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Walking through (Hi)stories:
City and Temporality in Vandana Singh's "Delhi"

ABSTRACT: The article constitutes an attempt at an in-depth analysis of the way in which Vandana Singh, in her short story "Delhi," engages in a discussion concerning the relationship between the urban space, hegemonic colonial narrative, and the subjectivity of the historical account, reframing it in terms of speculative fiction. This practice, framed as a counter-discursive attempt at rewriting the history of the Other, allows the author to comment upon the ways in which that history has been created and shaped. Adopting the postcolonial discourse as well as theory of science fiction as the primary methodological background, the article aims to explore the themes of collective memory and postcolonial reclaiming practices, framed in terms of a spatial-temporal journey through the urban space of Delhi, with the view of substantiating the thesis that the act of walking through the city in both the spatial and the temporal sense constitutes a counter-discursive attempt at reclaiming the colonial narrative and challenging the status quo.

KEYWORDS: science fiction, memory, city, postcolonial studies, history

Although speculative fiction, and science fiction in particular, is often regarded as a genre oriented towards the future rather than the present or the past, it is, in fact, neither ahistorical nor purely escapist; on the contrary, upon closer inspection, science fiction emerges as an inherently revisionist phenomenon, one which addresses and engages with the present and past fears, tensions, and hopes, and—as Alan Clarke remarks—one which is capable of revealing more about the society in which it originated than about any possible future it might

depict.[1] It is, then, a genre which is at its core metaphorical and meto-
nymic, according to Damien Broderick,[2] and, as such, a genre that
opens itself to re-presentation and symbolic reimagining, thus lend-
ing itself to counter-discursive practices. Those practices, which lie at
the foundations of postcolonial fiction writing—since, as Helen Tiffin
observes, "the subversive is characteristic of post-colonial discourse in
general"[3]—find their ultimate realisation in the sub-genre of postcolo-
nial science fiction, which addresses and writes against the essentially
colonialist roots of the genre in its modern incarnation. According to
Michelle Reid, "[science fiction's] fantastic nature does not distance
it from historical colonial projects, but gives a closer insight into the
strategies used to create the ideological fantasy of colonialism."[4] It is
for that reason, then, that more and more often postcolonial authors
seem to approach the reality of the colonial encounter from the science
fiction perspective, relying upon the principles of cognitive estrange-
ment. Cognitive estrangement is a term introduced by Darko Suvin
in his definition of science fiction, which postulates that in order for
science fiction to exist, there must be an element of cognition—that is,
all that is familiar and relies upon recognition of themes and imagery
introduced in the narrative, which facilitates a sense of connection
for the readers—as well as an element of estrangement—that is, all
that is foreign and unfamiliar, introducing a degree of alienation.[5]
Suvin, therefore, defines science fiction as a literary genre or verbal
construct whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence
and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main device

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1   Alan Clarke, "Past Tense: History, Heritage and Ideology," in *Britishness and
Cultural Studies*, ed. Krzysztof Knauer and Simon Murray (Katowice: Wydawnictwo
„Śląsk," 2000), 70.

2   Adam Roberts, "Defining Science Fiction," in *Science Fiction. The New Critical
Idiom* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 12.

3   Hellen Tiffin, "Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse," in *The Post-
Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft et al. (London and New York: Routledge,
2002), 95–96.

4   Michelle Reid, "Postcolonialism," in *The Routledge Companion to Science
Fiction*, ed. Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts, and Sherryl Vint (London
and New York: Routledge, 2009), 258.

5   Roberts, "Defining Science Fiction," 13.

is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment.[6]

This practice, in turn, allows postcolonial authors to reach beyond the binary of the colonial discourse and facilitate a more complex response to the dynamics of difference. The counter-discursive strategies employed by the writers constitute, therefore, an attempt at the postcolonial practices of writing back to the hegemonic centre and giving the voice back to the silenced peripheries.

The question of postcolonial writing back and resisting the master narrative imposed by the colonial discourse becomes one of the central themes in "Delhi," a short story by Vandana Singh, featured in the anthology of postcolonial speculative fiction entitled *So Long Been Dreaming*. In the story, the city itself is conceived of as the microcosm which becomes the site of the colonial encounter, but also as the space which facilitates reclamatory and revisionist practices, one which resists conforming to the notions of space and time as understood by the Western discourse, allowing Aseem, the protagonist of the story, who can travel through the city not only in space, but also in time, to assert his agency in the process of disrupting the colonial historical narrative. Those disruptions, which affect the city, the hegemonic narrative it represents and which it resists at the same time, and Aseem himself, testify to the complex nature of the postcolonial realities and the inevitable emergence of the liminal spaces which can enable the subaltern to speak and re-shape the stories of their own subjugation. With that in mind, the following paper seeks to examine the ways in which the city is presented at the intersection between the spatial and the temporal, with the view of substantiating a thesis that the act of walking through the city in both the spatial and the temporal sense constitutes a counter-discursive attempt at reclaiming the colonial narrative and challenging the status quo.

