Estranging History in Contemporary Indian Science Fiction

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Abstract (English)

This thesis contributes to the burgeoning field of Indian science fiction, exploring the unique pattern of "alternate history" novels that re-imagine the past in ways that lead to the author's contemporary present. Focusing on Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), Indra Das's *The Devourers* (2016), and Tashan Mehta's *The Liar's Weave* (2017), this thesis analyses how Indian science fiction estranges history. The blatant use of romantic tropes, such as the figures of hero and villain, the quest motif, and the frame narrative, in Indian historical science fiction disturbs the reader's understanding of history, as it conflates the fantastic elements of the novel with the historical backdrop its set against. Indian science fiction's reliance on mythology, and, at times, subalternity, enhances this estrangement, further distancing the reader from historical accounts they are familiar with. This thesis places such estrangement in conversation with the recent political interventions made by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, examining how Indian science fiction responds to historical anxieties within the subcontinent, enabling the reader to better understand how history is (re)constructed. By close reading *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Devourers*, and *The Liar's Weave*, this thesis uncovers the affordances of Indian science fiction in engaging history, especially during such politically tumultuous times.

Résumé (Français)

Ce mémoire contribue au domaine en plein essor de la science-fiction indienne, en explorant le modèle unique des romans de « l'uchronie » qui réimagine le passé d'une manière qui maintient la réalité contemporaine de l'auteur. En se concentrant sur *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995) d'Amitav Ghosh, *The Devourers* (2016) d'Indra Das et *The Liar's Weave* (2017) de Tashan Mehta, ce mémoire analyse comment la science-fiction indienne rend l'histoire étrange. L'utilisation flagrante de tropes romantiques dans la science-fiction historique indienne, par exemple les figures du héros et du méchant, le motif de la quête et la mise en abîme, perturbe la compréhension du lecteur de l'histoire, car cela confond les éléments fantastiques du roman avec son contexte historique. La dépendance de la science-fiction indienne à la mythologie et, parfois, à la subalternité, renforce cet éloignement, éloignant davantage le lecteur des récits historiques qui lui sont familiers. Ce mémoire met cet éloignement en conversation avec les récentes interventions politiques du gouvernement du Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), afin d'examiner comment la science-fiction indienne répond aux angoisses historiques au sein du sous-continent, permettant au lecteur de mieux comprendre comment l'histoire est (re)construite. En lisant attentivement *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Devourers*, et *The Liar's Weave*, ce mémoire dévoile les possibilités de science-fiction indienne d'animer l'histoire, surtout pendant les périodes politiquement tumultueuses comme les nôtres.

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Introduction

There's real power to this genre [science fiction]. It's what U. K. Le Guin meant, isn't it, when she asked us to 'imagine new alternatives'? That we could. It's an acceptance of the power of the idea, of showing the reader new ways of looking such that they see their reality as clearly as possible, warts and all, just as they see all the ways in which it could be different.

—Tashan Mehta, "Dialogues with South Asian SF Writers"

The past is the hardest to change. The future you only have to utter, the present focus on, but the past needs to be weeded. You have to play with memory.

—Tashan Mehta, *The Liar's Weave*

While Indian science fiction has been around for at least two centuries, emerging, arguably, from the British education system in the 1800s (or, depending on how liberal one's definition of science fiction is, for millennia, stretching back to the ancient epics), it has only recently begun to carve a space for itself in literary criticism. The intersections of postcolonial literature and science fiction were only given their due attention at the turn of this century, and Indian science fiction theory has been the natural product of such engagement (Banerjee 1). Scholars such as Suparno Banerjee, Sami Ahmad Khan, Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, Urvashi Kuhad, and others have all more than laid the foundation for this study, tracing the genre's trajectory across a survey of literature in various languages, as well as positing and examining

major themes and trends specific to Indian science fiction. One such pattern that keeps rearing its head, and one that this thesis aims to unpack further, is the genre's preoccupation with history: how the genres of historical fiction and science fiction intersect to create a new engagement with our past.

The overlaps between science fiction and the historical novel have been notably discussed by Carl Freedman, in his seminal text *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (2000). Freedman examines parallels between the two genres, noting that

> [b]oth manifest a radically critical impulse, for both are radically dialectical and historicizing literary tendencies, and both are determinate products of the capitalist-revolutionary dynamic that produced history (in the modern sense) itself. Both operate by means of a post-Hegelian dialectic of historical identity and historical difference: in both, that is, the empirical present of the reader and of the text's own production is put into contrast with an alternative significantly different from the former, yet different in a way that remains rationally accountable. (54)

Freedman builds on this observation further, stating that while the historical realist novel locates this "alternative" in a "knowable past," science fiction locates it in "a potential future that is indeed historically determinate (at least in literary effect) but of its very nature less factually preset than any established past" (54). While Freedman does mention important overlaps between the two genres, he contrasts the *past*-oriented historical novel with the *future*-oriented science fiction text. This is an unsurprising contrast, as the latter genre is better known for its focus on futurity. However, this future-oriented trend is at times subverted, and the subgenre of historical science fiction, as oxymoronic as it might at first appear, emerges.

Within the parameters of this study, I limit the scope of my analysis to historical science fiction: science fiction texts that engage with or take place (either entirely or partially) in the past. This subgenre is not a recent phenomenon that has been left unexamined or ignored. Think of the various narratives that involve time travel, such as H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) and Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979), or of the novels in which the "past" is discovered in the present, as in Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864), Arthur Conan Doyle's *Lost World* (1912), and Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (1990). This thesis, however, engages primarily with the other, third manifestation of the subgenre: "alternate histories," in which major historical events are changed, irrevocably also changing our present and future, such as in Phillip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) and Kingsley Amis's *The Alteration* (1976). In the former novels, the past typically remains unchanged but is accessed through fantastical means; in the latter, the past (and subsequent present) is changed so drastically that it ceases to be perceived as real.

Freedman also touches on the idea of alternate histories in his discussion of "the science-fictional historical novel," a category I read as synonymous with the historical science fiction novel. As he states:

> For the science-fictional historical novel, historical knowing is the central conceptual problem, and the principal cognitive estrangement produced by the form is the defamiliarization of historical knowledge … Science fiction has long been familiar with the novel of alternative reality … in which history is rewritten with one huge difference … in order to foreground the contingency and mutability of the historical actual. The science-fictional historical novel is a closely related subgenre, though here the estrangement of history—the shattering of the overfamiliarity and taken-for-grantedness

of the received narrative of the past—is effected not so much by departing from known

historical reality as by questioning how and to what extent historical reality is, after all,

known. (61)

I find Freedman's application of Darko Suvin's concept of "cognitive estrangement"[1] to be

insightful in analysing the intersections of historical and science fiction. In this thesis, I expand

on his theory of historical estrangement, exploring how science fiction engages the past in ways

that defamiliarise and twist the historical narratives that the reader is familiar with.

While I agree with Freedman's concluding remark, that the estranging of history

encourages the reader to question the construction and knowledge of historical reality, I seek to

take his ideas further by placing them in the arguably unique context of Indian science fiction.

Popular conceptions of the alternate history novel re-imagine the past and play with major

historical events to subsequently alter the novel's present—that is, the estranging of history is

accompanied by a transformation of the present. In *The Man in the High Castle*, the triumph of

the Axis powers in World War II not only irrevocably changes the events of the 1940s but those

in the reader's present: the United States never emerges as a global superpower and imperial

Japan and Nazi Germany vie for dominance instead. The pattern in Indian historical science

fiction that I observe, however, differs from this estrangement of past *and* present. Instead of

transforming the present, Indian science fiction re-imagines history in ways that are congruent

with their contemporary moment. In so doing, such historical science fiction draws on the events

of an alternate past to *explain the present*.

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[1] Cognitive estrangement refers to Suvin's framing of science fiction as "a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (20).

Freedman is once again useful for contrasting how exactly this re-imagining of history differs from prototypical alternate history novels. When comparing science fiction and the historical novel, he states that

> [t]here is a further parallel here between science fiction and historical realism: in the latter the past, while of course more fixedly determinate than the future in science fiction, is of value not so much for its literal accuracy in all detail … as for its role in establishing the historicity of the present—in the sense of denaturalizing the present by showing it to be neither arbitrary nor inevitable but the conjunctural result of complex, knowable material processes. (55–56)

While historical realism's orientation toward the past is once again contrasted with future-oriented science fiction, this passage helps better understand how Indian historical science fiction operates. Freedman here makes three key claims: that the past is more "fixedly determinate" than the future in science fiction; that historical fiction provides a historical authenticity to the present; and that historical fiction denaturalizes the present by revealing how it is "neither arbitrary nor inevitable." However, when the genre intersects with science fiction, these characteristics are disrupted. In the prototypical alternate history novel, the first claim is challenged, since the past becomes just as estranged as the imagined dystopian or utopian futures. The second claim is also challenged, as the alternate history creates an alternate present. It no longer establishes the historicity of *the reader's* present, but rather that of another imagined one. The third claim of denaturalization holds true: the toying with the past reveals how a single event or a single decision can change the course of history as we know it. As these events and decisions are usually tied to major global consequences, and thus assuredly lead to a new, estranging present, these novels show how the present is neither arbitrary nor inevitable.

For Indian historical science fiction, however, this toying with the past is toyed with. While Freedman's first claim remains challenged—the past is estranged in such narratives as well—the second claim now holds partly true instead. Since in the Indian subgenre the past is altered in ways that lead to the same present, a historicity of the present is established but one that readers may be unfamiliar with. Thus, the readers become estranged from the estrangement that they may be used to, at least as in other conceptions of the alternate history novel. Finally, the third claim is not so challenged or confirmed as much as it is called into question. While the novels in Indian historical science fiction do denaturalize the present, they do so in ways that mark it as inevitable. Any denaturalization these novels achieve therefore stems from the reader's attempts to reconcile a present they know and occupy with an estranging past. This causes a hangover effect, in which the estrangement of the past casts a pallor onto the present we are used to, making the reader doubt the nature of their current present. It thus encourages them to reflect on the inherent strangeness of their known present as well as questions of power and mutability with respect to historiography.

To better understand this unique engagement with history and the present in Indian science fiction, it is important to also recognise India's tenuous relationship with its past. While modern India does in fact have a long history of human settlement that vastly predates the colonial period, British rule and Orientalist framings were crucial in erasing and reshaping this narrative. As Gyan Prakash notes,

> [h]istory and colonialism arose together in India. As India was introduced to history, it was also stripped of a meaningful past; it became a history-less society brought into the age of History. The flawed nature of history's birth in India was not lost on the nationalists who pressed the nation-state's claim to the age of history, and marxists

struggled against capital's collusion with colonialism to make the worker the agent of history. Consequently, history, flawed at birth, has lived an embattled life in India. (17) As Prakash hints, Indian history was trapped between being excised by colonisers and reclaimed by nationalists. This reclamation, however, would sometimes push too far, looking to glorify the "Golden Age" of pre-Mughal India in order to speak back against such erasure. Postcolonial criticism, according to Prakash, thus sought to find a balanced middle ground, "to seize and reinscribe [history] catachrestically, not to restore lost forms of telling and knowing but to pick apart the disjunctive moments of discourses authorized by colonialism and authenticated by the nation-state and rearticulate them in another—third—form of writing history" (17). I argue that Indian science fiction follows this line of thinking, acting as an extension of Prakash's articulation of postcolonial criticism.

Such a fraught relationship with the past also helps contextualise recent attempts by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, following this idea of nationalist reclamation, to, very literally, rewrite Indian history to promote a Hindutva agenda.[2] The removal of various topics in history textbooks across the country, and the promotion of epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* as historical narratives by various political leaders and historians are driven by a sense of anxiety among the votaries of the Hindu Right. As Sami Ahmad Khan notes, following colonisation, the feared destruction of Indian history and culture "becomes dialectically contested: it finds an antithesis in a golden past, where the past is remembered and reconstructed (even if without veracity) for ends that still promote an unequal society. Such a re/discovery becomes the fulcrum of identity politics, religious reawakenings and national reimaginings"

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[2] Hindutva refers to a Hindu supremacist movement whose project is to build a monolithic Hindu *rashtra* (Hindu nation) (Natrajan 298).

(101). The pattern of past-oriented Indian science fiction that I identify is thus responding to the past-oriented identity politics of Independent India.

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. builds further on how the concept of nationality[3] "is so rarely explored in [science fiction's] thought experiments that one might conclude that it has been rejected as something that cannot exist in any future" (218). In order to contend with such questions then, Indian science fiction turns instead to the past. As such, as Khan identifies, "identity politics, religious reawakenings and national reimagings" become the central themes Indian historical science fiction finds itself contending with. These three often coalesce and manifest in another major characteristic of the genre, which, as expected, goes hand-in-hand with its historical preoccupation: the cognitively estranging elements of Indian mythologies, seen most predominantly through Hindu mythology.

Mythology is an arguably intrinsic part of Indian science fiction, with various gods, goddesses, *rakshasas* (demons), and sacred objects often being evoked. Khan dedicates a third of his book, *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj* (2021), to unpacking mythology's place in Indian science fiction. Other scholars, such as Banerjee and Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee also emphasise the importance of mythology in Indian science fiction, with Banerjee even making the radical, if contestable, claim that the genre is "a product of both the traditional imaginative literature of India and that of European colonial education and scientific ideas," the former specifically in reference to Indian mythologies (21). Most notable, however, is Chattopadhyay's contribution of the "mythologerm" in understanding the various ways in which mythology is employed by Indian science fiction. The mytholgerm falls under *kalpavigyan*, a Bengali word composed of *kalpana*, loosely translated as imagination, and *vigyan*, which is knowledge of the

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[3] Csicsery-Ronay Jr. here is careful to "distinguish nations from nationstates, and national consciousness from nationalism," though he also notes the difficult "duality inherent in the concept" (221).

material world. Chattopadhyay comments on *kalpavigyan*'s synonymy with "science fiction," but also claims that it exceeds science fiction's generic boundaries: "[w]ithin *kalpavigyan*, notions such as hard sf or soft sf do not make sense; the term signals instead a different aesthetic, that of linkages and intersections among and between diverse kinds of knowledge" ("On the Mythologerm" 436–37). The mythologerm, located within the realm of *kalpavigyan*, refers to any "tendency to continually rework the history of science through the use of the mythic, or to use the mythic as a source of alternative or unknown or advanced science, or to use the mythic as a hinge to elaborate a difference between one kind of sf and another" (437). I base my research on how Indian mythology affects our engagement of history in Indian science fiction on Chattopadhyay's conceptualisation, exploring the mythic as a source of alternate history.

This study examines how Indian science fiction estranges history and how its estrangement differs from other popular historical science fiction narratives. I draw on three contemporary Anglophone novels—*The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995) by Amitav Ghosh, *The Devourers* (2015) by Indra Das, and *The Liar's Weave* (2017) by Tashan Mehta—demonstrating how, as Indian science fiction texts, they all follow similar patterns of historical estrangement. My first chapter interrogates various elements of romance—tropes of hero and villain, the quest motif, and the frame narrative—that mark science fiction as a generic descendant of romance. Using Northop Frye's theorisation of romance, I locate the genre as a mode of rewriting history. I claim that the romanticisation of the historical narrative becomes part of its estrangement. Frye's conceptualisation of the romantic universe as perpetually engaged in a tension between reality and imagination, heaven and hell, good and evil, helps navigate how Indian science fiction's engagement with the same estranges the historical narrative the reader is used to.

