; gods depicted as extraterrestrials; India as a target of CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear) warfare; and Islamic terror in future-war stories. In each case, Khan successfully pulls three or more examples together, which provides a jumping-off point for exploring each concept in depth. For example, in Chapter 7, “Aliens < Gods: Gods as Extraterrestrials (from Other Planets),” Khan provides a strong take on why many ISFE stories consistently depict gods as highly advanced extraterrestrial beings: they allow the exploration of the divine in a genre grounded in hard scientific fact and where “science is killing God” (qtd. in Khan 109). Here, Khan’s clustering of texts allows a provocative reading to emerge – one that I can see being applied beyond the three stories highlighted in this chapter.

On the other hand, Khan’s seeming need to include and classify *every* ISFE text means that he also includes combinations of texts that produce much less striking analyses. Chapter 12, “Cyberistan: Digital is the New Real in *Domechild*, ‘Catatonic’ and ‘The Coward’” focuses on stories that emphasise technology. When discussing Payal Dhar’s “The Coward” (2007), Khan draws on ISFE writer Vandana Singh to argue that “while (capitalist) technologies can also be used for the greater good, it is ‘*despite* the original intent’” (167, emphasis original). But Khan feels the need to end his chapter by uniting all three stories discussed, and thus pulls away from anything provocative in the process. He banally concludes that “technology a value-neutral category and depends on the person using it” (170), which doesn’t say much about the use of technology in ISFE specifically, and it neglects those complications about capitalism’s role in technological development Khan himself had raised just a few pages prior.

A deep challenge for Khan is that he cannot assume his audience – mainly a scholarly one broadly interested in SF studies, judging by the criticism he cites – knows the texts he analyses, none of which have had wide reception outside of India. This means that *Star Warriors* needs to provide plot summary, and this often limits Khan’s available space for interpretation. For example, Khan’s discussion of Manjula Padmanabhan’s feminist dystopian duology, *Escape* (2008) and *The Island of Lost Girls* (2015), spends about three pages summarising the stories, including some long quotations, before segueing into about a half-page discussion that only interacts with the text in broad strokes. Khan concludes that, through *Escape*, the “author makes an impassioned plea for the women in India – and indicts patriarchy, author-

itarianism and totalitarianism” (89). While this is true, it doesn’t bring much insight to Padmanabhan’s duology for anyone who *has* already read it. The paucity of textual analysis means that *Star Warriors* tantalises its academic readers, highlighting interesting texts but not always providing interesting interpretations. If less time had been spent summarizing, there would have been room for Khan to expand his analyses.

Earlier, I said the book’s strength was that it avoided a single, overall frame; it lets the texts speak for themselves within the clusters Khan has devised. This is largely true, but not entirely: the introductory chapters (there are three, plus an extended author’s note) posit what Khan dubs the “IN situ Model.” This is made of three theses: the

- (1) transMIT thesis;
- (2) the antekaal thesis; and
- (3) the neoMONSTERS thesis.

The transMIT thesis itself is made up of three parts: **mythology, ideology, and technology**. All of this is explained both textually and with a chart. To be frank, I found this apparatus more muddying than edifying. What actually *is* the transMIT thesis? Occasional explanations left me none the wiser: “While the transMIT thesis engages with the materiality, mythology and technology, it also wonders whether ISFE – while having multiple ‘distinctive features’ – can have one core or centre, in short, a ‘soul’” (34). Can a thesis wonder? The book says it focuses on just the transMIT thesis component of the IN situ Model, but the neoMONSTERS thesis is about mutants, clones, monsters, and more according to a chart in the book (23). Since all those *are* discussed in this volume, it’s not very clear what this demarcation is meant to achieve. This doesn’t harm the book very much as, once Khan gets through the introductory chapters, he rarely refers to the IN situ Model or the transMIT thesis, focusing instead on the stories themselves. But this does mean that Khan’s book gets off to a somewhat rough start with over forty pages passing before concrete discussion of actual works of ISFE appear.

Lastly, although Khan displays an admirably wide reading within ISFE, *Star Warriors of the British Raj* nonetheless gives a poor impression of SF *outside* of India. Most of the times when the book compares Indian SF to SF from America or elsewhere, it references television shows: *Star Trek: Picard* (2020–present) and *The Orville* (2017–22) as examples of AI, or *Prometheus* (2012) as an example of humanity having an extraterrestrial origin. In contrast, the ISFE texts that Khan references are nearly all prose fiction. The effect gives an impoverished sense of what ISFE can do. American prose SF such as Ann Leckie’s *Ancillary Justice* (2013) and Martha Wells’s *The Murderbot Diaries* (2017–present), or even older works such as Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) and David Gerrold’s *When HARLIE Was One* (1972), present a more thematically ambitious rendering of AI than *Star Trek: Picard*, but comparing ISFE to an interesting but SF-lite television show is more damning to Khan’s chosen texts than he perhaps realises. Maybe this was done deliberately to increase the book’s mass-market appeal. If so, it unfortunately seems to *reduce* the appeal of the book to scholars of SF, or even voracious readers of SF, who will find an unsatisfying representation of their favourite genre’s possibilities here.

As I said at the beginning of this review, there aren't really any strong overviews of ISFE already in existence. There have been some broad studies of postcolonial SF that include ISFE, such as Jessica Langer's *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* (2011) or Ericka Hoagland and Reema Sarwal's *Science Fiction, Imperialism and the Third World* (2010), but these works are largely aimed at postcolonialist critics. In contrast, Khan aims to open up the world of ISFE to SF scholars more broadly. *Star Warriors* is one of the first works to look at the level of India itself, to let us better see how the SF of this single country fits into the global whole of SF. Its strengths and its weaknesses both derive from this ambition, but Khan takes a necessary – and very useful – step. Almost a decade after my conference, the *Science Fiction Encyclopedia* still does not have that entry on India, but if any SF scholars want a way into ISFE, Khan's book will direct them to the works that will matter to and interest them. More work on this topic is necessary, but *Star Warriors* helps fill a frustrating gap in the field for SF critics.

Biography: Steven Mollmann is an Assistant Teaching Professor in the Department of English and Writing at the University of Tampa. He studies depictions of science and scientists in SF and literature more broadly, primarily in British and Anglophone literature. His work on Manjula Padmanabhan's SF has been published in the *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies*; his monograph on the scientist in 19th-century British literature from Mary Shelley and Charles Dickens to H. G. Wells and Joseph Conrad is forthcoming.