In "Delhi," Singh proposes a vision of the city which becomes for the protagonist a living organism, breathing history, a maze which he needs to find a way to navigate in order to make sense of his own existence. His journeys through the city are accompanied by exhaustive descriptions of the places he visits or simply passes by, rendered in vivid detail,

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6   Suvin, *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction*, 37.

which contributes to the feelings of immediacy and authenticity of the experience narrated through the eyes of a native inhabitant of the place, one who is capable of accessing and rewriting the imperial historical account, Delhi denies the Orientalist fascination of the Western gaze and rebels against the colonial master narrative. Throughout the story, Aseem seems to be extremely closely tied to the very fabric of the city—not much is known about his past, and what is revealed, is in each case inextricably connected with the topography of Delhi, as his memories are always prompted by a particular location in which he finds himself. In the opening paragraph of the story, the narrator says:

> Tonight he is intensely aware of the city: its ancient stones, the flat-roofed brick houses, threads of clotheslines, wet, bright colours waving like pennants, neem-tree lined roads choked with traffic. There's a bus going over the bridge under which he has chosen to sleep. The night smells of jasmine and stale urine, and the dust of the cricket field on the other side of the road. A man is lighting a bidi near him: face lean, half in shadow, and he thinks he sees himself.[7]

Thus, it becomes evident that Aseem appears to possess an unusual awareness of the city, further enhanced by his ability to see the past, the present, and the future of Delhi at the same time, which simultaneously facilitates his self-identification, rooted in his connectedness to the place, and alienates him from the rest of the crowd, contributing to the neurosis he admits to experiencing in one of the flashbacks, in which he contemplates suicide:

> Last night he tried, as a last resort, to leave Delhi, hoping that perhaps the visions would stop. He got as far as the railway station. […] People were nudging him, telling him to hurry up, but all he could think of were the still trains between the

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7   Vandana Singh, "Delhi," in *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy*, ed. Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004), 79.

platforms, waiting to take him away. The thought of leaving
filled him with a sudden terror. He turned and walked out of
the station. Outside, in the cold, glittering night, he breathed
deep, fierce breaths of relief, as though he had walked away
from his own death.[8]

For Aseem, the city—compared at one point in the story to a beehive,
standing still and perpetually in motion at the same time[9]—opens itself
up in ways which allow him to inhabit the liminal spaces at the meet-
ing point of the past, the present, and the future of Delhi, spaces which
overlap and overwrite one another, creating a palimpsest readable only
to Aseem and the few others across history who share his ability. His
encounters with the past, as well as the future, serve as points of rupture,
brief moments of uncertainty and confusion that ultimately pave the way
for a revision of the colonial history. What Singh emphasises, therefore,
is the fact that the cities of the past, the cities which the modern-day
Delhi used to be once upon a time, are still alive, creating tension and
disrupting the colonial historical narrative by virtue of their sole exist-
ence in the past, the present, and the future simultaneously, thus chal-
lenging the preconceived Western notions of time and linearity of the
historical account. As Bill Ashcroft remarks:

> when we investigate history itself we find that, particularly in its
> nineteenth-century imperial forms, it stands less for investiga-
> tion than for perpetuation […]. At base, the myth of a value-free,
> "scientific" view of the past, the myth of the beauty of order, the
> myth of the story of history as a simple representation of the
> continuity of events, authorized nothing less than the construc-
> tion of a world reality.[10]

Disregarding the principles of historicity delineated by Ashcroft,
Aseem's ability to reach towards both the past and the future at the same

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8   Ibid., 85.
9   Ibid., 86.
10   Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2001), 82–83.