The second chapter focuses on how this estrangement is framed through mythology. Indeed, mythology is an important aspect of not only Indian science fiction, but of the romanticisation of history, and by extension, its estrangement. As Frye states,

> [i]f there is no sense that the mythological universe is a human creation, man can never get free of servile anxieties and superstitions, never surpass himself, in Nietzsche's phrase. But if there is no sense that it is also something uncreated, something coming from elsewhere, man remains a Narcissus staring at his own reflection, equally unable to surpass himself. Somehow or other, the created scripture and the revealed scripture, or whatever we call the latter, have to keep fighting each other like Jacob and the angel, and it is through the maintaining of this struggle, the suspension of belief between the spiritually real and the humanly imaginative, that our own mental evolution grows. (*The Secular Scripture* 43)

The tension between the real and the imaginative as described above is literalised in Indian science fiction, where mythologies are depicted as alternate histories. By fictionalising and mythologising the past, Indian science fiction further estranges its reader from a history they know.

I then turn to *whose* mythologies and histories are foregrounded in the three novels. I read *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Devourers*, and *The Liar's Weave* as texts that focus on the figure of the subaltern, represented as tribal communities, lower-caste individuals, and other marginalised groups in India. By including subaltern retellings of history, history is estranged even further. Gayatri Spivak, in her famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?," notes that the subaltern figure can never truly be represented because their representation always involves their othering. Science fiction, and other speculative literature, thus are arguably the only modes

through which such representation can be achieved, as they depend on imagination as a framework. The reader, aware of the impossibility of representing the subaltern, is once again estranged from the already estranging narrative. The impossibility of these subaltern figures being foregrounded must also be reconciled with their constant, ever-present oppression, both in the romantic universe of the novels and in the real universe of the reader. Moreover, such subaltern retellings contribute to challenging Hindutva ideology that upholds their subjugated position, either by writing over imagined Hindutva histories or by literalising and critiquing them.

I conclude by placing Indian historical science fiction alongside the aforementioned recent attempts of the BJP government to rewrite history. I ask what reading such novels in light of the NCERT textbook revisions and anti-CAA/anti-NRC protests does to the reader's engagement with Indian science fiction. How does Indian science fiction both parallel and oppose the historical estrangement carried out by the Hindu Right? What is the significance of the genre in grappling with historiography and historical revisionism? While the final pages of this study will delve deeper into such questions, Frye once again provides us with an initial, possible path to an answer: "[t]he improbable, desiring, erotic, and violent world of romance reminds us that we are not awake when we have abolished the dream world: we are awake only when we have absorbed it again" (*The Secular Scripture* 43). In other words, we are able to wake up, that is, come to terms with our reality (and history), by engaging with the science fiction that responds to it. As this thesis will demonstrate, it is through estranging history that we are able to better understand it.

Chapter 1: Romantic Retellings

The frequent association of romance with the historical … is based, I should think, on the principle that there is a peculiar emotional intensity in contemplating something, including our own earlier lives, that we know we have survived. But there is beyond this a special kind of transformation of the past which is distinctive of romance. Our descending and ascending themes showed us two contrasting organizations of human life. Themes of ascent are pervaded by struggles to escape and survive: the other side, of descent and disappearing identity, takes place in a world of violent and cunning leaders.

— Northop Frye, *The Secular Scripture*

"This isn't too far from a story about a chosen one rising to lead his tribe to salvation is it? Lone exile wandering into the future, unable to die, shifting between shapes, all that."
He nods. "I'm just giving you some options. But I knew you had it in you, Professor. You can tell someone the rest of the story. Or tell it yourself. Romance, fantasy, horror, realism, moralistic fable, history, lies, truth. It's all there for you. Pick and choose, my friend."

— Indra Das, *The Devourers*

Romanticising the Past

Northrop Frye, in his various writings on romance, mentions science fiction's link to the larger genre several times: in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), he states, "[s]cience fiction frequently tries to imagine what life would be like on a plane as far above us as we are above savagery; its setting is often of a kind that appears to us as technologically miraculous. It is thus a mode of romance with a strong inherent tendency to myth" (49); in *The Secular Scripture* (1976), he remarks, "[i]n the twentieth century romance got a new lease of fashion after the mid-

1950s, with the success of Tolkien and the rise of what is generally called science fiction" (4); in his posthumously published *Northrop Frye's Notebooks on Romance* (2004), note 56a reads, "[i]t's also clear that the whole development of science fiction, and the kind of writing on the periphery of that (e.g. [Kurt] Vonnegut) attaches itself to sentimental romance, not to realism, and makes the tradition of the former important to grasp" (191). Frye thus continuously reminds his reader of romance's legacy in the science fiction genre.

Others have also picked up on the confluence of romance and science fiction. Robert Corbett, for instance, points to their temporal overlap, with the nineteenth century witnessing the height of romanticism as well as the origins of science fiction. He goes on to comment on perhaps the most famous instance, claiming that "the most common touchstone for romanticism undergraduate courses"[4] is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* (1818), which is simultaneously heralded as "the mother of science fiction." While Corbett does point to *Frankenstein* as proof of "the generic diversity that is at the origin of romanticism," he also concludes by unpacking the hermeneutic paradox of whether a singular origin is ever possible. Regardless of this paradox, Corbett is still productive in demonstrating "the conditions of possibility for science fiction in the romantic period," examining how romanticism affected and shaped science fiction in its nascent stages.

Despite Corbett's essay not mentioning or citing Northop Frye at all, it is almost impossible to not link his idea of the "conditions of possibility" to Frye's own conceptions of romance. However, while Corbett circumvents the hermeneutic paradox of origin, Frye instead chooses to disengage with the hermeneutic paradox of definition. As Michael Dolzani observes in his introduction to *Northrop Frye's Notebooks on Romance*:

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[4] With the exception of, according to Corbett, Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey."

Frye is not terribly interested in the definition of literary genres or categories, because

definitions imply an essentialist view of literature that he does not share. 'Romance' is

not an essence or exactly delimited area but a context: that is, a set of expectations for the

imagination of either the writer or the reader. Some of the fun and creativity of any

literary form comes from the possibility of playing either with or against the expectations

of the context; it can be even more creative to play with and against the conventions at

the same time. (xxii–iii)

I argue that Frye's conceptualisation of romance not as a "delimited area" but a "set of

expectations for the [writer or reader's] imagination" allows us to better engage with romance's

influences on science fiction. Indeed, with this in mind, it is much clearer how science fiction

and romance are generically connected. Rather than fall under the umbrella of romance, science

fiction instead follows a series of structural frameworks inspired by romantic narratives.

Romance ceases to be this all-encompassing monolith, instead becoming a reference point, a

helpful guide, for those who write science fiction or fantasy texts. I trace these reference points

through Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), Indra Das's *The Devourers* (2016),

and Tashan Mehta's *The Liar's Weave* (2017), arguing that these distinct elements of romance

aid in estranging the reader from the history they know.

All three novels are set against different time periods: colonial India in the 1800s and

1920s and seventeenth-century Mughal India. They also include clear markers of their historical

settings, referencing not only dates but people, places, and events that the reader may recognise

from their general knowledge of Indian history. For instance, in the Stranger's first story, he

mentions bauls (mystic minstrels) who "sing, unheeding of signatures on paper, of land

exchanges and politics, of the white traders and their tensions with the Nawab and the Mughal

Empire" (Das, *The Devourers* 9) Such exposition makes the dates mentioned almost unnecessary: "there are three villages: Kalikata, Sutanati, Gobindapur. They belong to the British East India Company. They are building a fort known as William. Things are changing, a new century nears. It will be the eighteenth, by the Christian calendar" (9). Any reader familiar with Indian history recognises what is being foreshadowed: the fall of the Mughal Empire, the revolt of 1857, and the official establishment of the British Raj. Das's later mentions of the construction of the Taj Mahal and Chandni-Chauk also help situate Cyrah's story in the early 1600s. Similarly, in *The Liar's Weave*, the multiple references to India's burgeoning Independence movement helps the reader acclimatise to the novel's historical setting more than the dates do. In the first few pages itself, Mehta mentions how "Bengal has been partitioned, the Congress is dividing into a more radical view, there is not a student you pass who isn't quoting Tilak with 'Swaraj is my birthright and I shall have it'" (*The Liar's Weave* 13). These references to such important historical moments in India's formation are ones readily accessible to the reader. The later mentions of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 and the introduction of the train (80–81), the Swadeshi movement (27), the Jallianwala Bagh massacre (38), the Non-Cooperation Movement (85), Motilal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi (268), all work together to provide the reader with familiar historical reference points. Even Ghosh's centring of Ronald Ross and his malarial research in *The Calcutta Chromosome* provide the reader with historical markers, not just of then-contemporary scientists and findings, but of the Queen's rule and the social divisions of colonial India.

The reader becomes comfortable amidst these recognisable historical markers. Such reference points lull them into a sense of realism. Yet I argue that by employing romantic tropes and figures, these authors make the reader aware of the fabulous, surreal narratives they are

reading. The introduction of romantic reference points, alongside the familiar historical ones, disrupts the reader's familiarity with the historical setting of the novel. It causes them to question the legitimacy of not only the narrative itself but of the history the narrative is set against. The romanticisation of the narratives thus estranges the reader from the historical accounts they are used to.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Frye characterises the context of romance by its "vertical perspective," as opposed to realism's horizontality,[5] in which a dichotomy between good and evil is emphasised, seen in "its tendency to split into heroes and villains." Romantic narratives tend to "[avoid] the ambiguities of ordinary life, where everything is a mixture of good and bad, and where it is difficult to take sides or believe that people are consistent patterns of virtue or vice" (*The Secular Scripture* 50). He posits that the romantic tendency to engage in such absolutes "relieves" the reader, allowing them to easily take sides between the well-defined "hero" and "villain." We see these categories of hero and villain throughout science fiction texts, including those that this thesis focuses on.

Starting at the top of the vertical perspective, the hero is an essential character in romantic literature. As the ones around whom the narrative revolves, the hero is the driving force of the plot. Their importance is provided early on in *The Secular Scripture*, when Frye hearkens back to the title, likening the hero in a romantic narrative to God in the Bible: "The Bible is the kind of book in which God himself is the hero: romance is a 'secular scripture,' where the hero represents humanity and the quest he achieves the possibility of human existence" (5). Frye here

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[5] Frye elaborates on this, stating that in romance, "[t]he story proceeds toward an end which echoes the beginning, but echoes it in a different world … [with] the action [taking] place on two levels of experience. This principle of action on two levels, neither of them corresponding very closely to the ordinary world of experience, is essential to romance, and shows us that romance presents a vertical perspective which realism, left to itself, would find it very difficult to achieve. The realist, with his sense of logical and horizontal continuity, leads us to the end of his story; the romancer, scrambling over a series of disconnected episodes, seems to be trying to get us to the top of it" (*The Secular Scripture* 35).

not only emphasises the importance of the hero in romantic narratives but also emphasises a key heroic feature: the quest as the hero's means to an end. He goes on to propose that such quest narratives contribute to "a survey of the landscape of romance, in which there are themes of descent and of ascent. Descent takes the hero into lower and lower steps of consciousness, ending with death: ascent takes him up again to his original identity" (5). All romances can be categorised under one theme, though many play with the tension between ascent and descent as well, a tension that will be unpacked more shortly.

The hero and quest trope are found in all three texts this thesis focuses on: in Tashan Mehta's *The Liar's Weave*, everyone's journey is literally mapped out, traced in the stars and then transcribed in charts given to them when they come of age. Zahan's struggle with finding his own path is almost comically made obvious by the fact that his future is the only one undecipherable, the stars never consistently aligning for him. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Murugan and Antar travel, one physically and one virtually, across Kolkata to uncover the truth behind Ross's malarial discovery. In *The Devourers*, Alok transcribes various scrolls about Cyrah and Gévaudan's journey across Mughal India to find and confront Fenrir. Das even pokes fun at his own use of the romantic trope, with Alok sardonically asking the Stranger about his own tale: "This isn't too far from a story about a chosen one rising to lead his tribe to salvation, is it?" (13). The joke here is twofold: the reader is aware that Das's story follows romantic conventions, just as the Stranger's story within does.

The hero's quest, however, is often similarly twofold. Frye mentions the parallel "psychological quest" that the hero embarks on (*The Secular Scripture* 41). Darko Suvin, in his seminal text *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, builds on this, speaking of how the quest narrative, as something that gets carried forward from romanticism to science fiction, usually

follows a moral goal or lesson, with the adventurous journey usually mirroring the protagonist's own internal quest, as seen in works by Shelley, Edgar Allen Poe, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and more (150, 159–64). Frye characterises this psychological quest as one that usually follows a theme of descent, instead of ascension. As he claims, "[r]omance often deliberately descends into a world obviously related to the human unconscious, and we are not surprised to find that some romances … are psychological quests carried out in inner space" (41).

We see this descent into the human unconscious perhaps most clearly in Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*. As mentioned, both Murugan and Antar, the heroes of their respective timelines, embark on a quest of knowledge, seeking to discover the shadowy reality of Ross's time in India. Their quest, through West Bengal and through the various corrupted Internet archives, is partially founded on their struggles with their mundane everyday lives. Before Antar discovers Murugan's broken keycard in his server, he longs for his retirement, only one year away. He thinks of how "[f]or years, he'd been dreaming of leaving New York and going back to Egypt: of getting out of this musty apartment where all he could see when he looked down the street were boarded-up windows stretching across the fronts of buildings that were almost as empty as his own" (Ghosh 5). All these descriptions of longing, however, soon vanish once he begins his search online for what actually happened to Murugan and why it has been seemingly covered up. Antar's initial reluctance to work and attempts to read or pass the time during his shifts soon dissolve entirely. He instead chooses to work overtime to decode data and even breaches security walls to confront his superiors in order to come closer to the truth (112, 203). Murugan, too, is jaded by academia and his peers' refusal to take his work seriously. His "ostracism from the scholarly community" and "estrangement from several of his friends and associates" leads him to make choices that are "detrimental to his career"—yet he too

rediscovers his love for research through being able to pursue the "Secret History" of malaria (31–33).

Another hero in the novel, Urmila, finds herself "at the end of her tether … She had already been up an hour: she had given her parents their breakfast; she had cleaned the kitchen; she had fed and bathed her nephew and niece; she had washed her younger brother's uniform for his afternoon football match [… and] there was still the business of the fish to deal with" (147). Ghosh's listing of Urmila's domestic chores that consume her day once again speaks to the same mundane reality that Antar and Murugan battle against. This tension, between the banal ordinary and the search for fantastic knowledge, is one that is commonly found in quest narratives. As Dolzani claims, "it has been true that the 'romantic' element in the hero's quest, if there is one, consists of a pervading sense of the marvelous, or, to use a term associated with romance from Shakespeare's late plays to modern fantasy and science fiction, a sense of wonder … romance is based on a contrast between a sense of wonder and what we might call the disenchantment of ordinary life" (xxvi–vii). However, the mundane lives that they all attempt to flee from are ultimately robbed from them, as they all are bested by Mangala in the end, with one rotting in prison and the other two presumably possessed. The final scene, of Antar losing consciousness as Mangala-as-Urmila-as-Tara prepares to transfer Laakhan's consciousness into him, almost parodically literalises Frye's proposal of the psychological quest as a descent into the human unconscious.

