Time-Travel Technology and Science in Vandana Singh's "Delhi"

Dr. Hadgekar Varsha

Assistant Professor, Department of English,
Dynanopasak College of Arts, Commerce & Science Parbhani Maharashtra.

ABSTRACT

The paper examines concerns arising in and through the science fiction "Delhi" by Vandana Sing. She consciously deviates from generic conventions of the structures of western science fiction. The main protagonist in "Delhi" experiences alienation and powerlessness. Singh traces manipulations of western science fiction tropes vis-à-vis time travel, technology, and larger implications of engaging in a science fiction from a technologically developing Indian context.

Keywords: *Indian science fiction, Time-Travel, Technology, Dystopia*

FULL PAPER

"What is the purpose of our existence?" and "Who are we?" These are the two questions that are raised time and again. These questions are universal and timeless and have plagued the minds of every self-aware human being living in this beautiful world. Both the disciplines of science and literature arguably conceived around these two questions. The genre of science fiction stands as a negation of this belief and an affirmation of the fact that scientific discovery and fiction are but two sides of the same coin. Although Indian writing in English has always been considered a promising field, the Indian science fiction genre has never managed to earn as much attention as it should have from literary scholars despite its subversive potential.

"Delhi" a science, fiction short story written by Vandana Singh. In Delhi Aseem is positioned as an alienated subject caught between fluxes of temporal changes in the city of Delhi. Vandana Singh's short story "Delhi" was first published in the anthology so long been dreaming: postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy (2004), edited by Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan. The story is written in the third person omniscient narration and features Aseem as a protagonist who can perceive Delhi at significant junctures of its past and future through time-travel. This confuses Aseem greatly especially at instances when he encounters historically significant figures and feels compelled to interact with them in a bid to change the course of history. The confusion and anxiety lead him to attempt suicide but he is saved by an unknown person i.e. implied to be his older self. Aseem's alienated post-colonial subjectivity can be looked at as an effect of the temporal breaks in the narrative due to his time travelling condition.

Paul Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative* talks about the " Nonbeingness" of time. He stress on the importance of language in understanding time. Paul believes that in order for time to exist, there is the need for narrative. People recount things which they are told and hold them as true and predict events which occur as they foresaw them. Assem's time-travelling is seen in a similar condition. His understanding of how he experiences time-travel subjectivity. His time-travelling is punctuated by significant colonial encounters. Aseem is familiar with the colonial figures he encounters and their solidified position in history. He even tries to change the course of history through his dialogues and interactions with them. This makes us to believe that Aseem understands time as subjective, which further makes it very clear that the past really cannot be recalled "Truthfully." This gives the author "the space to explore the subjectivity of power relations and historicity by using experimental narratives and temporal techniques in the plot." Vandana Singh employs the subversive narrative techniques because of which the passage of time in "Delhi" is skewered. Time can be understood only in relation to narrative, it follows that disruptions in narrative can skewer temporality as well. The author Vandana Singh structures her narrative to include flashbacks where the hero Aseem remembers his previous encounters with apparitions. The language of that the story is written in changes accordingly, depending on the kind of flashback and encounters. When Aseem recalls his encounter with Mohammed Shah Rangila, the writing takes on an archaic quality with a song of

separation from one's beloved marking the end of the flashback. This technique calls the reader's attention that how time and language keeps changing. Vandana Singh chooses to incorporate here transliteration as a means to signify how Aseem's temporality keeps shifting.

