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## **Time Travel and Alternate History: The Posthuman Subject in Jayant Narlikar's *The Adventure* and Vandana Singh's *Delhi***

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**Abstract:** One of the principal modes of narration in science fiction, time travel, serves to create feelings of defamiliarisation and estrangement, making the reader more receptive to the aim of writing the fiction. Through the use of these devices postcolonial science fiction interrogates the validity of the imposition of the European linear, teleological trajectory of history as well as contests perceived ontological and epistemological limits and boundaries defined by traditional humanist thought. A new form of subject-formation emerges, one that bears the inscription of the past, the present and the future. This subject emerges at the interstices of discursive power and is therefore in a constant state of “becoming”. This ontological state of “becoming” where the subject can belong to discrete temporalities at the same time, is enabled by time travel, the most commonly used narrative device in science fiction. This paper will focus on Jayant Vishnu Narlikar's *The Adventure* and Vandana Singh's *Delhi* by showing the postcolonial subject as not only the site of resistance by rejecting and altering received history, but also emerging as constant states of “becoming”, as ontologically posthuman. Fashioning new modes of being through new epistemological means is therefore the focus of this paper.

**Keywords:** Time travel, Postcolonial, self, history.

Among all the extant branches of knowledge the discipline most concerned with the question of ‘what is human’ and ‘what it means to be human’ is, perhaps, none other than literature. The imaginary, artistic construction of a given scenario devoted to the sole question of defining the state of being human is exclusive to literary works. Among the many genres of literature, science fiction as a genre deals with tales of technological enhancements and imaginary worlds that both



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serve to celebrate the uniqueness of the human subject as well as through techniques of defamiliarisation and estrangement, work to remind us of our humanity, acting as cautionary tales to remind us that we are only human by presenting proleptic accounts of self -annihilation. Brian Aldiss in his *Trillion Year Spree* defines this genre of fiction as “the search for a definition of mankind and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science) and is characteristically cast in the Gothic or post-Gothic mode. [...it is] Hubris clobbered by nemesis.” (Cuddon) Thus the human body becomes the site for the quest of perfectibility, both physically through scientific experiments as well as imaginatively through the art of fictionalizing. Writers of science fiction mainly employ this trope to discuss “issues of ethics and social justice that have long haunted human society and that may be amplified by its posthuman successors.” (Yaszek and Ellis)

The human body therefore becomes the site where both historical and ideological currents meet and opposing forces try to establish their dominance through dialectic process. (Banerjee) This is best seen in postcolonial literature, where we see a marginalized people trying to come to terms with the trauma of being colonized and subsequently frame a distinctly subjective identity that is both national (political) and existential. Postcolonial science fiction is also pre-occupied with these questions of decolonization and creation of identities, and the future of the nation through the liminal body of the protagonist.

The humanist conception of man as an autonomous and rational being capable of individual perfection has been debunked since the 1960s as propagating a monolithic image of man as white, male, able-bodied, straight and of European origin, possessing the ability of rational thought. (Braidotti) Posthumanist theory instead sees man as an assemblage of contradictory technological and historical forces, at the intersections of which the body emerges. (Halberstam and Livingston) Subjectivity is always defined by and constrained within “networks of knowledge, discourse and power.” The Enlightenment conception of rational man as remaining aloof from its Other is debunked- the formation of the subject takes place “across and among” the in-between spaces of “economies, governments, technologies, communities” with whom it interacts. (Lillvis) Thus



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The posthuman does not reduce difference-from-others to difference-from-self, but rather emerges in the pattern of resonance and interference between the two. (Halberstam and Livingston)

It is therefore continuously emerging at the sites of conflict, a scenario to which postcolonial fiction is no stranger. Therefore, the postcolonial subject is also the posthuman subject.