Similarly, in *The Devourers*, Alok's own internal journey of coming to terms with his sexuality and gender identity is made possible through him following Cyrah and Gévaudan's physical journey. Alok's attraction to men is hinted at throughout the novel, in the growing sexual tension between him and the Stranger. This is originally met with shame and fear from

Alok, unsurprising given that when the novel was written, homosexuality was still a criminal offence in India. At one point, Alok and the Stranger are harassed by three drunk men, who see them sitting together and taunt them. "Don't mind us. Go about your romantic evening," they cackle, as they unzip their pants and urinate around Alok. When they leave, Alok "[wipes his] eyes, shaking with anger and shame" (Das 162–63). He lashes out at the Stranger, who responds by calling out Alok's source of fear and propositioning him, causing a mortifying reaction: "Uncomfortably, horribly, I feel my disturbed blood rushing to my cock, stretching at the crotch of my pants. I step back, breathing hard … 'I want to go home. Forget tonight. Forget all of what just happened'" (164).

Yet, shortly after, despite his insistence in distancing himself from the Stranger, Alok manages to find some kind of solace in their relationship, through the scrolls he must transcribe:

The stranger exists. The manuscript he gave me exists. The woman in the manuscript exists, if only in words. All this I know. And despite whatever just happened, I can't imagine not seeing the stranger again, can't imagine turning my back on this entirely unexpected phase of my life and just going back to what was there before. Who's to say the stranger would even allow me to walk away? The thought that he might not is actually comforting. (166)

Alok manages to find some resolution within himself after reading about Cyrah's struggle with confronting Fenrir about her rape and pregnancy. His own struggle ultimately culminates at the end of the novel, when he and the Stranger finally sleep together, and he remembers his earlier experiences with men that he had been repressing. Unlike the shame-filled erection he had earlier, this time Alok embraces "the yearning, the ache for immediate intimacy, immediate consummation" and "[is] grateful" (241, 245).

Alok's grappling with gender, however, is something that is revealed only in the book's final pages. Though there is some foreshadowing—"My dreams, ever faithful, are filled with terrible monsters and skewed, magic-haunted worlds from the past. In them, I often find that I'm a woman" (166)—it is only in the aftermath of his relationship with the Stranger, when Alok grows out his hair and "painstakingly" relearns how to wear a saree, that we are truly made privy to his other identity crisis. Looking at his reflection in the mirror, he notes how he "[passes] for someone who is not a man, not merely Alok. No, in those moments, I *am* not merely Alok. Not a second self, but a self, my self, one that I've been afraid to let breathe for so long" (301). Once again, drawing a link between the dreams that plagued him while transcribing and his eventual acceptance of his "self," it is clear how his internal quest mirrors Cyrah's, with both coming to accept that they are no longer the person they used to be; or rather, that they are finally the person they have been all along. Alok is not upset or torn over his new identity. Rather, as he says, "I spend a lot of time looking at myself in those moments, and I feel an inkling of happiness, of some mounting expectation, of pride, a clawing against my heart" (302). In this way, Das turns the usual theme of descent on its head. As mentioned, according to Frye, most descent narratives lead "the hero into lower and lower steps of consciousness, ending with death: ascent takes him up again to his original identity" (5); here, however, while it is still a descent narrative, the romance ends with the hero reconciling with his original identity.

While not all the novels end with the heroes' actual deaths, they still lead to a symbolic demise of sorts. Antar and Urmila both do not die in the literal sense—their bodies continue to function and breathe. Yet, their consciousness is gone, replaced by Laakhan's and Mangala's. It is perhaps a fate worse than death, as the heroes are, quite literally, taken over by the villains. While the villains are "reborn" in a sense, the heroes are lost forever. In the other two novels,

instead of the villains being reborn, the heroes are—though still in ways that mark an initial

"death." At the end of *The Liar's Weave*, Zahan boards a train for Calcutta, leaving Vidroha,[6]

Mumbai, and everything else behind. He must start a new life, with a new identity, but before he

does that, "[t]here is one last lie" (Mehta 327). At the station, he pauses and says, softly:

> "Zahan Merchant is dead. He died on 1 January 1923. He was killed by a wolf. If you go
>
> to the forest at the edge of Bombay, you'll find his body, buried under vines. Half picked
>
> apart by the jungle."
>
> The words leave him. They hang in the air, poised. Like his first death feast, he watches
>
> them fill, brimmed with his power. Then their casing melts, the verbal echoes of speech
>
> fading, and the power spills, dissolving into the world. In a moment, there is no trace it
>
> ever happened. In a moment, there is a dead him, waiting to be found. (329)

To cement it, even though the lie has already become real, he also turns and addresses Sorab,

though "[t]here is no one there," saying, "Sorab. You cannot come … You'll only make things

harder for me. Go back. Tell them I am dead. You must" (326). Zahan lies his death into reality,

and takes on a new life, lying himself new features, a new face, and a new name. His lied

(symbolic) death thus leads to a rebirth, the start of a new, uncertain future.

Similarly, Alok also ends with a rebirth of sorts. By shedding his fears and accepting

himself for who he is, Alok's "old" persona also symbolically dies, with him being born anew. In

a perhaps overly pronounced manner, his final monologue, which conflates his identity with the

Stranger's, Cyrah's, and Fenrir's, references birth, death, and rebirth several times:

> I slide out of my mother and into the hands of Banbibi's vahana, in his first self of pale
>
> young Frenchman. *I am reborn* at the end of bitter winter's long night, kneeling by the

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[6] Vidroha is the safe haven for *hatadaiva*, located deep in the forest at the outskirts of Mumbai.

carcass of an Úlfhéðinn who nearly killed me … *I am born* at Woodlands Nursing Home

in Calcutta on a sweltering summer day … I leave a human become something else, a

khrissal[7] turned Valkyrie, proud and fierce … *I die* at the edge of the Indian ocean,

between land and sea, eaten by my son … I let my son kill me, because I do not

remember the human I first sprang from … By the grace of Allah *I am reborn* in my son.

I am reborn under a winter moon in Kolkata as a stranger tells me stories of impossible

lives … *I am reborn* in language. (Das 303, emphasis added)

Both Alok and Zahan "die" at the end of the novels, but it is not a traditional heroic death—

instead it is a transformative one, that leads to them starting a new quest, leaving the conclusion

open-ended.

These novels thus clearly follow an identifiable quest narrative, showing how these

heroes move the plot forward by embarking on various journeys, both physical and

psychological. I belabour this point since Frye himself chooses to belabour on it, repeatedly

bringing up the quest as a key trope of romance. As he states, romance "brings us closer than any

other aspect of literature *to the sense of fiction*, considered as a whole, as the epic of the creature,

man's vision of his own life as a quest" (14, emphasis added). Frye here places in conversation

two key elements of romance: "man's vision of his own life as a quest" and the "sense of fiction"

that romance conjures. I argue that this connection that Frye draws is exactly what causes the

estrangement of history in Indian science fiction. The "sense of fiction" that the romantic quest

evokes interrupts the novels' historical settings, causing an estrangement from a past the readers

are familiar with. History becomes fictionalised through the employment of such tropes that the

readers recognise as romantic in nature, disrupting, in turn, their recognition of history.[8]

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[7] In *The Devourers*, the word "khrissal" is used by the shape-shifters to refer to humans.
[8] This idea, of history as fictionalised, will be expanded on in the following chapter.

Moving down the vertical structure of romance, villains are the necessary counter to the hero. Once again, these figures are easily identifiable in the novels: the power-hungry Mangala taking over bodies in a bid to achieve immortality; the rapist and murderer Fenrir and the Stranger who initially planned to seduce and eat Alok; Svasa and the leaders of Vidroha who are so consumed by righting their wrongs that they are willing to sacrifice innocent children. While Frye doesn't elaborate as much on the villain, he does note that their role is to get the audience to "take sides, applauding [the hero] and hissing the other" (36). Yet, Ghosh, Das, and Mehta all complicate this slightly, by either conflating hero and villain or by encouraging their reader to empathise with the latter. While in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, the conflation is quite literal—the heroes literally become the villains in the end—in *The Devourers*, in much more subtle fashion, the heroes come to reflect the villains instead. Alok's reflections on himself, especially in the monologue that ends the novel, parallel the shape-shifters' shifting identity: the Stranger, described as "man and woman both" (242); his imakhr[9] "in that moment [*choosing*] to bear male and female genitals both" (276, emphasis added); the Stranger confiding that "[i]dentity doesn't mean the same thing to us as it does to you" (253); and finally, Alok proudly proclaiming at the end, "I am male. I am female. I am neither" (303).[10] Cyrah too, in her final confession to the Stranger, laments her status as being "mired between worlds." She states, with calm acceptance, how having "lived [her] life like no human," she "can't go back to humanity's shores. And I don't belong here either" (270–71). Her words echo the Stranger's own bitter internal crisis, of being both human and shape-shifter and not belonging to either, referring to himself as "Bastard

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[9] Gévaudan describes one's imakhr as follows: "I suppose to a khrissal that would be a parent, but it is not. He was my guide. He was many times my mate also" (Das, *The Devourers* 193).

[10] The conflation of hero and villain in this instance should not be misunderstood as a conflation of trans and non-binary identities with villainy. Instead, such fluid gender identity is simply one way that Das draws similarities between the two romantic poles in *The Devourers*.

thing, son of Banbibi, eater of Banbibi. Khrissal-rakshasa. Khrissal-rakshasa-kveldulf" (278).

They also echo Fenrir's wish to "become more like them [humans]" (74), leading to his exile, as

Gévaudan notes that he is now "more like her than [he is his] own kind" (73). Cyrah's mired

state is therefore also reflected in the villains' split identities.

This blurring of hero and villain is hinted at in *The Liar's Weave* as well when Zahan is

kidnapped and interrogated by the Vidroha leaders. Liling, forcing him to confront a lie that he

has told himself, asks: "Don't you wonder if it was the gods that built the catch? If you are the

hatadaiva[11] of all *hatadaiva* – a demigod who cannot see, touch or smell his power. It must be

lonely" (Mehta 298). Marking Zahan as *hatadaiva* puts him in the same boat as the Vidroha

leaders. Zahan's wishes also mirror their goal, with him, eyes full of hope and confidence,

confiding in Sorab: "'I think Vidroha is what I've been looking for' … There is – finally –

purpose … 'I can help them. I was likely meant to help them; this power, their fates – it aligns. I

can change their lives'" (90). In another life, Zahan and the Vidroha leaders would have teamed

up to change the world. It is only because of the latter's desperation that they become the villains

in his story.

This desperation also ties into how these authors make the reader empathise with the

villains, understanding if not condoning their actions. The Stranger ultimately does not follow

through with killing Alok, and we see how their relationship allows Alok to embrace parts of his

identity that he had repressed. By providing the reader with the Stranger's own first-person

narration, Das encourages us to see his side of the story, how his morals and worldview are

perhaps not evil but just different from ours. A clearer empathic connect, though, is in the

villains' societal positions. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Mangala's background as a

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[11] In *The Liar's Weave*, "*hatadaiva*" literally translates to "unfortunate," referring to all those whose stars map out misfortune in their futures.

presumably lower-caste "sweeper-woman" (Ghosh 123) cannot be divorced from her desire for power and control. Similarly, in *The Liar's Weave*, while Svasa, Liling, Tamarin, Jia, and Yaatri, are all complicit in kidnapping and murdering children, their reason for doing so—to overturn their status as *hatadaiva* and help others who have been similarly marked and ostracised—is not easily dismissed.

Yet, despite this seeming dilution of the black-and-white romantic dichotomy, all the authors still provide us with a villain to "hiss" at in their novel, one that is ever-present throughout their stories, but who lurks in the background. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, while Mangala is the evil mastermind who pulls the strings, Dr. Ronald Ross, the hapless virologist who is her puppet, is painted as an antagonist despite his gullibility. Murugan introduces him to Antar as "a genius, of course, but … also a dickhead" (Ghosh 46). Ghosh, in interviews, has stated that part of the inspiration for his book was Ross's memoirs, which Claire Chambers describes as a "self-aggrandizing narrative" that is "heavily doctored and biased" (60–61), claiming that it "explicitly equates scientific discovery with exploration and colonization … Ross's narrative obfuscates the part that local knowledge played in his discovery, projecting a one directional process of discovery, when in fact cross-cultural interaction created the possibility of a breakthrough" (64). Ross and all that he represents—colonisers who dismiss Indians as inferior—are easy to root against, becoming the true villains in the story.

Das also follows this vein of colonial villainy, alluding to the East India Trading Company's rise in the story set in 1600s Mughal India: we see an emaciated dervish warn Cyrah to leave Gévaudan and stop following Fenrir, as they are "white folk" who are "a different evil from the traders in their companies" (*The Devourers* 146). The comparison of the shape-shifters to the traders reminds the reader of what looms on the horizon: the Company and Britain's

eventual colonisation of India. Interestingly, while *The Liar's Weave* is perhaps set in a much more contentious time of colonisation, 1920s India, the villains are not the British, who are dismissed in whispers and overheard conversations from students, but rather the Association and what they stand for: the Brahmanical system that constrains the *hatadaiva*, upholding oppressive hierarchies that only benefit those in power.[12] By ensuring that there is always a bigger, badder villain who never makes it to the forefront of the novel, Ghosh, Mehta, and Das all keep the romantic polarity of good and evil alive in their works. And, as mentioned, it is this polarity that constantly contributes towards the reader's historical estrangement.

The hero/villain dichotomy seen throughout the novels also serves as a representation of the larger struggle between good and evil. As Frye claims:

> The characterization of romance is really a feature of its mental landscape. Its heroes and villains exist primarily to symbolize a contrast between two worlds, one above the level of ordinary experience, the other below it. There is, first, a world associated with happiness, security, and peace; the emphasis is often thrown on childhood or on an "innocent" or pregenital period of youth, and the images are those of spring and summer, flowers and sunshine. I shall call this world the idyllic world. The other is a world of exciting adventures, but adventures which involve separation, loneliness, humiliation, pain, and the threat of more pain. I shall call this world the demonic or night world. (*The Secular Scripture* 53)

Frye's separation of the idyllic and demonic world is clearly represented in the novels this thesis focuses on. In *The Liar's Weave* and *The Devourers*, the demonic world is depicted as wild, dangerous Indian forests: those on the borders of Mumbai, that keep Vidroha "hidden from the

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[12] This discussion of who the "true villains" are in the three novels, as well as the earlier mentions of characters' social statuses, will be further elaborated on in the following chapter on subaltern retellings of history.

gods" (Mehta 29), and the mangroves in the Sundarbans, thronging with man-eating tigers. The

language that Mehta and Das use to describe the forests speaks to their categorisation as demonic

worlds. When the forest is introduced, Mehta writes, "The first thing they tell newcomers is this:

the forest eats. It is an ever-ravenous emerald and mud beast, moving through the air around you,

seeking to move into you, root, bark, and vine, hoping for that knob of shoulder, a hooked toe or

a lightly crushed torso, marinated in bittersweet blood" (24). The forest is not just "carnivorous"

(312) though; it also is hallucinatory, tricking the mind and feeding on fear. As Zahan and

Porthos run through the jungle, this becomes evident: "Are there shadows near them? Zahan

cannot tell. He thinks he sees a figure leap – a cheetah, in the trees – but it is dark now, and he is

not sure … His skin changes. Things grow on it – fungi? Moss? He slaps his arms, panicked.

Careens … 'It's an illusion, only an illusion'" (255–56).

