Johanna Pundt

Speculative India

Genre and Aesthetics in Contemporary Indian Anglophone Literature and Popular Culture

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I. Introducing Speculative India

"Some places are too evil to be allowed to exist" (Simmons 1985/2008: 1), declares the autodiegetic narrator Robert C. Luczak in the first sentence of Dan Simmons' 1985 horror novel *Song of Kali*. Told in retrospect, the story opens with a disturbing hate speech against the city of Kolkata, then named Calcutta.[1] Luczak envisions drastic scenarios in which the Indian metropolis is annihilated: "After the Romans had conquered the city of Carthage, they killed the men, sold the women and children into slavery, pulled down the great buildings, broke up the stones, burned the rubble, and salted the earth so that nothing would ever grow there again. That is not enough for Calcutta. Calcutta should be *expunged*" (Simmons 1985/2008: 1)[2]. As his narrative continues, Luczak tries to justify his abhorrence by stylizing himself as the victim of a corrupt city that has destroyed his life. Set in 1977, Simmons' novel revolves around the mysterious resurrection of the fictional Kolkata poet M. Das who went missing in the late 1960s and was long presumed dead. When a local writers association claims that Das is alive and is working on a long poem about the goddess Kali, the U.S.-American editor and journalist Luczak tries to obtain Das' manuscript. Accompanied by his wife Amrita, who is supposed to help him as a translator since she was born in Delhi, and his five-months-old daughter Victoria, the protagonist travels to Kolkata. The state capital of West Bengal is depicted as a place of filth and decay; in every chapter descriptions of dilapidated buildings, massive garbage piles, ineffective infrastructure, starving humans and begging children abound. But Luczak is soon confronted with the most sinister side of the city when his investigation leads him to the Kapalika Society, a criminal organization that worships the goddess Kali. The Kapalika control Kolkata and gain their power by sacrificing humans to the goddess of time and death in dreadful ceremonies. As is eventually revealed, Das' dead body was given to Kali, who brought him back to life and now instrumentalizes him "as poet, priest and avatar" (Simmons 1985/2008: 181) to spread her message of destruction and chaos. Though Luczak is able to unravel the mysterious case of Das' resurrection, he has to pay for this knowledge: Kolkata becomes the place of his worst nightmares after his daughter is kidnaped and murdered.

1 The capital city of the state West Bengal was renamed in 2001. Several other cities faced a similar name change, including Bombay which is officially called by its Marathi name Mumbai since 1995, or Chennai which used to be called Madras. Since India's independence in 1947, more than 100 cities have changed their official names (Biswas 2018a: n. pag.). What was initially promoted as a rejection of colonial naming practices is increasingly problematized as a "[s]affronisation" (R. Ahmad 2018: n. pag.) of India in the context of a growing Hindutva nationalist turn. Such renaming policies are indicative of a political agenda that propagates a mono-religious state by, for instance, strategically erasing the Mughal presence in Indian history through a renaming of places that connote the country's Muslim heritage or that carry Urdu names (R. Ahmad 2018: n. pag.; Biswas 2018a: n. pag.).

2 Unless otherwise noted, all emphases are in the original texts.

The novel reads like an enumeration of racist prejudices and is marked by an utterly uninformed portrayal of Kali worship as a superstitious, satanic cult practiced by a Mafia organization. Not only is the Hindu goddess misused to effect horror and fear, but Kolkata and its citizens seem to possess dangerous supernatural powers that fundamentally unsettle the protagonist. Repeated references to actual places, organizations and events increase the uncanny effect and are supposed to lend the novel's Kolkata a sense of authenticity. The biographical note of the author demonstrates this problematic attempt to justify orientalist representations by suggesting that "it was Dan Simmons' travels in India that inspired him to write *Song of Kali*" (1985: 279). Despite that, Simmons' novel has become a classic of horror literature and even won the World Fantasy Award in 1986.

Coming to Terms: Indian Anglophone Speculative Fiction

Song of Kali joins the ranks of speculative fiction which premises its worldbuilding on Indian cultural practices, most notably Hindu mythology, such as Roger Zelazny's 1967 *Lord of Light*, Ian McDonald's 2004 novel *River of Gods* and his 2009 collection of short stories *Cyberabad Days*. Although these texts avoid the derogatory language that characterizes Simmons' novel, they likewise treat India as an unknowable and mythic resource to estrange readers.[3] Nonetheless, all of these novels have been immensely popular and received some of the most prestigious science fiction and fantasy awards.[4] Since there is, as Gautam Bhatia observes, "a small – but steadily growing – corpus of 21st-century speculative fiction that locates itself – geographically, socially and even culturally in India" (2018: n. pag.),[5] their treatment of their cultural resources has become a major point of contention. Works that gained considerable attention on an international scale have often made recourse to exploitative misappropriations of cultural

3 Ian McDonald's texts are certainly a contested example. As Uppinder Mehan notes, McDonald "treats the setting and characters of the novel and short stories with a consideration rarely found in fiction by cultural outsiders. McDonald is a strong writer with a firm grasp of style and structure and an inventive imagination" (2017: 43). Nonetheless, he also reproduces stereotypes and, in particular, simplified notions of religious practices so that "[t]he constant pull of the exoticizing gaze ends up being too strong" (Mehan 2017: 51). Gautam Bhatia more explicitly denounces McDonald's representation of Indians as "nameless and faceless, perpetually inflamed, always on the cusp of rioting, and senselessly violent – often to the bewilderment of some of the [*sic*] McDonald's Western protagonists" (2017: n. pag.).

4 *Lord of Light* received the 1968 Hugo Award for Best Novel and was shortlisted for a Nebula Award. *River of Gods* was nominated as Best Novel for the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the Hugo Award in 2005 after winning the award for Best Novel of the British Science Fiction Association in 2004. McDonald's short story "Vishnu at the Cat Circus," published in *Cyberabad Days*, was nominated for two Hugo Awards.

5 In the following study, I use the abbreviation 'n. pag.' when referencing web sources that have no pagination.