time, bringing them together in the present moment, destroys the nostalgic vision of a natural, sequential progression of time and the historical narrative, and shatters the paradigm upon which the colonial enterprise had been founded, challenging the concept of the asynchronous space, described by Matthew Candelaria as "a notion of space-time where some parts of the Earth (universe) are imagined to be in the future, others in the past."[11] For Aseem, walking through the city is equivalent to walking through history, breaching the barriers imposed by the Western understanding of the progression of time and creating a source of disquiet and tension for the colonial discourse, which still exerts significant influence over the city and its inhabitants, even after the colonial British empire has officially ceased to exist. And it is the city itself, which, once again, prompts Aseem's reflections on the matter: "Watching the play of light on the shimmering water, he thinks about the British invaders, who brought one of the richest and oldest civilisations on earth to abject poverty in only two hundred years."[12] Indeed, the haunted relics of the colonial past seem to emerge in abundance throughout Aseem's journey—at one point, the narrator remarks that he encounters more apparitions in the older parts of Delhi, implying a degree of disquiet which affects the site of the colonial encounter as well as the hegemonic system, a painful memory which still bleeds ghosts of the past like an open wound. This journey, which ultimately brings Aseem's understanding of the mechanisms behind the colonial enterprise, is enabled first and foremost by the physical dimension of the city—Aseem measures his movement in the temporal sense by the topography of the city which changes with time, while his spatial movement is measured by the streets and buildings he passes on his way. The moments in which the past, the present, and the future overlap are the moments in which "history" turns into "histories," as the city allows for the multiplicity of voices and stories to be heard and collected by Aseem for the purpose of recording them for his own use and, ultimately, for posterity.

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11   Matthew Candelaria, "Reading Science Fiction with Postcolonial Theory," in *Reading Science Fiction*, ed. James Gunn, Marleen S. Barr, and Matthew Candelaria (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 136.

12   Singh, "Delhi," 81.

It is the city, then, which ultimately allows Aseem to see through the colonial narrative and reach the past embedded in the fabric of the city which later has become the canvas for the colonial encounter. By granting him unrestricted insight into the authentic, untainted past of Delhi, the city and its history become freed from the constraints of the colonial narrative, facilitating an unrestricted, immediate access to the pre-colonial and colonial times. The city in Singh's story is ultimately a city that resists, one that breaks the rules imposed upon it by the imperial order and challenges the colonial paradigm. It is, as Aseem remarks on several occasions, a resilient organism which survives, in one way or another, and revolts against the colonial attempts at erasure by granting the powers of witnessing its history in its entirety to the selected few, who are given the capability of disturbing and influencing the historical narrative. For Aseem and his contemporaries, who still live in the shade of the British empire, this particular aspect of his spatial-temporal journey bears special significance, as it paves the way for revisionist practices and reclaiming of the lost histories and voices. This particular journey though, is still fraught with uncertainties and apprehension, as Aseem remarks:

> In his more fanciful moments, he wonders if he hasn't, in some way, *caused* the history to happen the way it does. Planted a seed of doubt in a British officer's mind about the permanency of the empire. Despite his best intentions, convinced Moham-mad Shah that the impending invasion is not a real danger but a ploy wrought against him by evil spirits. But he knows that apart from the Emperor, nobody he has communicated with is of any real importance in the course of history, and that he is simply deluding himself about his own significance.[13]

His own personal convictions are belied, however, by the way in which he is situated within the greater narrative, as the one who is, indeed, not only capable of reclaiming the lost stories and allowing the forgotten voices, erased by the colonial enterprise, to be heard again, but

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13   Ibid., 82.

also as the one who can reach even beyond the colonial times to recover the lost ancestral repositories of knowledge and tradition, and bear witness for all citizens of Delhi, regardless of their ethnicity or religion, thus avoiding an unwitting repetition of the narrative of subjugation and erasure. Aseem's journey through the city of Delhi, then, affects not only his own subjectivity as well as his sense of connectedness to the city, but also creates a sense of simultaneous continuity and discontinuity of events that allows for a different, more complex understanding of the processes which have shaped and will continue to shape the city. Moreover, in the quoted passage, Singh touches upon the issue of historical significance versus insignificance of individual subjects in the colonial paradigm, in order to emphasise the importance of heterogeneous postcolonial narratives which favour the multiplicity of polyphonic voices and experiences.

Therefore, what seems to function on a more abstract level in the postcolonial discourse and fiction, can be approached by postcolonial science fiction in a more literal way—the decolonised subject, in writing back to the colonial system, becomes capable of rewriting the narrative of the colonial encounter and, ultimately, rewriting history. For Aseem, the source of his identification as a human being and a former colonial subject is rooted in his relation with the topography of the city as well as its history—history which has been erased, appropriated and rewritten by the coloniser, and which is now changed and reshaped by one of those who had been denied their right to speak. Albert Memmi, in his book *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, comments on the practice of such erasure of history, emphasising the fact that it is first and foremost a political tool as much as it is a cultural one, since the coloniser "endeavors to falsify history, he rewrites laws, he would extinguish memories—anything to succeed in transforming his usurpation into legitimacy."[14] When Singh addresses the colonial erasure of history, it is revealed that Aseem sees the past regardless of the master narrative imposed upon it, thus deconstructing the notion of history as an objective, unifying narrative—a notion used extensively in the political discourse—and illustrating that the Other and the Orient as perceived