Similarly, in *The Devourers*, the Sundarbans act as the carnivorous forest, where fantasy

and reality meld together. Alok is asleep when they cross over into the region and notices the

difference immediately: "When I wake, everything has changed. The grey world gleams with

sunlight, and the dull earth around has sprung to green life … The forest shimmers surreal and

bright … We are in the Sundarbans" (Das 232–33). When he and the Stranger delve deeper into

the grove, this surreality is further heightened, echoing the descriptions in *The Liar's Weave*:

> The forest is a wall of scent and sound—the constant hiss of leaves, the bone-crackle of
>
> branches and dry detritus shifting and warming in the morning, the unending song of
>
> insects. The smell of wet earth and shadow-brewed chlorophyll makes it feel like entering
>
> the threshold of a new atmosphere, a different world than the one we were just walking
>
> in. I twitch and stumble with each tickle of leaf or bug on my skin, my entire body coiled

tight with fear … I can't even speak. I am shaking, wondering what's beyond the tree

trunks in that dazzling profusion of green. (Das 259–60)

Both forests clearly depict what Frye classifies as the demonic world. By venturing into them,

Alok and Zahan embark on "exciting adventures," but at the cost of "separation, loneliness,

humiliation, pain, and the threat of more pain," all of which both protagonists experience.

Yet, just as the hero and villain are sometimes conflated, as discussed above, the demonic

world is also at times conflated with the idyllic. By situating the Stranger and the leaders of

Vidroha as villains who the reader empathises with, demonic worlds are similarly transformed

into idyllic ones when the reader is provided with the villains' points of view. In *The Liar's*

Weave, though Vidroha exists in the state of constant peril, with children being eaten alive by

leopards and crocodiles and snakes prowling the lakes and trees, it is still a safe haven for

hatadaiva. During a heated conversation between the Vidroha leaders, Jia suggests, "Perhaps

Vidroha is the answer … Think about it … It's a home. It's cruel and desperate, but before this

none of them had even that. We've built…" (Mehta 217–18). Yaatri, realising that "Vidroha is

his *tanda*[13] now," agrees with her: "We must [stop]. I have lost one tribe to this, this

stubbornness to accept fate … Think. Would you lose Vidroha for it?" (217). To them, losing

Vidroha is akin to losing family. It carries that sense of stability and security. Dhani, the seven-

year-old boy killed by a leopard, and the other children considered *hatadaiva* grow up there,

viewing it as their only home.

In *The Devourers*, while Alok is terrified, the Stranger rests at ease. Through another

series of hallucinatory stories and dreams that transport them to the past, it is revealed that this

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[13] A *tanda* refers to "a large caravan of laden bullocks" that characterised merchant communities in precolonial
India, such as the Banjaras (Habib 375). Yaatri was part of the Banjara community, a tribe that was nomadic and
travelled in groups. The Banjaras were marked as criminals following the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 and forced to
disband. In *The Liar's Weave*, it is implied that *tanda* carries a familial and communal connotation.

forest is the Stranger's first home: "I am an infant, taking my first steps, tottering on young, chubby legs, miniature feet sinking into the warm mud of the forest" (Das 248). Das's contrast of the terrifying forest and the sweet scene of a toddler walking for the first time is effectively jarring. These is further heightened when, in the memory, the Stranger is fed by his imakhr, who arrives,

> trailing tendrils of blood from her chin, cheeks swollen. Her powerful hands pluck me off the ground like a fallen fruit, lifting me up into the air, making me dizzy, making me forget to cry, making me burp in delight … She lifts me to her face, carefully parting my tiny mouth with her lips. The deer's blood rushes into me, warm bubbling, dripping off that snake-sharp tongue and into my growing belly. I suckle, legs and arms twitching as my food splatters down my body in comforting rivulets. (248)

Once again, the juxtaposition between the horrifying scene of a monster feeding blood to a baby is offset by phrases such as "burp in delight" and "comforting rivulets." Through the eyes of the Stranger, the forest transforms into a place of domesticity, with us following him as he grows into a boy and revels, like all children do, in his imakhr's pride. Once again, the demonic world becomes a world of happiness and safety, embodying the "pregenital period of youth" associated with the idyllic world.[14]

This blurring of the demonic and idyllic worlds demonstrates the tension that the novels play with, between the themes of ascent and descent. This does not, however, lead to a negation of the romantic polarity of good and evil, but rather speaks to another dichotomous tension that

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[14] This blurring of the demonic and idyllic worlds is a prominent theme in Das's book. The novel begins with an epigraph from William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. The title, *The Devourers*, in fact, was apparently inspired by the "dichotomy of 'the devouring' and 'the prolific'" found in Blake's work (Das, "INTERVIEW"). Furthermore, the section in the Sundarbans, Part Six of the novel, is preceded by a translated epigraph from the Quran that ends as follows: "…and when the records are unfolded, and when the veil of heaven is removed, and when Hell is set blazing, and when Paradise is brought near, then each person shall know what he has brought with him" (*The Devourers* 228).

exists within these romantic narratives. The demonic and idyllic worlds fall under what Frye

calls the "dream world," which he introduces when distinguishing between realism and romance.

He discusses the popular conception of the two respectively representing the "waking world" and

"the dream world," stating,

> [i]t looks, therefore, as though romance were simply replacing the world of ordinary
>
> experience by a dream world, in which the narrative movement keeps rising into wish
>
> fulfilment or sinking into anxiety and nightmare. To some extent this is true. The realistic
>
> tendency seeks for its material, or, more accurately, for analogies to its material, in the
>
> world of waking consciousness; the up-and-down movement of romance is an indication
>
> that the romancer is finding analogies to his material also in a world where we "fall"
>
> asleep and wake "up." (*The Secular Scripture* 38)

Yet, romantic narratives, such as those in the form of contemporary science fiction, do not solely

engage with the dream world—many of them play with the tension between the two realms, as

seen in Frye's mentions of "falling" asleep and waking "up" (analogous to the themes of descent

and ascent). As he goes on to claim, "The romancer, *qua* romancer, does not accept these

categories of reality and illusion. Both his idyllic and his demonic worlds are a mixture of the

two, and no commonsense assumptions that waking is real and dreaming unreal will work for

romance" (38). There is a collapsing at work here, between the real and unreal, that is intrinsic to

the genre. I base my argument on this collapsing: when Indian science fiction intersects with

historical fiction, setting fantastical narratives against a recognisable historical past, this blurring

of the waking world (the historical setting we are used to) with the dream world (the fantastical,

fictional moments within the text) works towards estranging that historical narrative. The reader,

qua reader, experiences the mixture of reality and illusion alongside the romancer. Indian

historical science fiction, like *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Devourers*, and *The Liar's Weave*, complicates the reader's engagement and perception of history, by romanticising the historical narrative, thus making them call into question what they consider to be real and what they consider to be fantastic.[15]

Framing Historical Estrangement

In descent narratives, we as readers "seldom get a clear sight of progress toward a conclusion. Such stories do not end: they stop, and very frequently they can be easily started again. They are designed to provide a kind of idealized shadow of the continuum of our lives, an endless dream world in which we can keep losing ourselves" (Frye, *The Secular Scripture* 110). This endless dream world must often be structured in order to be rendered comprehensible. Frye accordingly goes on to claim that "[a] modulation of the endless romance is the linking together of a series of stories by a frame providing a unified setting" (110). The frame narrative is thus a literary device that allows readers to make sense of the dream world, as seen in two of the three novels this thesis focuses on. Ruby Ramraj is correct in stating that "Ghosh's multilayered narrative structure in *The Calcutta Chromosome* befits the quest motif used so often in science fiction and fantasy novels" (194). Yet, I argue that the frame, used anachronistically, functions dialectically in these works: it acts not only "as a convenience of reading, a means of gradually

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[15] This idea of the real versus fantastic or of waking versus dreaming can be placed alongside Dolzani's earlier claim of science fiction, as romance, being based on "a contrast between a sense of wonder and what we might call the disenchantment of ordinary life" (xxvi–vii). Frye, in the same book, expands on this idea: "'Sense of wonder' is the most frequent phrase used in discussions of science fiction and fantasy. In *The Known and the Unknown: The Iconography of Science Fiction* … Gary K. Wolfe defines what he calls a 'dialectic of wonder': 'All of this leads to the conclusion that the sense of wonder in science fiction may well be a sense of the tension set up between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the known and the unknown'" (377).

introducing the reader to the extraordinary" (Seed 138), but simultaneously as an extension of the extraordinary itself, estranging the reader from temporal familiarity.

The frame narrative, according to W.H. Clawson, is a device "composed for the primary purpose of introducing and connecting a series of tales, which are the raison d'etre of the whole work" (qtd. in Gittes 2). Essentially, it is a story within a story. Anachronistic frame narratives are when the two (or more) stories are set in different time periods, whether it be a matter of months or years or millenia, switching back between one and the other, creating an anti-chronological narrative. This device was popularised in anglophone literature through the Gothic novel, which used the frame narrative to add to the terror and mystery that surrounds the genre. C.C. Tarr suggests that "[w]hile frame narratives appear to provide structure—limits, boundaries, borders—they far more frequently disturb narrative cohesiveness" (4), creating discomfort in the reader. This is heightened by the fact that "often these frames are left open and remain unresolved or complicated by aborted or alternate endings" (7). The reader, accustomed to a certain narrative trajectory, is unsettled by such framing, paralleling any unsettlement caused by the contents of the Gothic story.

Following the Gothic novel, the frame narrative did not disappear, but was appropriated by science fiction. Indeed, Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a novel that uses this device prominently, cleverly sits at the crossroads of both genres; it is lauded as a prime example of Gothic fiction, while also being considered one of the first ever science fiction novels (Suvin 147). The science fiction genre similarly utilises the discomfort caused by the frame narrative to its own benefit, albeit slightly differently. While Tarr argues that "[f]raming devices have often been considered a means of distancing author from text" (8), I propose that it also distances the reader from the text. In line with Suvin's definition of science fiction as "cognitive estrangement" (15), instead of just adding to the terror and mystery to the novel, as it does for the Gothic, the frame narrative

here acts as a method of further *estranging* the reader's cognition. By interrupting the chronological flow of narrative, the frame makes the reader rethink their view of time and perspective. As Suvin states, "[t]he effect of such factual reporting of fictions is one of confronting a set normative system – a Ptolemaic-type closed world picture – with a point of view or look implying a new set of norms; in literary theory this is known as the attitude of *estrangement*" (18). This estrangement here then is in the reader being confronted by a point of view that encourages them to re-imagine the flow of time. Seo-Young Chu builds on this idea of the frame narrative as a form of estrangement. According to her, "there are SF narratives that evoke lyric timelessness through a poetics of anachronism whereby disparate chronological eras are somehow juxtaposed, brought into ghostly superimposition, or compelled to hover in one another's vicinity" (30). I argue that this idea, of anachronistic frame narratives as a science fictional device that evokes temporal estrangement, contributes to how readily and smoothly the genres of science fiction and historical fiction overlap, as the frame narrative is just as readily found in the latter. Indeed, while the frame narrative manages to conjure a sense of science fictionality, it simultaneously establishes a sense of historicity to the novel as well.

Historical fiction has depended on the frame narrative for as long as science fiction has, with the nineteenth century seeing the device employed liberally in both genres. Mari Hatavara claims that in historical fiction, the frame narrative "connect[s] to the poetics of writing and commenting on history, and also to the balance between referentiality and self-reflection" (243). She goes on to state that "they are part and parcel of the historical novel's link to the historiography proper, and essential in building the historical illusion." They thus "serve the interpretation of the text itself and provide opportunities to guide the reading process," (244) hearkening back to David Seed's claim as well, of the frame narrative as that which fosters comprehensibility and familiarity. This is the dialectic function that I mentioned: the frame

narrative not only works to establish this historiographic link, which the reader associates with historical fiction, but also works to estrange the reader from this familiar setting, which they then associate with science fiction. We see this dual usage operate in both Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* and Das's *The Devourers*.

Das's *The Devourers* employs the frame narrative heavily and effectively—the novel continuously flips between 2010s India and seventeenth-century Mughal India, framed through Alok's transcriptions of various scrolls given to him by the Stranger, which are written by himself, his father Fenrir, as well as his mother Cyrah. The chapter headings are a helpful marker for noting when the break happens; each section alternates between past and present, with the former neatly divided under the headings of "The First Scroll *(For Cyrah)*" and "The Second Scroll *(To Rakh'narokh)*." However, this temporal division is not as clean as it appears—during both sections devoted to the scrolls, the reader is continuously reminded of the fact that the text they are reading is being delivered to them via Alok's transcription. The parts of the story set in Mughal India are repeatedly interrupted by Alok's footnotes, in which he debates the authenticity of the scrolls and provides the reader with helpful cues and explanations that help distinguish the story in the past as a departure from the story in the present. The use of the footnotes allows Das to speak through Alok, providing the reader with information to orient themselves against the temporal shifts, such as Alok helpfully stating who the narrator of the scroll appears to be or firmly situating the story in an approximate time period. For instance, he writes: "From the description that follows, this is the construction site of the Taj Mahal, placing the time of these events anywhere between A.D. 1632 and 1653, the period it was being built. Probably somewhere in the middle (1640s) going by the degree of completion. Shah Jahan ruled the Mughal Empire until 1658" (45). Here, Das uses Alok's occupation as a history professor to his

advantage; since we know his profession, we are likely to trust his approximation, making him a more reliable narrator (or, in this case, interlocutor).

However, Alok's faith in his own ability to be reliable and sure of himself is constantly called into question by the Stranger. The past is not just interrupted by the present in the novel; the past interrupts the present at times as well. The chapters set in 2010s India also contain real-time stories told by the Stranger that transport Alok (and the reader) to various pasts, both seventeenth-century India as well as an unspecified later period firmly under British rule, breaking up the boundaries of past and present within the sections themselves. Alok is left reeling after each tale, unsure of what is real and what is not—"I feel like I've just woken up from the most vivid dream I've ever had" (11); "I look at my small brown hands … and I wonder who I am" (19); "We're still near Jadavpur. This is real" (19); "I feel very far from the present" (22). Alok's footnotes and the oral storytelling of the Stranger's deliberately blurs the line between past and present *within* the temporally demarcated sections, creating dissonance in the structure that the reader has become used to. Das skilfully manages to unsettle even those who have become used to the anachronistic frame narrative, further heightening the reader's estrangement from reality, both within and outside of the text.

Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* follows a similar anachronistic structure. The novel flips between various time periods: the past, set around late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonial India; the present, 1995 India; and a not-so-distant future that remains unspecified. However, Ghosh's approach to anachronism is far more erratic than Das's. Rather than have the novel neatly divided into multiple demarcated sections, Ghosh chooses to have only two specified, overarching sections: "August 20: Mosquito Day" and "The Day After" (that is, August 21). Within these two, chapters are haphazardly distributed, with the story switching between completely different eras, from past, present, and future, in a seemingly random order,

with no mentioned time period, but with each narrative appearing to take place on that day—

August 20 or 21.

Like Alok, Murugan in *The Calcutta Chromosome* acts as an interlocutor at times,

explaining his conspiracy theories and research to Antar, Urmila, and the reader. Just as Alok's

position as a history professor makes him a reliable narrator—at least, in terms of the historical

explanations—Murugan's position as an expert in the "highly specialized aspect of this subject

[medical history]: the history of malaria research" (31) encourages the reader to trust his

accounts of Ross's biography and the surrounding facts and discrepancies around malaria

research. Ghosh, however, complicates this, positioning Murugan as not just an expert but an

obsessive fanatic who gets discredited by the scientific community. He is expelled from the

History of Science Society and labelled "a crank and an eccentric" (32), forcing the reader to be

somewhat sceptical of his findings, marking him as a less reliable narrator.

Due to this erratic framing and unreliable interlocutor, unlike Das, the reader has no

friendly guide to help them parse through the time jumps; rather, they are expected to use the

various characters and historical references as markers of a chapter's temporal setting. The

absence of such a guide speaks to Ghosh's deliberate attempt to estrange the reader as much as

possible, shrouding the stories within more confusion and mystery. The form here mimics and

reproduces the shadowy and uncanny themes and characters that make up the novel's contents.