In postcolonial fiction the focus is on encounters with the Other seen from the perspective of the marginalized self. The short stories I am discussing in this paper, Jayant Narlikar's *The Adventure* and Vandana Singh's *Delhi* narrate such encounters that present an alternate reality through the use of the device of time travel. One of the most widely used narrative devices of science fiction, it enables the focalizing viewpoint to move backwards and forwards in time. (Nicholls and Clute) In doing so, the reader experiences cognition of the narrative event through estrangement. (Banerjee) This feeling of defamiliarisation and estrangement is what sets science fiction apart from all other literary genres. Suparno Banerjee succinctly puts the method of cognition through defamiliarisation

As a genre using estrangement as its fundamental component, science fiction is bound to be subversive. It draws conceptual sources from progress of science and philosophy that can challenge stereotypes and systems by literalizing metaphors and constructing scenarios alternative to empirical reality and conducive to subversive thought experiments, which would not be possible in mainstream literature. The dialectic between these two tendencies can be traced in the construction of schematic utopias (both negative and positive) as well as in texts that deal with fragmentation and difference. (Banerjee)

This strategy of estrangement "offers a powerful means of imagining communities based on alternative social models that indicate the possibility of breaking out of cycles of colonial dominance". (Reid)

Banerjee further notes that "science fiction in India, especially in the postcolonial era (after 1947, when most of the works in English were written), is a creation of a society at once driven by a



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fast growing materialistic industrial economy as well as the metaphysical and pastoral traditions that has existed for millennia”. (Banerjee) Both Jayant Narlikar’s *The Adventure* and Vandana Singh’s *Delhi* were published in the decolonizing era- 1986 and 2004 respectively. Narlikar’s protagonist Gangadharpant Gaitonde is a professor in history, an active producer of knowledge- he writes “massive tomes” and is an “eminent historian”. Not only does he contribute to the proliferation of academic discourse but he also presides over such events like seminars and public lectures. At the end of the story we see him experiencing a peripatetic reversal of his situation. This has taken place because of a certain change in the course of history- instead of losing and being subjugated to British rule, the Marathas won and established themselves over the western part of India, where the action of Narlikar’s story is located. In the alternate world Gaitonde finds that the bullet did not strike Viswas Rao, a crucial event that had changed the order of successive events after the battle. Only the torn page of *Bhauasahebanchi Bakhar* is the connection to the order of reality to which Gaitonde originally belonged. Thus, the layout of the city feels simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar to Gaitonde,

He soon lost the familiar landscape and where Fergusson College Road should have been, there was nothing but a jungle. Apparently whatever urban expansion of Pune had taken place, it had not come this way. Was the famous Fergusson College really not here but in Bombay? What happened to all those shops and housing colonies? The hills behind Fergusson College and Law College (the colleges were absent, of course) were devoid of any signs of habitation. (Narlikar) Thus, Gaitonde, who is an active discursive agent, travels to an alternate world that can be seen as the manifestation of the native Real. Through the construction of this alternate world, Narlikar strikes back at the historical-cultural Imaginary, with the Symbolic torn page of *Bhanusahebanchi Bakhar* as the ‘proof’ of his travel. It is fitting that Gaitonde cannot find any trace of himself, his family or his milieu in the alternate world. Gaitonde’s identity is that of the postcolonial subject, mediated through postcolonial control of the pre-colonial past. His five-volume *Concise History of India*, complete with an extended edition, testifies to his subject position as an active postcolonial agent. By not creating any double for Gaitonde in the alternate world, Narlikar enacts the Lacanian



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order of “radical alterity that resists identification or assimilation”. (Pordzik) The alternate world is seen as the dimension of the Other where “the subject’s unlimited desire for the Other can be articulated, [one that] originates in the cultural matrix itself (Pordzik 145) [here, both Gaitonde and Narlikar’s postcolonial condition]”. The Symbolic Order (Gaitonde’s work, *Bhanusahebanchi Bakhar*) in which discourse is located, produces and reinforces the sense of lack that creates the desire to fill the lack and achieve closure. Hence when he reaches the Town Hall and finds his own books there with the histories altered, he reads volume five “from both ends inwards”. This stands for the search of the Other within the empty signifier. It is also appropriate that Rajendra Deshpande’s explication of Gaitonde’s experience is undertaken through “catastrophe theory”, a theory denied legitimacy within its own discursive field

The professor of mathematics, an eminent person in his own field, was a man of mercurial temperament. “Catastrophe is not mathematics; I will have nothing to do with it,” he declared when the idea of a seminar was mooted. (Narlikar)

It occupies the position of the Freudian “slippage”, that excessive which defies any attempt at control and therefore is the agent of subversion. The “parallel world” that Gaitonde just experienced is thus denied validity and dismissed. Narlikar effectively employs the strategies of cognition and estrangement to highlight the Lack at the heart of the postcolonial condition, by inscribing it on the body of his protagonist, placing him in the interstices of history and rendering him ontologically posthuman.