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14   Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 52.

by the hegemonic power structure are also constructs, artificial and arbitrary, echoing Said's claims concerning the image of the Other.[15] Here, the former colonial Other is able to free themselves of the constructed image imposed upon them by the colonial discourse, and—by revisiting, reshaping and rewriting history—regain the lost subjectivity. Thus, the act of walking and engaging in a dialogue with the changeable city of Delhi facilitates the emergence of heterogeneous narratives that defy the linear progression of time and history adopted as the master principles of the Western paradigm and reinforces its position as a liminal, hybrid space from which the Othered subjects can articulate the experience of their own indigeneity and engage in counter-discursive practices of writing—and speaking—back.

In conclusion, by constructing the city of Delhi as a palimpsest and a point of resistance against the colonial narrative, Singh challenges the traditional Western notions of time, history, and discourse, and exposes the mechanisms behind the colonial enterprise. Although the motif of the city as a palimpsest can be found in various different contexts in past as well as contemporary literary production, in this particular instance, Singh utilises it in order to facilitate the postcolonial act of writing back, reclaiming history, and the colonial narrative. Her use of the changing topography of the city to mark the passage of time grounds the story in the local and works to deconstruct the notion of the asynchronous space as well as the Orientalist assumptions of mysterious exoticism and "Oriental backwardness."[16] Moreover, in the story, Singh contests the idea that the image of the Other, constructed by the hegemonic power structure, is in any way natural and objectively true, regardless of the claims of the colonial discourse. Here, once again, the theme of the Other as a myth is exposed and deconstructed, and what emerges instead is a portrait of the former colonial subject who is capable of rewriting the master narratives imposed upon them, thus challenging the idea of the centre as the superior locus of power, knowledge, and civilisation. In this way, both Singh and Aseem write back to the colonial hegemonic centre and eschew the remnants of the imperial paradigm as well as the

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15   Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 4.

16   Ibid., 7.

master narratives it upheld in order to construct stories of their own and engage in counter-discursive practices that pave the way for revisions and retellings of the local histories, allowing the former colonial subjects to address the trauma of the colonial encounter and, ultimately, to quote Nalo Hopkinson, "build [them] a house of [their] own."[17]

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17   Nalo Hopkinson, Introduction to *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy*, ed. Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004), 8.

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Agnieszka Podruczna

Podróżując przez historie:
Temporalny wymiar miasta w opowiadaniu Vandany Singh „Delhi"

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł ten stanowi próbę dogłębnej analizy sposobów, jakie Vandana Singh podejmuje w opowiadaniu *Delhi*, ukazując problematykę relacji pomiędzy przestrzenią miejską, hegemoniczną narracją kolonialną i subiektywnością relacji historycznych, ujętą w kontekście fikcji spekulatywnej. Używając dyskursu post-kolonialnego oraz teorii science fiction jako podstawowych ram metodologicznych, artykuł ten ma na celu analizę zagadnień pamięci zbiorowej i postkolonialnych procesów ponownego odczytywania przeszłości, przedstawionych przez autorkę w kontekście podróży przez Delhi zarówno w czasie, jak i w przestrzeni, za tezę stawiając sobie stwierdzenie, że akt poruszania się po mieście w wymiarze przestrzennym oraz temporalnym stanowi kontrdyskursywną próbę przejęcia i przepisania na nowo narracji kolonialnej, kwestionując tym samym *status quo*.

Agnieszka Podruczna

Auf der Reise durch die Geschichten:
Temporaler Ausmaß der Stadt in Vandana Singhs Erzählung „Delhi"

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der vorliegende Artikel ist ein Versuch, die von Vandana Singh in ihrer Erzählung „Delhi" angewandten Methoden, die Wechselwirkung zwischen einem Stadtraum, hegemonialer kolonialer Narration und subjektiven historischen Berichten im Kontext der spekulativen Fiktion darzustellen, tief schürfend zu analysieren. Mittels des postkolonialen Diskurses und der Theorie *science fiction* als grundlegenden methodologischen Rahmens bezweckt die Verfasserin, die mit dem Kollektivgedächtnis und postkolonialen Prozessen der neumaligen Interpretation der Vergangenheit verbundenen Fragen zu untersuchen, die die Schriftstellerin im Zusammenhang mit raumzeitlicher Reise durch Delhi schildert. Die Verfasserin stellt die These auf, dass der Akt der Bewegung in der Stadt im räumlichen und temporalen Ausmaß ein gegendiskursiver Versuch ist, die koloniale Narration zu übernehmen und neu abzuschreiben, den Status quo dabei in Frage stellend.