The Calcutta Chromosome's ambiguous ending hearkens back to the Gothic trend of leaving the

frames open or abruptly aborted, contributing to the overall eerie aura.

These open and aborted frames speak back to Frye's discussion of descent narratives that

began this subsection—romantic narratives that "have a long tradition … of stories in which we

seldom get a clear sight of progress toward a conclusion. Such stories do not end: they stop, and

very frequently they can be easily started again" (*The Secular Scripture* 110). As seen, both *The*

Devourers and *The Calcutta Chromosome* employ frame narratives in entirely ambiguous and open-ended ways. Ghosh's novel concludes abruptly with Antar apparently being chosen by Tara/Mangala as a vessel for Laakhan to continue living on forever; however, even this is only vaguely hinted at:

> There were voices everywhere now, in his room, in his head, in his ears, it was as though a crowd of people were in the room with him. They were saying "We're with you; you're not alone; we'll help you across."

> He sat back and sighed as he hadn't sighed in years. (*The Calcutta Chromosome* 262)

Antar's fate is left unknown, and whether Laakhan's transference is successful or not is never revealed. The shift from Antar being entirely alone in his apartment to suddenly being surrounded by people—are there even people there or are they just the disembodied voices of Managala's cult?—is also never explained. Even the story set in 1995, that concludes just before this scene, ends abruptly with Urmila and Murugan in a car en route to Renupur station. A disembodied holographic Murugan only barely fills in the gaps in the final chapter, hinting at Mangala's victory over them and, now, Antar. Does Mangala achieve her quest for the chromosome of immortality? As Lou Ratté answers, "We don't know, and we never find out" (28).

In *The Devourers*, the book's conclusion is similarly deliberately open-ended, with Alok's identity becoming increasingly ambiguous and blurred following his relationship with the Stranger. The final monologue of the novel, delivered by him, highlights this:

> I am Cyrah of Lahore. I am Fenrir of the far Norse lands. I am Izrail of the Sundarbans, son of Cyrah and Fenrir, bastard khrissal-werewolf-rakshasa. I am Alok of Kolkata … I killed my parents. I am my mother. I am my father. I am a shape-shifter. I am devi. I am deva. I am sura. I am asura. I am male. I am female. I am neither. I am rakshasa. I am

djinn. I am werewolf. I am not a khrissal. I was once a human. I want to be a human. I

want to love a human. I am a human. (Das 303)

The intentional ambiguity around Alok, his identity, and his future contributes towards the use of

frame narratives as devices in science fiction that serve to complicate and disrupt the story rather

than structure and define it.

The Liar's Weave, which ends with Zahan on the precipice of a new journey, is similarly

open-ended despite not following a frame narrative structure. The reader is uncertain of whether

Zahan acquiesces to Tarachand and Krishna's order to lie away his power or whether he will

continue to change reality and people's futures, though the latter seems to be what is implied:

"[Tarachand] says: promise me you won't lie after this. Zahan promises. He cannot decide if the

in-between is kind or a fool. There is often little difference" (Mehta 326). We are left wondering

how many more lies Zahan spun into reality.

The open-endedness of all three texts is not novel for works of science fiction, or even for

those under the alternate history subgenre.[16] Yet, I mark this open-endedness as uniquely radical

due to Indian historical science fiction's tendency to lead to the same present moment as that of

the reader, instead of a new, jarringly different reality. What does it mean for a novel to end so

ambiguously, so estrangingly, when the plot leads to a recognisable, familiar present? Is our

present a present that Zahan lied into existence or is it one where he kept his promise to

Tarachand and Krishna? Was the Daghdavasta right when he said "[t]his boy is an anomaly. In

time, he will be swallowed … have you forgotten the grandeur of the cosmos? Of how small

earth is in it, of how tiny we, within that earth, are? What can a boy do to the cosmos?" (73). Is

our present the same present as Alok's and Antar's, who uncover hidden, secret histories,

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[16] Once again, think of Wells's The Time Machine or of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's The Difference Engine (1990).

thought to be myths and folktales? What does it mean to grapple with myths and folktales as histories that lead to our present, instead of fantasies that are dismissed as just stories?

I argue that reading such texts cause all these questions to erupt within the reader, resulting in a "denaturalization" (Freedman 56) that forces them to associate the present they know with an estranging past; this estrangement is further emphasised by the authors choosing to end their novels on such nebulous notes. The forced association between a familiar present and an unfamiliar past creates a hangover effect, where the estrangement in the novel carries over to the reader's reality, making them question just how real their present is. It asks them to reflect on the historical narratives they know and accept that lead them to the same present, a reflection that can be broken down into two big questions: What does it mean to conflate mythology, fiction, and history? And who is writing the myths and historical narratives that are accepted as real? These questions shall be further explored in the following chapter and in the conclusion.

Chapter 2: Mythological and Subaltern Retellings

Vandana Singh writes that she "generally" does not "like to use the term 'mythology' for a living tradition – it's a western term that does not quite fit … Asian cultures have always blurred the boundary between what we might call mundane reality and the realm of metaphor and symbol, resisting the western tendency to neatly separate and compartmentalise."

—Sami Ahmad Khan, *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj*

Suddenly, taking Urmila by surprise, Murugan fell to his knees, squeezing himself into the narrow legspace of the backseat. Bending low he touched his forehead to her feet. "Don't forget me," he begged her. "If you have it in your power to change the script, write me in. Don't leave me behind. Please."

—Amitav Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome*

Fictionalising and Mythologising the Past

"History? Tales. The weaving of words" (Das 6). This line from *The Devourers* signals the contentious position history has long since occupied: whether it errs closer to fact or fiction. It also hearkens back to how this position is exacerbated in romantic narratives. As Northop Frye claims, romance "brings us closer than any other aspect of literature to the sense of fiction" (*The Secular Scripture* 14); I have argued that the presence of romantic elements, as discussed in the previous chapter, work to estrange history by fictionalising it, thus disrupting the reader's accepted historical accounts. Richard Maxwell builds on this notion, arguing that the

introduction of romantic tropes and devices are "modes of mixing history with fiction" (2). While romantic tropes succeed in estranging history, this idea, of history being fictionalised, of history *as* fiction, is directly addressed in Ghosh's, Das's, and Mehta's novels.

Hayden White, in his seminal text *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), spends over 400 pages unpacking this, calling the first step of the historiographical process a "*transformation of chronicle into story*" (5), echoing the Stranger's conflation of history and storytelling that opens this section. White builds on this conflation further, stating that

> [i]t is sometimes said that the aim of the historian is to explain the past by 'finding,' 'identifying,' or 'uncovering' the 'stories' that lie buried in chronicles; and that the difference between 'history' and 'fiction' resides in the fact that the historian 'finds' his stories, whereas the fiction writer 'invents' his. This conception of the historian's task, however, obscures the extent to which 'invention' also plays a part in the historian's operations. (6–7)

The idea of the historian "inventing" their historical account is alluded to here, in a manner not unlike the fiction writer. White thus takes the conflation between storytelling and history further, choosing to position history alongside fiction, as opposed to other non-fictional narratives.

Das, in *The Devourers*, blurs this line between history and fiction multiple times, usually using the Stranger as a conduit. As mentioned already, within the first few pages itself, the Stranger responds to Alok's assertion of being a professor of history, stating, "History? Tales. The weaving of words" (6). There is no derision or mockery in the Stranger's voice; he is genuinely impressed with Alok's choice of occupation, viewing history as an essential tool that future generations need. He instead appears to mourn the state of education in the country,

following his statement with: "If only we had better storytellers, perhaps they would learn more willingly from the past" (Das 6). The apparent synonymy between historians and storytellers encourages the reader to reflect on the magnitude of difference between the two. The Stranger's claim also raises an interesting question: is the purpose of history to know the truth of what happened or to effectively learn from it? In her *LARB* review of the book, Melissa Kurtz examines this quote, stating, "[t]he point, it seems, is that stories may be 'fiction,' but their effects are very real, performed through the reactions and thoughts incited in readers." This idea, of the real effects of fiction/history, will be elaborated on in the conclusion, alongside a critical commentary of the BJP's weaponising of history.

Das continues this conflation between history and fiction, extending it to his own novel, supplying a meta-fictional undercurrent to *The Devourers*. Alok's introduction to his unbelievable story, that unfolds throughout the rest of the book, begins with him addressing the reader, saying, "To set the stage, I must tell you where I was" (1). Not even ten pages later, the Stranger speaks the exact same words to Alok, asking the reader to reflect on if they have accepted Alok to be a reliable narrator and if the obvious paralleling with the Stranger is then an attempt to make them believe him as well. Do we accept the historian's word to be fact but then view the storyteller's same words as fiction?

The Stranger goes on to confide in Alok: "I want to tell you a story" (7). The story, of the Stranger hunting a woman in a group of bauls, has Alok breaking into a sweat, wondering whether it was real or not. The Stranger reassures him:

> "…Professor, I am merely showing you the benefits of rationalizing a story. There are none. Stories are fiction. Made up."

> "You told me that story was true," I [Alok] remark, feeling smug.

"It is." (Das 12)

This assertion that a story—and history—can seemingly be, paradoxically, both fictional and true lends credence to the idea of interpretation as the only form of rendering the past, through the fictionalisation of the unprocessed historical record.

This gets carried forward in the same conversation, with Alok asking the Stranger how the story ends and the latter replying, "You're not a professor of literature, but you are a professor of history. History has all the stories. Make it up. Guess" (Das 12). This seems to contradict what the Stranger and Das have been saying: that history is another form of storytelling, which we understand as literature—here, however, history is placed in opposition to literature. The reader is left wondering that if history is fiction, and if history and literature are opposites, then what does that make literature? Das's weaving back and forth between positioning history and storytelling/literature/fiction as both synonyms and antonyms further complicates the reader's perception of the two and contributes to the confusion around where the boundaries between them lie, further estranging their conceptualisation of history.

Das is not the only one who plays with the idea of history and fiction. During an interview with *The Hindu*, in response to a question about how "history is not being taught in India in a way that helps make connections," Ghosh states: "As I was writing I felt more and more that today the world we are in is in some ways so strange, so surprising, that really you cannot make sense of it with non-fiction. We need fiction more than ever" ("For me storytelling"). His belief that the contemporary world can only access history through fiction once again challenges the reader's preconceptions of what they understand as history. This is exemplified through the figure of Phulboni in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. The renowned author's subplot, much like the rest of the novel, constantly toes the line between fiction and

reality. Phulboni's fictional story about a woman who almost drowns but is saved by grasping onto a stone figurine that she hails as her god is later retold to him as a true event that happened. Later, he encounters the same stone figurine that he imagined, down to the minute detail, being worshipped in Kalighat, a neighbourhood in Calcutta. Neither of these individuals, the man who retells the story to Phulboni or the man who made the idol, "had [ever] heard of Phulboni and had never read anything he had ever written" (Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome* 195). Is the story then something that sprung from his imagination or is it based in reality? Which preceded the other?

Ghosh explicitly encourages the reader to stay with this question, writing, "Phulboni … was no longer sure which had happened first or whether they were all aspects of the coming of that image into the world: its presence in the mud, the writing of his story, the bather's discovery or the tale he had just heard, in Kalighat" (195). Chitra Sankaran draws a connection between this narrative and David Hume's distinction of memory and imagination—"that memory is truer than imagination and it is due to causality brought about by a consciousness of time" ("Sharing Landscapes" 113)—claiming that Ghosh challenges Hume's thesis through Phulboni's subplot. She points to an earlier moment in the novel as proof of this, where Urmila quotes Phulboni, stating, "I have never known … whether life lies in words or in images, in speech or sight. Does a story come to be in the words that I conjure out of my mind or does it live already, somewhere enshrined in mud and clay—in an image, that is, in the crafted mimicry of life?" (Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome* 194). Phulboni himself is unclear whether his story is based on imagination or memory; here again, history and fiction are muddied together, both for the characters as well as the readers.

This muddying of history and fiction, past and present, speaks to Daniel Baker's idea of how, "[u]sing history as a fictional device, contemporary historical fiction creates a doubling effect; it uses a 'then' to talk about a 'then' and a 'now.' This is intentional and pivotal. Investing the past with the cultural input of the present speaks directly and explicitly to the act of history creation" (2). This ties back to Frye's own discussion of creation, of whether "the mythological universe is a human creation" or not. Similar to how history is presented in these texts, mythology too is constantly torn between being considered either "the created scripture [or] the revealed scripture," and it is only through this tension between the "real and the humanly imaginative, that our own mental evolution grows" (43).

The overlaps between history and mythology in these three novels are integral to my argument. Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay's conception of the mythologerm as the crux of Indian science fiction speaks to this. Chattopadhyay defines the mythologerm as the "tendency to continually rework the history of science through the use of the mythic, or to use the mythic as a source of alternative or unknown or advanced science, or to use the mythic as a hinge to elaborate a difference between one kind of sf and another" ("On the Mythologerm" 437). Each of these tendencies are actualised in the novels this thesis focuses on. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, the history of malarial medicine is reworked through the myths of Mangala-bibi and her shadowy tribal cult. In *The Liar's Weave*, the mythological suppositions that gird Vedic astrology are imagined to be scientific fact. In *The Devourers*, the myths of Bonbibi and the shape-shifters work together to demarcate Indian science fiction that glorifies Hindu mythology from that which challenges it. Yet, I locate another thread of the mythologerm, which Chattopadhyay speaks of in his other essay, "Kalpavigyan and Imperial Technoscience," that runs through all three novels: the tendency to use the mythic as an alternate history. Indeed,

Chattopadhyay discusses how the myth is "a site where minimal history is transformed through imagination." He goes on refer to the mythologerm as "*[t]he framing of mythology as history*, mythic elements as science, and myth as a cultural prism" (114, emphasis added). This use of mythology as an alternate history is a uniquely common characteristic of Indian science fiction, mainly due to the Indian preoccupation to conflate mythology and history, most clearly seen in Hindutva propaganda.[17]

As Sami Ahmad Khan notes, "[t]he concepts of myth versus reality, fantasy versus history and fiction versus truth are ruptured by the Indian classical imagination" (96). Khan cites R. Malhotra, who claims that "accounts of past are not made through either myth or history exclusively' but by itihasa; this implies 'dharma traditions deal with their past through "itihasa", a Sanskrit term sometimes translated as "myth" or simply "narrative", which may not always be the opposite of truth'" (97). This idea of myth as history further troubles the reader's engagement with the latter. As the created versus revealed tension that Frye proposes is present in both, considering myths *as* alternate histories in science fiction texts heightens one's estrangement. Indeed, I have shown how the fictionalisation of history, that we know to be an estrangement of history, is achieved through the romantic tropes present; yet, I have neglected so far to mention perhaps the most prominent romantic trope that Frye conceives: the myth. Mythologising history, in the way that Chattopadhyay, Khan, Malhotra, and myself suggest, thus follows the same vein set out in Chapter 1, of how the romanticisation of history leads to its estrangement. However, I argue that by mythologising history, that is, by having myth stand in for an alternate history, these authors *further* estrange their reader's cognition. This is because the estrangement caused by mythologising history exceeds the simple fictionalisation of history, namely due to the above

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[17] This will be elaborated on in the conclusion.

tension. Frye, in "The Expanding World of Metaphor," remarks that "[t]he myth, like the metaphor, conveys two contradictory messages. One is 'this happened.' The other is 'this almost certainly did not happen, at least not in precisely the way described'" (350). As seen here, the tension of created versus revealed, which fiction does not have since it is always recognised as the former, is what furthers the historical estrangement. While simply fictionalising historical narratives estranges the reader to some extent (as demonstrated in Chapter 1), Indian science fiction takes this estrangement to another level by revealing the tension between fact and fiction and muddying the reader's idea of history as fitting firmly in one or the other by equating it with mythology.