In *Delhi* Vandana Singh’s protagonist Aseem is also located in the interstices of history, both past and future. He is a wraith, Cassandra-like figure who possesses the power of prolepsis (anticipation, foreshadowing) as well as analepsis (flashback). Singh’s story was initially published in Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan’s collection of short stories called *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy* (2004) under the section “Future Earth”. The story is told by a third-person omniscient narrator, (Vinod and Jayagopalan 74) who maintains an almost panoptical focus on Aseem, the focalizing point of view through which the reader sees the



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unfolding of events. For Aseem, Delhi itself is no less than an organic entity, brimming with historic past

There is plenty of history in Delhi, no doubt about that- the city's past goes back into myth, when the Pandava brothers of the epic Mahabharata first founded their fabled capital, Indraprastha, some three thousand years ago. In medieval times alone there were seven cities of Delhi, he remembers, from a well-thumbed history textbook- and the eighth city was established by the British during the days of the Raj. The city of the present day, the ninth, is the largest. (Singh)

While Aseem can see "apparitions" from the past and tries to bring about changes to the course of history he can also see visions of "Neechi Dilli", an apocalyptic vision of Delhi in the future where the gap between the rich and the poor grows to the point of being unbridgeable. Clearly, therefore, Aseem is the estranged postcolonial subject caught between opposing historical forces. Afflicted as he is by his visions, Aseem occupies the space of the margins of a decolonized Delhi. Singh narrates her story with Aseem as the focalizing point of view, thereby intertwining cultural politics with personal subjectivity. Aseem's social non-belonging is explained by Banerjee

While India has been developing its economic might continuously over the last two decades, an increasing population has stifled employment and real growth within the country. Although jobs have expanded in various areas such as information, technology and the service sectors, unemployment rose from 8.8% in 2003 to 10.1% in 2011. (Banerjee, 284)

Written in 2004, Aseem clearly belongs to that generation. He is able to "recognize a certain preoccupation in the eyes of his fellow citizens: the desire for the final anonymity that death brings. Sometimes, as in this case, he knows it before they do." (Singh) Singh further reveals that Aseem can "never leave" Delhi. Thus Delhi stands for the metaphorical representation of the space-time continuum, and also as a receptacle for history. The city is seen as the alien Other that threatens to engulf its inhabitants. Singh writes, "The city's needs are alien, unfathomable. It is an entity in its own right, swallowing the surrounding countryside, crossing the Yamuna which was once its boundary, spawning satellite children, infant towns that it will ultimately devour." (Singh) One can



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also say that Aseem's name, meaning 'limitless' or 'unlimited' in Hindi, is the Symbolic self of the city itself. Thus what Aseem experiences is the dichotomy of the self and the Other within his own being.

Aseem's visions grant him the privilege of sight, so he rejects the discursive presentations of history in "well-thumbed history text books", standing for the rampant teleology of European history. (Hamilton 65) For Aseem history no longer "separates us from ourselves" because these anonymous characters of European history take shape, are literally made manifest, and in doing so reclaim their individuality. Under such conditions, history is no longer about explaining the causes of national conflicts or economic trends; it is about everyday people who are engaged in the largely mundane activities of everyday life. (Hamilton 67) Therefore, Aseem can intimately feel the "smoky tang" of the "mad emperor" Muhammad Shah. In this way is history inscribed into the present. Aseem's character provides the site of the amalgamation of the past with the present so that the self is regarded simultaneously as both the self-as-subject and the self-as-other. According to Michel Foucault, history is nothing but "what we are in the process of differing from". (Foucault) This leads us to a constant state of "becoming". Gilles Deleuze further states that from our "past" is our "essential otherness", (Deleuze) that is, history itself. Therefore the teleological narrative of history cannot fix our identity. It remains in a constant state of flux, in a constant state of "becoming". This cluster of discrete temporal identities on a single body at a given point of time is what makes the self posthuman. Aseem who possesses near-omniscient vision eludes the narrative control of the writer herself. While she paints a cautionary tale through the visions of "Neechi Dilli" Singh establishes the ontology of the postcolonial subject as posthuman, situated within the continual process of becoming. His location at the many intersections of power, of the past, present and future thus destabilizes the idea of the unified, coherent Self advocated by traditional humanist thought.





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www.daathvoyagejournal.com

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