Introduction: "Re-Visions and Re-Imaginations in Asian Speculative Fiction"

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How does one define speculative fiction? Is it a sub-genre that is distinct from science fiction, with writers speculating on not-too-distant future scenarios that might happen? Does it stand apart from science fiction in that there is little focus on laser rays and "beam me up, Scotty" moments? Perhaps we can focus on the word "speculative". Do speculative fiction authors basically just wonder "what would happen if we changed this vital detail about society?", and thus invite their readers to rethink society and how it could work? Or is it just a broad heading that includes science fiction, fantasy, steampunk, fairy tales, dystopian fiction, and the other myriad genres that seem not to deal with the "real"? For this special issue, we have perhaps hewed most closely to the latter definition, preferring to open up to contributions on a range of fictions from Asia. But we have also hoped that our authors would try to think through that vital "what if" question. What if the subalterns were secretly in charge? What if women enjoyed their apparently dangerous, impure bodies? What if we could walk between worlds?

Speculative fiction of all kinds has long been seen as something of a niche market, the purview of nerds and small fandom communities. More recently, however, there has been an upsurge of interest in the genre, as well as an increase in the number of subgenres within speculative fiction. Apart from the more traditional epic fantasy, sci-fi and horror, we now see dystopia, paranormal romance, urban fantasy, zombies, steampunk, magic realism, gothic, slipstream, horror and so on.

Part of this increasing popularity and diversity has to do with society's fears, hopes, desires, dreams, nightmares. As Bruce Sterling points out, "A genre arises out of some deeper social need; a genre is not some independent floating construct" (7). And here, we go back to our earlier comment about works of speculative fiction seeming "not to deal with the 'real'". Fundamentally, they are usually deeply rooted in the realities of society. Much as these works do represent vast leaps of the imagination and, often, wholesale invention, they are grounded in some "deeper social need", and are therefore in some way reflective of the condition of society. This idea is emphasized by Margaret Atwood, who contends that her speculative

fiction "invents nothing we haven't already invented or started to invent" (285-286). Works of speculative fiction address or embody questions that affect us, even when dressed up in the seemingly medieval garb of epic fantasy, or the futuristic space stations of science fiction. At the most basic level, we must be able to relate in some way to the characters; there must be something recognizable about them. But in larger ways, speculative fiction speculates on our world. Because speculative fiction is not tied to the strict demands of realism, it enables us to play with reality in exciting ways. Importantly, speculative fiction enables us to imagine and re-imagine things differently from our current realities. Marie Jakober argues that speculative fiction "makes us think, and specifically, it makes us think differently" (30). Speculative fiction thus, enables us to imagine possibilities and even spaces for correcting the imbalances in asymmetrical power relations and to confront the terrifying possibilities that may arise from allowing these inequalities to propagate continuously.

It may help us to examine pressing and urgent questions, while allowing for critical distance; or to explore and expand our mythologies, dreams and legends; to highlight and focus on that which is not dominant or mainstream; or even to evade censorship by setting the story in some mythical past or distant future. It is, perhaps, these last two points which are most significant in this special issue.

Why Asia and Asian speculative fiction? David S. Roh et al. point out that Asia and Asians have long been imagined in both Orientalist and anti-Orientalist terms in various techno-cultural productions. Employing the term "techno-orientalism"[1], they argue that Asia and Asians have been repeatedly represented in a myriad of futuristic and technological imaginations. We ourselves have chosen to focus on speculative fiction coming out of Asia in recognition of how the genre has taken off and evolved recently. Japan has long been a fixture in this genre, through manga and anime. However, there is, increasingly, a voice from other parts of Asia such as India and Southeast Asia, which successfully tie together fantasy and science fiction with elements of folklore. Malaysian author Zen Cho, for example, has authored two fantasy novels, *Sorcerer to the Crown* and *The True Queen*, which are primarily set in a parallel-world Regency England where magic is practised, but which includes magic and supernatural elements from the Malay world (the latter title is reviewed in this issue). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* retells the Mahabharata from the viewpoint of Princess Panchaali, rather than focusing on the tales of warriors and armies. Julie Kagawa's *Shadow of the Fox* combines magic, spirituality, samurai and dragons in a tale about a quest to save the world.

Asian culture, society, politics and history give speculative fiction authors an original platform from which to speak out about their own realities, to re-imagine these realities, to face and embrace the good and the bad in them, and even more importantly, to find redemptive potential in even the most horrifying of realities.

In relation to this, Marek Oziewicz's suggestion that speculative fiction arises from, among other things, "the proliferation of indigenous, minority, and postcolonial narrative forms that subvert dominant Western notions of the real; and the need for new conceptual categories to accommodate diverse and hybrid types of storytelling that oppose a stifling vision of reality imposed by exploitative global capitalism" is particularly germane. Several of the articles included here focus on voicing indigenous and subaltern voices which have long been silenced by Western dominance.