In Ghosh's, Mehta's, and Das's novels, mythology as an alternate history estranges the reader's conception of history in two ways: through revealing a multiplicity of history and through the foregrounding of subaltern narratives. Once again, due to Indian science fiction's unique configuration of the alternate history novel as one that re-imagines in the past in ways that lead to same contemporary moment as that of the reader, the myth-as-history forces the reader to question the validity of both the history they know and the fictional history present in the novel. This is literalised in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, through Phulboni's subplot. The crux of Phulboni's dilemma is not simply which came first, his fiction or the folklore, but rather that the two seem to exist concurrently. Ghosh here reifies what White terms as the "crisis of historicism," that is, "the consistent elaboration of a number of equally comprehensive and plausible, yet apparently mutually exclusive, conceptions of the same sets of events [that] … undermine confidence in history's claim to 'objectivity,' 'scientificity,' and 'realism'" (41). Historian Mark Salber Phillips argues that this multiplicity is the result of the historian's

"*estrangement*" (217, emphasis added) from the past—a word-choice that I specifically choose to focus on.

Phillips argues that this estrangement is the product of "history [being] really constructed out of a series of gaps of understanding … that remains even to the end between the accumulating knowledge of the historian and the obscurities that still surround the subject at the center of his history" (224). The estrangement here lies in the historian's lack of complete access to the unprocessed historical record, causing them to fill in the gaps with their own narrative. While the word "estrangement" is probably employed by Phillips independently of science fiction theory, it nonetheless brings to mind Darko Suvin's famous concept of cognitive estrangement as the foundation for science fiction. By placing Chattopadhyay, Suvin, and Phillips in conversation with one another, I argue that the mythologising of history exemplifies this concurrent multiplicity. Phillips's estrangement from the past maps onto the estrangement of history caused by science fiction texts that literalise White's "crisis of historicism." In this way, depicting myth as an alternate history asks the reader to confront this crisis; being forced to recognise the historical multiplicity in the novels estranges them from the singular historical narratives that dominate the public realm.[18]

I argue that through its estrangement, Indian science fiction enables us to better understand history—especially those histories that are side-lined or hidden—as it locates an intrinsic element of the speculative genre within the historical narrative itself. Frederic Jameson demonstrates how science fiction is primed to engage with this idea of multiplicity. Indeed, in his book *The Political Unconscious* (1981)*,* Jameson argues for the plurality of history, claiming that

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[18] While I do not reference her directly, I must also credit Linda Hutcheon and her idea of "historiographic metafiction" as well. Hutcheon's discussion of how historiographic metafiction "problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge, because there is no reconciliation, no dialectic here—just unresolved contradiction" (106) was instrumental in understanding White's own claims and placing them in conversation with science fiction theory.

such "heterogeneous historical perspectives" (104) were limited by the constraints of realism, and found liberation in romanticism:

> Indeed, this multiple temporality tends to be sealed off and recontained again in "high" realism and naturalism, where a perfected narrative apparatus (in particular the threefold imperatives of authorial depersonalization, unity of point of view, and restriction to scenic representation) begins to confer on the "realistic" option the appearance of an asphyxiating, self-imposed penance … It is in the context of the gradual reification of realism in late capitalism that romance once again comes to be felt as the place of narrative heterogeneity and of freedom from that reality principle to which a now oppressive realistic representation is the hostage. (104)

Science fiction, as a generic descendant of romance, *"offer[s] the possibility of sensing other historical rhythms, and of demonic or Utopian transformations of a real now unshakably set in place.* (104, emphasis added) History thus finds its outlet through science fiction, in its ability to "[sense] other historical rhythms," that is, to parse through the various other histories and critically examine the historical narrative that dominates public belief.

This sensing of other historical rhythms is showcased in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, seen clearly in Murugan's paper titled "An Alternative Interpretation of Late 19th Century Malaria Research: is there a Secret History?" (Ghosh 32). The phrase "Alternative Interpretation" stands out in conjunction with the mention of history. Murugan here is not suggesting that something has been misrecorded but rather that there exists a series of different histories—note the later use of the article "a" instead of "the" before "Secret History." "Alternative Interpretation" thus not only supports the idea of historical heterogeneity, but also argues that some histories are

prioritised over others—that in the multiplicity, there is a suppression of other histories and a privileging and popularisation of a dominant single one.

Murugan later asks Antar, "Do you think that everything that can be known, should be known?" (Ghosh 52). This question follows the implication of his paper's title, that there exists histories that are forced, either deliberately or indirectly, into the margins and into obscurity. However, there is also another underlying implication to Murugan's question: whether learning about these histories is beneficial or not. This seemingly ties back to the question raised in *The Devourers*, about what the true purpose of history is: to uncover the truth or to better learn from it? The follow-up to this question that *The Calcutta Chromosome* offers though, is not what is being learnt from the history available to us but rather what is learnt from the erasure of these alternative histories? What does learning about such erasure prompt?

Chattopadhyay marks "the creation of alternate locales that bring the past into the present/future and establish an alternate history of the community" as a distinct trend in Indian science fiction ("Kalpavigyan and Imperial Technoscience" 118). Tying this to the questions that *The Calcutta Chromosome* raises though, a clarification one must ask of Chattopadhyay is an alternate history of *whose* community? Whose histories are being erased or rewritten/re-imagined? By mythologising the past, Ghosh, Mehta, and Das do not simply feed into the revitalisation of Hindu mythology that has proliferated the genre market in India, but rather seem to challenge it. Suparno Banerjee notes that in much of Indian science fiction, the "use of myths is often exploited to legitimise Hindu nationalism or as a subversive device against the imposition of western values" (86). Yet, he also locates a countertrend of science fiction that relies on non-Hindu mythology, as seen in *The Devourers* and *The Calcutta Chromosome*. In such narratives, "the use of a mythical framework also lends the story a historical and

philosophical continuity similar to the type found in Hindu nationalist SF, but from a different and non-dominant perspective" (95). There are also those that rely on Hindu mythology but seek to work from the inside to "destabilise the mythical structure that governs Hindu patriarchy and casteist social formations by introducing subtle twists to the original myths or by endowing the myths with new subversive associations" (90); *The Liar's Weave* is one such novel.

I believe that mythologising the past emphasises the concurrent plurality of history, as it places the myth-as-alternate history alongside a historical setting familiar to and accepted by the reader. However, it also asks the reader to engage in understanding the mechanism by which such alternate histories are created, and to call into question the acceptance of one history over another. By mythologising history, the Indian science fiction texts this thesis contends with encourage subaltern retellings of history, bringing to light that which cannot be exist outside of a fictional re-imagining.

Subaltern Retellings of History

As repeatedly reiterated, a unique marker of Indian science fiction that I observe is the re-imagination of the alternate history novel as one which leads to the reader's contemporary moment. Such a re-imaging of history, as seen in Murugan's paper's title, attempts to tease out alternate "Secret [Histories]" of marginalised communities without radically altering their present oppressed position. Indian historical science fiction re-imagines to the past to better understand the current oppression, looking specifically to the hidden, probably unfindable, alternate histories that tell these communities' stories. The proposed methodology here is something akin to Saidiya Hartman's concept of critical fabulation. In her essay, "Venus in Two Acts," Hartman expounds on critical fabulation, stating that

[b]y playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the

sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have

attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized

account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might

have been done … By flattening the levels of narrative discourse and confusing narrator

and speakers, I hoped to illuminate the contested character of history, narrative, event,

and fact, to topple the hierarchy of discourse, and to engulf authorized speech in the clash

of voices. The outcome of this method is a 'recombinant narrative,' which 'loops the

strands' of incommensurate accounts and which weaves present, past, and future in

retelling the girl's story and in narrating the time of slavery as our present. (11–12)

Just as Hartman utilises the archive in a new way, in order to contend with the nameless Venus

who died on a slave ship, along with the countless others that "Venus" represents, I argue that

genre (specifically the science fiction genre) is similarly utilised to contend with the subaltern

and marginalised in India.

The overlap between Hartman's archival research and my own is brought even more into

focus by critical fabulation's "commitment to imagination as a form of historical inquiry" (Nash

595). Both Hartman and science fiction depend on imagination as a means of historiography, and

both also seek to expand history by "attend[ing] to the openings and fissures produced inside the

enclosure and the subjunctive possibilities that reside in lived experiences" (qtd. in Copeland et

al. 101). As discussed, Suvin refers to science fiction as "a literary genre whose necessary and

sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose

main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical

environment" (20). Hartman's commitment to imagination parallels Suvin's positioning of

science fiction in an imaginative framework, showing how critical fabulation can similarly be employed through genre as well. Moreover, Hartman's mention of flattening narrative discourse and confusing narrators and speakers is reminiscent of my arguments in the previous chapter, on how the frame narrative affects and shapes science fiction—her playing with form with respect to history slots in neatly with science fiction's playing with form with respect to the same.

Hartman, in an interview, builds on critical fabulation, saying that "[w]hat I call critical fabulation is, akin to Aimé Césaire in *Poetry and Cognition*, an emphasis on poetics in creating a knowledge that is suited to the measure of the world as opposed to imperial or colonial knowledge formations" (qtd. in Copeland et al. 101). Her explicit steeping of the methodology in anti-colonial agendas is important to note, especially since Ghosh's, Das's, and Mehta's novels all contend with India's colonial past in some way. The following pages in this chapter contain close readings of the novels that demonstrate their engagement with colonialism and with the neo-colonialist powers that take over from the British. They also demonstrate the novels' portrayal of the subaltern, and their attempt to re-imagine the subaltern's position and past, in ways that do not "give voice" (Hartman 12) to them, "but rather … imagine what cannot be verified, a realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death—social and corporeal death" (12). This distinction is crucial. Both my analysis as well as the novels themselves do not attempt to speak for the subaltern or provide them with a fictional agency, but instead simply imagine a history other than the dominant colonial/neo-colonial one that erases their existence.

Hartman rightly states that "[i]t is an impossible writing which attempts to say that which resists being said (since dead girls are unable to speak). It is a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against

the archive" (12). Hartman's caveats are essential to her methodology and to my argument of

subaltern retellings as being inherently estranging. While reading the science fiction novels, the

reader is constantly made cognizant that they are engaging with subaltern mythologies, which

Hartman notes as "impossible" and "unrecoverable." The impossibility of the alternate history

existing is therefore in constant tension with the reader's growing distrust with and distance from

the history they know. As the reader must suspend their disbelief to follow and enjoy the novel,

they must grapple with accepting the alternate history as fact. However, this suspension of

disbelief proves to be exceedingly difficult due to the history's subaltern nature, causing another

layer of estrangement from the historical narrative. The reader, aware of this impossibility of

representing the subaltern, is thus further estranged from the already estranging narrative.

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In Das's *The Devourers*, the novel switches back between present-day Kolkata—assumed

to be around 2015 or so—and seventeenth-century Mughal India. While the journal entries that

the Stranger gives Alok to transcribe are two undated separate accounts either written or dictated

by his parents, Fenrir and Cyrah, Alok deduces that the past narratives are approximately set

between 1632 and 1653, based on references to Shah Jahan's rule and the Taj Mahal's

construction (Das 45). Though the novel takes place in Mughal India, Das, rather than focusing

on the popular narratives of the terror and tyranny of the Muslim rule, employs grand

descriptions of the vast cities, where even the poor have better lives on the streets than off them.

Cyrah spends pages expounding the beauties of Shahjahanabad: "I couldn't help but be awed by

the gleaming red sandstone walls of the scaffolded Qila-Mubarak on the horizon, incomplete but

towering over the tumult of the town" (Das, *The Devourers* 169). While walking through the

newly-built Chandni-Chauk at the centre of the city, Cyrah rebukes Gevaudan's label of the city

as a "pigsty," coldly stating, "[t]his city is one of the finest in the empire, probably in all of Europe and Asia taken together" (175). Cyrah views Muslim architecture and infrastructure as a point of nationalistic pride—or at least cultural pride, since India as a nation did not exist at this point. Das's descriptions of Shahjahanabad and Islamic buildings and monuments as something to have pride in speaks back against the Hindu Right's attempts at erasing them from India's map—both physically, in terms of the thousands of mosques being targeted to be replaced by temples (a precedent most infamously set by the 2019 Babri Masjid Supreme Court ruling), as well as titularly, as seen in the recent name changes made to cities, towns, and neighbourhoods with Muslim names (Ellis-Peterson; Frayer).

Despite the Mughal cities being given long, luxurious descriptions, the Stranger laments the replacement of the seventeenth-century villages with increasingly metropolitan cities; he, however, chooses to cite the British as the cause: "The British messed it all up. Built their City of Palaces here, built Fort William. Everything changed after Plassey" (Das, *The Devourers* 80)— referencing the Battle of Plassey (1757), in which the defeat of nawab Siraj-ud-daula led to the beginning of the English East India Company's political monopoly (Bandopadhyay 44). Here, we see Das foregrounding the burgeoning influx of the British as the main point of insidious historical change. The Company is alluded to later on as well, when an emaciated dervish warns Cyrah to leave Gevaudan and stop following Fenrir, as they are "white folk" who are "a different evil from the traders in their companies" (*The Devourers* 146). This comparison of the British traders to the shadowy monsters of the novel just before Fenrir goes on a murderous rampage, slaughtering numerous innocent people, reminds the reader of how the British trading companies similarly were responsible for deaths in innocent communities in India. It recalls how the

colonial enterprise was not originally set out by Britain but by East India Company officials who sought to expand their territorial and economic power (Bandopadhyay 37–38).

One of the most pointed claims in this regard is made while Cyrah and Gevaudan are travelling with the fictional East India Company trader Edward Courten and his caravan. During their journey, a conflict breaks out between the employed Hindu and Muslim labourers: the Baluchs suspect the Jats of murdering one of them. Gevaudan states that he will stay out of the matter, saying, "Courten can deal with his own men. It's his fault they're fighting. Overworks them so they blame one another, then ignores them when one of their own goes missing" (Das, *The Devourers* 185). It is well documented that the British deliberately used such divide-and-conquer tactics to strengthen their power—by inciting conflict between the two communities, they weakened the opposition to their own rule and created a hierarchy that contributes to their strength (Bandopadhyay 50–51). Das's reference to this being an offhand statement made by Gevaudan shows how such tactics were intentionally shrouded and operated under a more implicit form of colonial consolidation.

The mention of the British in Mehta's *The Liar's Weave* is more pronounced, given that the novel is set in 1920s India, when the Independence movement is well underway. The second chapter opens with an excerpt by Shri Narayan Tarachand, "the greatest astrologer that ever lived" (Mehta 109), stating:

> In these times, directives are difficult to remember. Bengal has been partitioned, the Congress is dividing into a more radical view, there is not a student you pass who isn't quoting Tilak with 'Swaraj is my birthright and I shall have it.' In these times, it is tempting – it is human – to look upon India and wonder if we can help her. But even as we choose to divide – into 'British,' 'Indian,' 'in-between' or 'object' – it is worth

remembering that the cosmos sees no division. To the skies, we are all governed by the

same line your grandmother sang to you as you slept at her breast: Everything happens as

it should happen, because it has already happened. (13)

This opening excerpt sets the stage for the historical and political background of the novel. The

British are sowing the divisive communal seeds, splitting Bengal into a Muslim-majority in the

East and a Hindu-majority in the West. Radical nationalism is gaining ground among the masses,

who are eager to liberate India.