Transliteration is a form of abrogation of the English Language and Singh's usage of the same to show case how Aseem experiences time also highlights a postcolonial concern on the constructs of how we write about history. Ricoeur believes that language and narrative determines us to understand human time and with it to understand "Truth." Vandana Singh's treatment of time in the story is very interesting as she follows the western mandated generic conventions of science Fiction's ideas about time-travel. She uses this idea in a very different and vast manner. Aseem's travel i.e. time-travel is not fixed or unchanging. It is not so simple as travelling from the past to the future or vice-versa. Singh tries to present the possibility of traveling between different timelines, and moreover having absolutely no control of the so-called destination. She goes on extending her idea by having and bringing other people from other timelines who interacts with Aseem in the form of various apparitions. All these people have no control of their time-travelling ability. Aseem very much experiences his encounters with time travel from the postcolonial internalization of time and history. He was walking past the faded white colonnades of some building in Connaught place when he saw her: an old woman in a long skirt and shawl... she put a wondering arm out toward him but did not touch him. She said : "What age are you from?" in an unfamiliar dialect of Hindi. (Singh, 2004)

With the context of "Delhi" as any science fiction this becomes an allusion to the helplessness of Aseem, who is completely unaware of these things and has no control over the various timelines he would visit and with whom he would interact with. Aseem tries to follow the unknown woman into "her world." But fails and runs into a pillar, inviting laughter from some onlookers. As and when Aseem finds himself in the "colonial past" he realises that he has no control over the events. Talking about Aseem's anxiety, he wants to change the course of history, but instead of that we see the tensions of a colonial past manipulating his all actions. Matt Hills, in "Time, Possible worlds and counter factual" says that history belongs to the unintended stumbling of ordinary everyday life as much as it does to the world politics. (Hills, 2015) This is very true in the "Delhi" as the author Vandana Singh focuses on everyday events in the protagonists Aseem's life with everyday people. Aseem encounters with rulers and British soldiers have no effect on the timeline what soever but it is his encounter with ordinary and unknown people that definitely changes the course of history.

Vandana Singh takes a major trope of western science fiction writing and makes it very unique to the Indian context. Pandit Vaidyanathan is one character who is of hybrid technology that Vandana Singh employs to great effect in the text to create a sense of power and enigma that is associated with this character. Pandit Vaidyanathan is an example of artificial intelligence in the story that can be easily associated with the Indian astrological traditions of "Panditjis." These Panditji's used

to help people find a purpose in life an understand or "Predict" their future. "Delhi" is the hybrid form of postcolonial science fiction says Reid. Believing the promise that pandit Vaidyanathan and Omprakash would help to lessen and sort out the problems in Aseem's life, Aseem gets a purpose in life. Aseem's spends the rest of his years in the search of the unknown woman who Omprakash claimed would change his life. Aseem keep a notebook for chance encounters, always dreaming and hoping that the next apparition would be the woman he is looking for. But to him the tragedy is that when he finally meets her, their meeting is anti-climactic and it puts Aseem into much bigger and larger problems. They are the city's dark and hellish future. When Aseem approaches Omprakash for half after his meeting with the woman and his vision of Delhi, Omprakash explains him, the science behind Aseem's visions and time travel. He says you can choose to break my bones, sir and nobody can stop you. You can choose to jump into the Yamuna. Whatever you do affects the world in some small way. (Singh, 2004) It leaves Aseem disillusioned with pandit Vaidyanathan, and drives and forces Aseem once again to attempt suicide Again, the narrative is repeated wherein another man prevents him from killing himself in the same manner that the first man did. Here Aseem question whether Omprakash and pandit Vaidyanathan were what they seemed to be. City is very important for Aseem and at a certain point he even regards it as a living alien entity. Advanced technology is found in the text, hence technology and artificial intelligence become an intrinsic part of the space that Vandana Singh foregrounds in the story. According to Omprakash Aseem's condition is a result of second order casual loops that jump from time to time. Towards the end of the story, Singh subverts such an understanding of technology again by revealing to the readers how pandit Vaidyanathan actually "Works for the city." Om Prakash reminds Aseem that he never claimed pandit Vaidyanathan could change the future or even predict it. Thus, Vandana Singh mixes technology with mysticism, time-travel with Hindu myths and disrupts time in the story through experimental narrative techniques.

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