The first article by Md Abu Shahid Abdullah discusses Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Calcutta Chromosome*. This novel (techno-Oriental in its scope) is compelling in its attempt to contest the Orientalist gaze. Abdullah situates it as an attempt on Ghosh's part to counter the narrative of Western dominance in scientific discovery by creating an alternate history in which subaltern figures use their superior folk knowledge to manipulate Ronald Ross into "discovering" the parasite which causes malaria

The next three articles focus on the re-imagining of Southeast Asian cultural beliefs and folklore. Both Anita Harris Satkunananthan and Sanghamitra Dalal engage with Malaysian author Yangsze Choo's novel *The Ghost Bride* while Hannah Ming Yit Ho looks at the *The Bunian Conspiracy* by Bruneian author Aamton Alias.

Dalal uses the supernatural elements of the novel *The Ghost Bride* to suggest levels of reality beyond what humans can normally perceive – thus disrupting the more Western view of reality as concrete, linear and time-bound. The mystic inner eye that Dalal focuses on is an intrinsic element in the anti-Orientalist and anti-Western rationalism emphasized in the preceding article.

Satkunananthan also discusses "Some Breakable Things" by Cassandra Khaw, another Malaysian author. Both these texts centre on the Chinese festival of the Hungry Ghost. Satkunananthan uses the texts to put forward her idea of the Malaysian Chinese Domestic Gothic as a hybrid form which combines Malaysian Chinese religious beliefs with regional politics. She argues that while holding on to cultural traditions and beliefs is an integral part of the diasporic self, these beliefs can be used to harmonize contrasting elements in the amalgam of belief systems and politics.

Ho highlights the intersections between Bruneian folklore and mythology, and contemporary constructions of national identity. *The Bunian Conspiracy* is a piece of speculative fiction which is doubly marginal in that it is from Brunei (a country that is somewhat under-studied in terms of its literature) and is written in English (not Brunei's official language). *The Bunian Conspiracy*, the trilogy she examines, uses the connection between humans and non-humans to discuss otherness and exclusivity in identity formation. Ultimately, Ho suggests, the novels argue for an inclusive, less divisive definition of national identity; her decision to set the debate in the world of the *bunian* (supernatural beings) serves to distance the reader from the political sensitivities of the topic, while at the same time allowing a deeper discussion.

The final two articles focus upon Asian bodies in different ways. Gema Charmaine Gonzales examines Indonesian writer Intan Paramaditha and her rewriting of myth and folklore to rethink the female body. Interestingly, she shows how the depiction of female bodies in myth and folklore controls how female bodies are currently perceived and governed. Gonzales discusses Paramaditha's appropriation of folktales and myths which represent the female body as dangerous and other, something to be controlled. Paramaditha reworks the myths to empower her female characters, taking on board the horror that their bodies might engender, but embracing that horror as a source of strength.

Foong Soon Seng and Gheeta Chandran have chosen to look at Japanese author Yokō Ogawa's 1994 novel *The Memory Police*, translated into English only in 2019. Unlike the other novels examined here, *The Memory Police* is not rooted in folklore and tradition. However, it speaks of a strong level of brutal mental (and even physical) control. Despite the characters in the novel literally losing control over their bodies, they still manage to find liberating potential in that loss. Foong and Chandran analyze the ways in which memory and body are used as weapons to dominate and, significantly also, as a means to resist that domination.

This special issue closes with the publication of two pieces of creative writing. Chris Mooney-Singh's offering, "The Bumboat Ride", is an excerpt from a novel in progress. It offers a vision of Singapore which encompasses its modernity and its position as a location in Asia where both East and West intersect, as well as a place where tradition and the supernatural still live, literally, just below the surface. Christina Yin's short story "Holocaust Borneo" focuses on environmental destruction and its consequences for human beings. Set in the future, the story hints tantalizingly at the redemptive potential of ancient folk knowledge – contrasted intriguingly with details of air ships and oxygen re-fill stations.

In bringing this issue together, we, alongside with the contributors, have explored multiplicities in the way in which Asian speculative fiction has been instrumental in re-imagining and re-defining the genre of speculative fiction. In challenging the current realities of the Asian self, and re-affirming Asia and Asians, speculative fiction in Asia has proved it is worthy of taking centre stage. We would like to thank our contributors for their hard work in making this special issue possible.

Notes

[1] Techno-Orientalism is a term that refers to the ways in which Asia and Asians are imagined in hypo or hyper – technological terms; techno-Orientalism often shows Asia in a broad spectrum of representations in which the "Orient" is presented as undergoing powerful transformations

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