However, the second half of the excerpt, most notably the last line, changes the tone of

the passage entirely. Tarachand here implies that in-betweens not only are able to read the future

of people, but also of places, places as big as colonial India. This implication is expounded on

later when Govinda, the *dhumaketu* (comet or rising star) of the universities, submits a chit to the

Association, which reads, "I humbly request the Association to use our knowledge to read the

future of our glorious nation, Bharat, and aid our courageous freedom fighters in defeating the

British Raj" (36). This request creates immediate outcry among those assembled, due to the

controversy of breaking the first directive: that in-betweens only read the birth-chart of

individuals.

While this raises several questions—for instance, is the reading of multiple individuals,

of a place, something that a single in-between cannot do? Are many joined together required to

undertake a task that vast?—what is most noteworthy is that despite the clashing opinions, it is

assumed immediately that the request be dismissed; the Association instead clashes over what to

do with Govinda for raising such a request. The implicit immediate dismissal suggests a stance

of apoliticality from the Association, of them being content with the current political state. This

then seems to be a subtle critique of the Association, of high-caste, high-class Indians, for being

sympathetic to the British—sympathetic in the same vein as how their lack of action is simply compliance with the norm. They are, to use Tarachand's own words, "complacent" (138).

This sentiment is echoed by Liling, during her conversation with Yaatri at the earth's nerve. Yaatri tells her of a boycott planned for August 1920, "the first All-India movement," to which she cynically responds "Well, we know how that goes" (27). She builds on her biting statement, saying:

> How petty it all is … They, out there, running along a path already set. They can see how it ends, right now. They look at individual lives – why not into the fate of the country, the world? But they won't. They will run along a set path, ignorant of its destination, so they can believe their footsteps have power. It's a lie. Power only resides in an alternative path; in creating one. (27)

Liling's view of the situation turns the Association's seemingly neutral stance into a question of power. According to her, the in-betweens want to remain in their powerful positions, and so choose not to use their ability to look towards India's future, since they fear upsetting the power dynamics that privilege them and the British. Indian science fiction author Gautam Bhatia, in his review of *The Liar's Weave*, comments on this, claiming it to be "a recurring motif, along the lines of *Star Trek*'s Prime Directive, or the law of non-intervention from the Strugatsky Brothers' *Noon Universe*, caught in its own paradox: to observe is itself to intervene." Yet, we see other more obvious means of intervention too. Mehta's novel asks the question: how does knowing the future affect your choices? However, it also asks: who is actually making those choices? When Zahan is asked whether Sorab is happy with his future, he replies, "He must be – he chooses it. But… But I think he chooses it because he's been told to choose it. It would be a good way to control people, telling them to do something because they've already done it" (*The*

Liar's Weave 111). When he is asked who does the controlling, he shrugs and replies, "The seven universities. The Association, the in-betweens. I know we aren't told everything. No one talks about the *hatadaiva*" (111). Zahan's matter-of-fact response to this question demonstrates how obvious the answer is. If astrology is the means by which people are controlled, and if the seven universities and the Association (both staunchly Hindu organisations) are the ones doing the controlling, Zahan is tacitly holding them responsible for the fate of the *hatadaiva* and colonised India.

Tarachand's concluding line in the earlier excerpt, which becomes a repeated mantra throughout the novel—"Everything happens as it should happen, because it has already happened" (13)—betrays a hidden complicity with the state of affairs as well. It can be interpreted as a justification of India's colonisation, of its tragedies and disasters. It displaces the blame from the perpetrator onto the literal cosmos. This is emphasised when Krishna, in a single sentence, reveals the source of Govinda's fervour and passion to bypass the Association's directives in order to defeat the British: "His family was at Jallianwala Bagh" (38). This line is heavy with the weight it carries, and Krishna (and Mehta herself) is aware of this: "The words have the effect he knows they will. The silence deepens, weighed by memories no one wants to articulate" (38).

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919 is a historical event that most students raised in India become familiar with in middle school. Mehta nonetheless provides a helpful, intentionally affectless, recapitulation of the events, that I shall defer to:

> Tarachand only knows what he has read in the papers and in the pamphlets distributed by
>
> the Indian National Congress. General Dyers fires on a peaceful gathering with machine
>
> guns and armoured tanks, blocking the entrance of the garden as women, children and

men tried to flee. The British estimate 379 dead. The Congress places the number at

1,000. (38)

While the reference to the massacre does help further situate the story in its historical moment, it also acts as an opening to discuss the aforementioned mantra. When Tarachand attempts to comfort Krishna about how he could not have known what form Govinda's tragedy would manifest in, he replies, wearily, "Yes … The future does not change. Only approaches" (39). This reluctant belief in the inevitability of tragedy masks a greater, more insidious belief: the acceptance of oppression and violence.

This acceptance though, is not just of the oppression meted out by the British to Indians. The indignation and anger that Liling carries at the in-betweens' seeming ambivalence to the power structures is not directed at their acceptance of British oppression but by their consolidation of oppression over marginalised Indians themselves: the *hatadaiva*. The *hatadaiva* are the general unfortunate, who within the story include the physically deformed or disabled, transvestites, tribal communities such as the Banjaras, and more. While caste is only ever explicitly mentioned once—in a throwaway comment about "aunts who are baffled that their enemy is their sister and their lover is from another caste" (174)—the implication is that most, if not all, lower-caste individuals are *hatadaiva*.

We see many such subtle caste references throughout *The Liar's Weave*. Zahan and Porthos's lack of knowledge of *hatadaivas* is reminiscent of the lack of caste knowledge amongst many upper-caste youths. When Zahan defends his trips to Vidroha to Sorab, he asks, "[w]hy don't they tell us this in these folk stories?" (88). Zahan here touches on the deliberate erasure and dismissal of *hatadaiva* narratives from popular stories and folktales. As Arundhati Roy discusses in her introduction to the Navayana edition of B. R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of*

Caste (2014), the deliberate, taught ignorance of caste and caste oppression helps uphold the existing hierarchy; the downtrodden cannot be downtrodden if they do not exist to their oppressors (13). In another instance, when the leaders of Vidroha are discussing what to do with Sorab who was just caught eavesdropping on them, Liling asks, "Why should his life be more valuable because he is not a *hatadaiva*?" (Mehta, *The Liar's Weave* 224). This questioning of the inherent "value" of a life in relation to *hatadaiva* reflects sentiments put forth by Ambedkar, exemplifying his frustration with the upper-caste belief of their superiority over others.

As briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, another caste allusion is seen near the end of the novel as well, in Zahan himself. When his ability, and its catch, is revealed to the Vidroha leaders, Liling asks, almost rhetorically, "Don't you wonder if it was the gods that built the catch? If you are the *hatadaiva* of all *hatadaiva* – a demigod who cannot see, touch or smell his power" (298). This idea, of Zahan as *hatadaiva*, is repeated earlier, when Tarachand and Krishna are arguing over saving Zahan, and Tarachand voices his confusion over how Krishna "grow[s] furious for Govinda but abandon[s] a boy, *a boy with no greater fault than being born*, to a cruelty far greater" (247, emphasis added). Even though the reader is aware that Zahan is presumably an upper-caste Parsi, the idea of him being *hatadaiva*, and the assumed equation of *hatadaiva* with lower-caste, adds considerable weight to this one sentence as it encapsulates the absurdity of Hindu astrology and the caste system's existence and validity.

There are also caste allusions made to Svasa and Govinda, in-betweens whose acceptance into the prestigious institutions is grounds for controversy. "'They will never accept his [Govinda's] background,' Tarachand says. 'It doesn't matter if he's a *dhumaketu* or not. Benares [University] cannot bend that far'" (75). This resistance to accepting students based on their "background"—which, in the case of Govinda, is never elaborated on—is repeated multiple

times in the novel. In reference to Svasa's acceptance into the Association being challenged, Mehta writes, "the universities are a barometer for too much in their profession" (20). Later, when Krishna, Tarachand, and Svasa are discussing the latter's potential hire to Benares University, Krishna states, "[t]he Sapta Puri universities are not keen on outsiders" (141). The Sapta Puri universities' overt discrimination on the basis of one's ambiguously termed "background" parallels the discrimination that universities in India mete out to lower-caste students, despite mandatory measures such as reservation (Roy, qtd. in Ambedkar 19).

Thus, while the British are portrayed as colonial invaders, they do not actually embody the antagonists or villains in Mehta's story. Rather, the true antagonist appears to be the Hindu hierarchical system—the same system that is upheld by Hindu astrology in the novel. Mehta shows how even if one exists outside the Hindu system—Zahan and his family as Parsi, Mary as Christian, Liling as Chinese—they still are subsumed by the illogical structures of power promoted by the dominant majority. The re-positioning of the Independence movement as a background event, rather than something that is directly grappled within a work of fiction set in 1920s India helps one refocus how the oppressors of many groups within India were not just the British but other Indians as well. "Everything happens as it should happen, because it has already happened" (Mehta, *The Liar's Weave* 13)—this line, and its apolitical baggage, shows how the reins of oppression were simply handed over from the British to a new set of native oppressors.

Interestingly, in Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*, the British aren't depicted as the evil masterminds who pull the strings. Instead, the roles become reversed: the British become the puppets whose strings are being pulled. Murugan narrates how Ronald Ross, the scientist who seemingly discovered the critical connection between malaria and mosquitoes, was in fact nudged at several instances by a shadowy underground cult in India. His paper, "An Alternative

Interpretation of Late 19th Century Malaria Research: is there a Secret History?" (Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome* 32), details these arguments. Note the use of the word "interpretation" alongside "history," two terms I have already discussed as intrinsically linked. However, it is the "Secret History" that I wish to focus on here. Ghosh chooses to use his book to fictionally retell the malarial breakthrough of the nineteenth century in a way that foregrounds not the British but the Indian genius. But it is not just any Indian genius; Ghosh is deliberate in mentioning how the people who are the masterminds behind the scenes are the Indians who exist in the margins of society. This is most explicit in the character Laakhan, Mangala's right-hand man, whose backstory and background is revealed to the reader only in the final few chapters. Characteristic of the narrative form in the novel, the reveal is told to us through a cascading set of characters: a guard on the train recounts it to Phulboni, who recounts it to Sonali, who recounts it to Urmila, who finally recounts it to Murugan and the reader. The guard speaks of a ghost story surrounding the Renupur train station, in which the then-station-master "was an orthodox, upper-caste man: he took an instant dislike to the lad [Laakhan], looking on him as an affront to himself. He told the villagers that Laakhan was worse than an untouchable" (239).

While Laakhan's caste or community affiliations are never explicitly stated, it can be inferred from the station-master's position as an orthodox, upper-caste man that Laakhan was definitely lower-caste, if not from a community so marginalised that it is considered outside of the caste system itself, such as the Dalit and tribal communities. Indeed, stating that Laakhan was "worse than an untouchable" leaves little to imagination in terms of Laakhan's position in society. When Dr. Cunningham, who apparently held the best research facilities on malaria research in India in the 1890s, introduces (for lack of a better word) Laakhan to Elijah Farley, he refers to him as "this chhokra-boy here" (123). The word "chhokra" loosely translates to

"servant" and carries implicit class and caste connotations, further emphasising Laakhan's

occupation in the lower rungs of Indian society. Ross's later description of Laakhan as a

"dhooley-bearer: in other words the British government pays him to shovel shit" (65) also is

heavy with these connotations, as only members from the lowest caste were hired to do such jobs

(Roy, qtd. in Ambedkar 20).

      In line with the "actual" historicity of the novel, Laakhan is not an invented character.

Ghosh discusses his research of Ross's work, stating that the colonial presuppositions that helped

shape Laakhan's position in his novel

> leapt out of the pages of Ross's *Memoirs*. I think you'd be surprised if you knew how
>
> close the story is to the facts. For example: Lutchman was a real character; he appeared in
>
> Ross's life exactly as I described (based on Ross's own account); its Ross who tells us
>
> that he learnt about the difference between species of mosquitoes from Lutchman;
>
> Lutchman in turn learnt about this from villagers in the Nilgiri mountains … Equally, it
>
> was an (unnamed) Indian assistant who pointed out the final crucial developments in the
>
> parasite to him. But does Ross ever give any credit to Lutchman or anyone else? Forget
>
> it: he didn't even know their surnames. ("Reprint: An Interview")

The colonial cavalier attitudes towards lower-status Indians is exemplified in how Ross writes

about experimenting on Laakhan. In a letter to Dr. Patrick Manson, Ross pleads: "Don't for

heaven's sake mention Lutchman at the British Medical Association … he is a government

servant. To give a Government servant fever would be a crime!'' (Ghosh, *The Calcutta*

Chromosome 65). Here, Ross's utilitarian view of Indian servants is emphasised. His worry over

Laakhan's health and the unfortunate consequences of his experiments is not based on

humanitarian grounds, but rather on Laakhan's usefulness as a government employee (Chambers 62).

Laakhan, however, isn't even the ringleader behind the whole secret operation. His boss, and the true genius in the story, is Mangala, who Cunningham hilariously dismisses as "just the sweeper-woman" (Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome* 123). Surprisingly, this is the extent of the information we are given about Mangala's background. However, from her association with Laakhan and her position as a sweeper-woman, it is implied that Mangala shares a similar low social status. This is also seen in her being positioned alongside other ostracised, oppressed groups, such as victims of syphilis, who were treated as social outcasts at the time. When Farley returns to examine slides at Cunningham's lab, he accidentally witnesses a strange scene: Mangala, seated next bamboo cages containing pigeons apparently on the verge of death and

> [o]n the floor, by the divan, clustered around the woman's feet, were some half-dozen people in various attitudes of supplication, some touching her feet, others lying prostate … Although Farley had glanced into their scarred, unseeing faces for no more than an instant, he recognized at once that they, like the man he had seen in the bamboo thicket, were syphilitics, in the final stages of the terrible disease. (130)

While Mangala is a figure of reverence here, appearing as a saviour to the disadvantaged, she also betrays her own social position simply by association with them. Ghosh's choice to position the Indian genius as someone from the borders of society, someone potentially at the bottom of, or outside of, the caste system, is yet another example of Indian science fiction centring the figure of the subaltern. John Thieme reads this recentring as a postcolonial means to force us to "engage with the possibility of an alternative historiography, in which the traditionally disempowered subjects prove to be the real puppet masters" (qtd. in Ramraj 199). Much like *The*

Liar's Weave, this "alternative historiography" is alternate not only to the British claim to history but to the Hindu claim to it as well.

As Suparno Banerjee states, "Ghosh's novel deals with subaltern knowledge – knowledge possessed by social outcasts and practised in secret, knowledge that is never acknowledged as such – not with the great ancient tradition" (52). Banerjee later expands on this, arguing that,

> [i]n this case, the 'counter-science' is the subaltern knowledge associated with the lower strata of Indian society, not the prestigious tradition of Vedic science. Thus empowerment of a secret subaltern cult in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, indicating that this cult, not Ross, was the main driving force behind the discovery of the malaria parasite, suggests the undermining of both European hegemonic science and that of the indigenous elites. (81)

Counter-science's dependence on silence as a foundation is read by Ruby Ramraj as Mangala and her cult being "denied voice by hegemonic cultures" (199). Chitra Sankaran refers to Mangala as "twice-colonized" ("Sharing Landscapes" 118), speaking to her intersectionality along the lines of race and gender; I argue that Mangala is *thrice*-colonised, along the lines of race, gender, and caste. Her position as "the lowest socially ranking native woman" (117) forces her into the shadows (which she uses to her advantage) of both the Western scientist and the upper-caste native. Such phrasing harkens back to Gayatri Spivak's statement of how "the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (287). Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is helpful in positioning Mangala and the cult—as she concludes, "the subaltern cannot [just] speak," they also "cannot be heard or read" (308). Such erasure of the subaltern's presence maps onto the intentional erasure of counter-science from knowledge. Ghosh here appears to be riffing

off of Spivak, re-imagining this erasure—which is impossible to separate from the subaltern figure—as a form of power.

Indeed, Mangala's position as subaltern is seen more clearly when she is directly compared to Hindu deities. When Urmila and Murugan visit Kalighat to ask a Hindu idol sculptor about the strange idol Murugan found lodged in a wall near Ronald Ross's memorial—a painted figurine with "large, stylized eyes," seated between "a tiny bird, unmistakably a pigeon" (Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome* 39), with an arm holding a metallic cylinder that Murugan deduces to be "an old-fashioned microscope" (193)—the workshop owner states that he has "never seen anything like this in my life … I know every divine image there is and I've never seen one like this" (199). Mangala's idol being conspicuously absent in the vast array of Hindu goddesses enumerated—Ma Kali, Ma Shoroshshoti, Ma Lokhkhi, Ma Durga—emphasises her distance from Hindu mythology. The presence of non-Hindu idols, ritualistic practices resembling tribal cultures, and having a woman as the head of the cult—breaking away from "the Brahmanical patriarchy that lies at the heart of the Vedic tradition" (Banerjee 81)—all tie together to undermine both Western and Hindutva hegemonic ideas of knowledge.

While Ghosh chooses to not conflate the science fictional elements with Hindu mythology, Das, on the other hand, makes this conflation deliberately. The Stranger discusses the idea of shapeshifters as *rakshasas* and gods, as seen in Mahishasura and Durga (Das, *The Devourers* 154). In the novel's present, when walking around with Alok during Durga Puja in Kolkata, the Stranger "looks at these deities incarnated in dried earth and made to represent good and evil, and he tells me [Alok] they are iconic human representations of witnessed shape-shifter battles from millennia ago. That the devi and her monstrous asura foe were from different tribes of the race he belongs to" (155). It is interesting to note that Das chooses to make the Hindu

goddess a shapeshifter too, seemingly lumping her in with her *rakshasa* enemy. The choice to depict a Hindu deity as equally monstrous as Mahishasura, literally being the same "kin," (156) to use Das's choice of words, implicitly asks the reader to reconcile the image of the terrifying, nightmarish shapeshifters with what they know of Hindu gods, or even of a Hindu-centric society.

This comparison of shapeshifters to Hindu deities, however, is mentioned in passing. Rather than Hindu mythology, Das instead chooses to foreground folklore from the Sundarbans, specifically the tale of Bonbibi. Bonbibi is the protector of the Sundarbans, a female deity atop a tiger who defeats the demon king Dokkhin Rai and safeguards both the people and the tigers of the delta. She is well known and well loved by all, worshipped by both Muslims and Hindus in the region. In a place like the Sundarbans, located across the West Bengal and Bangladesh partition, where large communities of both religions exist, one would expect a sense of communal conflict to arise. However, the forest apparently has the opposite effect, being considered a liminal space where "people who are in its realm into an isolated space divorced from their immediate socio-cultural setting into 'a form of institutionalised or symbolic anti-structure' … The forest does not discriminate between humans in terms of their caste, creed or communal affiliations" (Roy 72). Sonali Dutta Roy elaborates on this almost-magical secular middle ground of the forest. She attributes this magical nature to Bonbibi, discussing how the deity represents such sentiments of intercommunity harmony. According to her,

> the forest personified by Bonbibi is considered to have a 'levelling' effect in contrast to the relationships organised around land, which quintessentially stands for social hierarchies and differences (Jalais 86). For the community already geographically marginalised from what can be called as the 'mainstream' Bengali 'mainland,' Bonbibi

serves as the purveyor of these egalitarian values that are untarnished by man-made differences. (72)

Bonbibi is thus seen to occupy a space above "man-made differences," which are implied to include communal, religious differences. She protects all regardless of social affiliation. More importantly, the fact that she protects all is accepted and believed by all as well.

Ethnographer Subarna Karmakar builds on this in her empirical study of the region, concluding that "[t]he horrifying environment reinforced by economic miseries compels the people of the Sundarbans, cutting across religions, to look to 'Bonbibi' as a source of security. It is their very faith on 'Bonbibi' that give them strength to survive the adversities in everyday-life situations" (441). She ties the helplessness of the people in the forest to their dependency on Bonbibi, emphasising the deity's position as a "saviour of the disadvantaged" (441). This position is further proven by how Dalit actors sometimes take on the role of Bonbibi when plays in her honour, such as *Bon Bibi'r Palagaan*, are performed (Lobo et al. 14).

While this may seem like an exaggeration of the impact Bonbibi has on the Sundarbans community, other ethnographic research supports such claims. Sociologist Prama Mukhopadhyay interviews the last remaining *bauley* (tiger-charmer) in Bandhobpur, who states, "Sundarbans is no more what it used to be. It is not remaining *Maa* [Mother] Bonbibi's *desh* [country] anymore. Or else, do you think we would be fighting with ourselves about petty issues like Hindu-Musalman?" (284). According to the *bauley*, the rise of communal conflict is directly linked to the decline of faith in Bonbibi.

Though there is a joint belief by Hindus and Muslims in Bonbibi, the goddess has explicit Islamic roots. Roy traces the various origins of Bonbibi, noting that most of the popular versions are based in Islam, with Bonbibi and her brother Shah Jongoli being blessed twins to Ibrahim, a

Sufi *faqir* (66). While Das diverges from this narrative, he still secures Bonbibi's origin in Islam, with Cyrah, riding on Gevaudan's second self, becoming the mythical figure of Bonbibi: "The villagers here would catch glimpses of her riding through the forest and rivers on the back of a great beast, and she became, to them, an incarnation of the divine guardian of the forest, Banbibi. Gevaudan was her vahana, her animal vehicle. We [the shapeshifters] started calling her Banbibi as well" (*The Devourers* 247). *The Devourers* positions Bonbibi as a Muslim woman too, a Muslim poverty-stricken, abrasive prostitute. Attributing divinity to such a person encourages readers to rethink their preconceptions of what class, communal, and other societal affiliations figures of worship must embody.

Das paints Dokkhin Rai as a shapeshifter too—"Lord of the South, the shapeshifter king Dakkhin Rai" (246)—even though Rai never appears in the story. The other Sundarban shape-shifters, the tribe to whom the Stranger is born into, become the man-eating tigers that the local communities pray to Bonbibi for protection from. Tying this back to the conflation of Mahishasura and Durga, both being shape-shifters according to the Stranger, there is a stark difference between how such Hindu figures are depicted versus how the figure of Bonbibi is. Having a secular (in the sense of transcending religious affiliations) folk deity such as Bonbibi *not* be a shape-shifter—which in the novel is synonymous with *rakshasa*—but a "human demi-goddess" (272) seemingly places folklore on a separate, potentially less monstrous, plane than Hindu mythology.

The Devourers' positioning of folklore and Islam in relation to Hinduism speaks to the current hegemonic presence the latter has in terms of India's cultural and traditional atmosphere. This hegemony a lot of times is at the expense of others, eclipsing other beliefs, and even at times erasing them. Das reminds us that this erasure does not imply non-existence. His novel

chooses to foreground tales that are being slowly pushed to the periphery. As Kurtz states in her review of *The Devourers*, "in its final pages, *The Devourers* reminds us once again of when it is important to tell stories and when it might be more important to listen in silence as others tell theirs." Das, as well as Mehta and Ghosh, gently nudge their reader to listen, not only to the tales within tales about *rakshasas* and a re-imagined Indian history, but to the tales and history currently being silenced in the reader's own world.

Conclusion

What strikes me about these books is that they are … historical romances in which the history (and geography) is invented. A lot of this is just the return of the myth-romance cycle I predicted in [*Anatomy of Criticism*], and in fact a lot of these so-called science fiction fantasies are simply re-tellings of myths … But they raise the question that [William] Morris raises: what's the link between Morris' medieval near-obsessions and his socialist interests that presumably are future-related?

—Northop Frye, *Northrop Frye's Notebooks on Romance*

Antar had never quite understood why they went to so much trouble, but that morning, thinking of the archaeologist, he suddenly knew. They saw themselves making History with their vast water-control experiments: they wanted to record every minute detail of what they had done, what they would do. Instead of having a historian sift through their dirt, looking for meanings, they wanted to do it themselves: they wanted to load their dirt with their own meanings.

—Amitav Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome*

When I began research for this study, I was unsurprised at the dearth of scholarly work on Indian science fiction. Yet, as seen, over the past few years there has been increasing engagement with the genre, with several notable books heralding the start of a new academic field, such as Suparno Banerjee's *Indian Science Fiction* (2020), Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee's *Final Frontiers: Science Fiction and Techno-Science in Non-Aligned India* (2020), and Sami Ahmad Khan's *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj* (2021). Perhaps as unsurprising though is that all these works open with mentions of the Hindu Right and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government. While Banerjee's is probably the least explicit, with his introduction simply

including a paragraph about Vinayak Savarkar's Hindutva ideology in conversation with "the Other" and the "dominant Indian identity" (18), both Mukherjee and Khan are much more direct with their political intervention. The very first page of Mukherjee's book dives into the false history and science propounded by the BJP—which he refers to as "the authoritarian Hindu organisation [… that wages] what it sees as a culture war to cleanse all traces of 'foreign elements' from the country – chief among which are 'secularism' and 'leftism'" (1). Khan begins *Star Warriors* with an author's note about his conversations with two friends: one regales India's supposed long history of science fiction, seen in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and the other scoffs at such historical revisionism that "will lead us nowhere." Khan cites these moments as when he became "painfully aware that my thesis was suddenly much more 'political' than I ever wanted it to be. 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. It was going to be a long road ahead" (xii).

It is a tough question to consider: whether we can ever divorce contemporary Indian science fiction from Indian history and politics, especially in response to the Hindu Right. Yet perhaps it is not a question of whether we ever *can*, but whether we ever *should*. Banerjee, Mukherjee, and Khan do not all mention the Hindu Right lightly. In recent years, the BJP government has repeatedly enforced policies that work towards creating and upholding a Hindu nation. This is not just in the bills passed, such as the 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act, but in the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) textbook revisions that followed the COVID-19 pandemic. Several sections in history textbooks have been cut, specifically those on Mughal history, the Naxalite movement, and the 2002 Gujarat riots,[19]

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[19] The 2002 Gujarat riots was a three-day pogrom carried out against Muslims following the killing of over 50 train passengers (reportedly Hindu) and the burning of the coach. The BJP government and Prime Minister Modi have long been suspected of their complicity in the pogrom by many international and national journalists and

among others. In science textbooks, Darwinian evolution has been removed from class 9 and 10

syllabi, following BJP officials publicly denouncing Darwin's theory as "scientifically wrong,"

claiming that "Indians were the descendants of Hindu 'rishis' (sages) and not monkeys" (Jaswal).

Mentions of Dalit activists and writers, such as BR Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule, and Mukta Salve,

have also been deleted (Shantha). By literally erasing and rewriting history, the BJP government

engages in a similar act of historical estrangement to that of science fiction. Yet, while they

attempt to obfuscate their estrangement, Indian science fiction seems to revel in it. Moreover,

Indian science fiction, as seen in Ghosh's, Mehta's, and Das's novels, tends to nuance this

estrangement: it challenges hegemonic ideologies, highlights hidden or subaltern narratives, and

(perhaps most importantly) encourages the reader to think critically about history and how it is

constructed.

Joseph Adamson and Jean Wilson touch on this affordance of science fiction, when they

analyse Frye's approach to history, stating that

> Frye does not mean to denigrate either logic or history. He does wish, however, to oppose
>
> the unquestioned authority of historical approaches in literary scholarship, old and new,
>
> by establishing as an essential critical principle the unique and specific authority of
>
> literature and imaginative experience. The recreation of a society's mythological
>
> structure— its revitalization in each new context—keeps alive a vision in which history is
>
> both absorbed and confronted. (*The Secular Scripture* xlii)[20]

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organisations, accused of inciting communal violence and spreading false historical discourse that painted Muslims as barbarians and terrorists (Patil 28, 45; Pandey 187—89).

[20] I also connect this back to Freedman's claim, mentioned in the introduction, of how the "estrangement of history—the shattering of the overfamiliarity and taken-for-grantedness of the received narrative of the past—is effected not so much by departing from known historical reality as by questioning how and to what extent historical reality is, after all, known" (61). As seen here, the estrangement of history is *synonymous* with thinking critically of historiography and accepted historical accounts.

This idea of history as both "absorbed and confronted" by mythology, and by extension, by Indian science fiction that employs mythology to re-imagine the past, speaks to the affordances of the genre in unpacking history. Building on Frye's thoughts, I argue that romance is *necessary* to understand history. It is by estranging it—through romanticisation, fictionalisation, and mythologisation—that we "absorb" history, and by drawing attention to how such estrangement is carried out in real life by those in power that we can "confront" and critically examine it as a practice.

While both science fiction and the BJP rely on mythology to re-imagine the past, it is this criticality that the former contains—how its historical estrangement encourages the reader to reflect on how history is constructed and who is constructing it—that separates it from Hindutva propaganda. The historical estrangement that Indian science fiction engages with carries what Frye refers to as "the potentially revolutionary quality of romance" (*Northrop Frye's Notebooks* 212), most clearly seen when set against the NCERT textbook revisions and the anti-CAA/anti-NRC protests.[21]

Another way of conceptualising this difference is placing both in conversation with Frye's category of "projected romance," which is when "projecting writers fall in love with the hierarchical structures that they find in earlier history, and present them as ideals to be recreated in their past forms" (*The Secular Scripture* 115). While the Hindu Right's ideology definitely falls under this category, Ghosh, Das, and Mehta demonstrate how Indian science fiction subverts this glorification of the past, especially the pre-Mughal "Golden Age" of India. Such

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[21] In 2019–20, nation-wide protests erupted against the Citizenship Amendment Act, which "offers amnesty to non-Muslim immigrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan." This, alongside the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which "requires people to prove they are citizens of India," was seen by many as an Islamophobic policy. As a Kanpur politician stated, "Just imagine if a Hindu family and a Muslim family both fail to prove citizenship – the former can use CAA to claim citizenship but the latter will be stripped of [it]" ("Citizenship Act protests").

subversion is "revolutionary," since in projected romances, "the past becomes the mirror of the future, and we remember from our survey of descent themes that remaining imprisoned within a mirror world keeps us in the basement of reality" (116). By not only engaging in projected romance but by attempting to pass such romance as realism, the Hindu Right arrests any sense of forward progression. Indian science fiction frees the historical narrative from this prison, encouraging readers to question its mutability and legitimacy.

By revealing its own estranging nature, Indian science fiction that engages the past allows us to better understand history and its construction. I hearken back to the concluding line of the introduction: "[t]he improbable, desiring, erotic, and violent world of romance reminds us that we are not awake when we have abolished the dream world: we are awake only when we have absorbed it again" (Frye, *The Secular Scripture* 43). As mentioned above, only by absorbing such estrangement is the reader able to confront blatant historical revisionism by the Hindu Right. It is maybe fitting that I choose to end my conclusion with another poetic quote from Frye: "Perhaps, to borrow a celebrated maxim, it is only those who will not learn history who are condemned to repeat it. The ouroboros might straighten out if it began to feel actual pain while chewing its tail" (160). Yet, perhaps, it is not those who will not learn history, but those who will not learn to critically engage with history who condemn themselves. The ouroboros has been in pain for quite some time—Indian science fiction may not be the solution, but it is at least another step towards straightening it out.

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