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The Haunted City: Spectres of Colonial Past in Vandana Singh's "Delhi"

Abstract. Even though the British colonial rule over India ended in 1947, its spectres haunt the nation until this day. Since then, Indian postcolonial writing—both of the realist and fantastic kind—has attempted to reconcile the past of the nation with its present, addressing the legacy of the haunting spectres of the colonial rule. With that in mind, the following article seeks to explore the way in which Vandana Singh, in her short story "Delhi," engages in a discussion concerning the intersection between spectral hauntings of the colonial past and the counter-discursive, revisionist practice of reclaiming and rewriting the colonial narrative by the Othered subject personified by the protagonist. Adopting the postcolonial discourse as well as theory of science fiction as the primary methodological framework, the paper argues that for Singh, the act of haunting facilitates reclamation of the lost history and memories of the city and ultimately contributes to the revision of the colonial account. Thus, in Singh's "Delhi," the spectres of the past become liminal, incorporeal entities, no longer confined to the sphere of abstraction and metaphor, enabling the postcolonial act of writing back.

Keywords: postcolonial studies; hauntology; writing back; postcolonial haunting; urban space; historical narrative.

When conceptualizing science fiction as a genre, it remains a widespread tendency to conceive of it in terms of engagement with the future rather than engagement with the present or the past. Science fiction, then, is regarded in the popular consciousness first and foremost as an escapist genre, while, in fact, upon further consideration, it reveals itself to be neither ahistorical nor purely escapist. On the contrary, science fiction remains deeply indebted to the socio-political and cultural circumstances which gave rise to the genre in its modern incarnation, at the same time as it emerges as an inherently revisionist phenomenon, one which addresses and engages with the present and past fears, tensions, and hopes, echoing the words of Fredric Jameson, who argues that "[one] of the most significant potentialities of SF as a form is precisely [its] capacity to provide something like an experimental variation on our own empirical universe" (2007: 270). It is, then, a genre which, according to Damien Broderick (Roberts 2000: 12), remains at its core metaphorical and metonymic, utilizing such strategies in order to provide a degree of simultaneous verisimilitude and estrangement. This understanding of the mechanisms at work in science fiction follows from Darko Suvin's concept of cognitive estrangement, which he describes as the interplay between cognition, which facilitates our understanding of the text, and estrangement, which distances us from our empirical experience (1988: 37). It is, therefore, thanks to that mechanism that "SF is increasingly recognized for its ability to articulate complex and multifaceted responses to contemporary uncertainties and anxieties, and metaphors drawn from SF have acquired considerable cultural resonance" (Wolmark 2005: 156). As such, the genre opens itself to re-presentation and symbolic reimagining, and, by extension, lends itself particularly well to counter-discursive practices. Those practices, which lie at the foundations of all postcolonial fiction writing—given that, as Helen Tiffin remarks, "the subversive is characteristic of post-colonial discourse in general" (2002: 96–96)—can utilize their own potential to the fullest in the sub-genre of postcolonial science fiction, which addresses and transgresses the essentially colonialist roots of the genre in the act of postcolonial writing back.

Thus, it becomes evident that mainstream science fiction remains a colonial genre at its core, fuelled by the dominant narratives of the encounter with the other and colonial expansion and conquest. Moreover, as John Rieder observes, it is not coincidental that science fiction "appeared predominantly in those countries that were involved in colonial and imperialist projects" (2005: 375) since, in his formulation, science fiction, at its most basic level, "addresses itself to the fantastic basis of colonial practice" (2005: 376) and to this day perpetuates "the persistent traces of a stubbornly visible colonial

scenario beneath its fantastic script" (2008: 376). It appears, then, that both postcolonial science fiction and the postcolonial discourse in general remain continuously haunted by the spectres of the colonial past, witnessing what Homi Bhabha calls the "furious emergence of the projective past" (1994: 254). Thus, it should come as no surprise that what they also share is the affinity for the hauntological perspective, mobilizing the spectres of the colonial empire in order to work through the trauma of the colonial encounter and facilitate the creation of new, liminal temporalities, echoing the words of Derrida who claims that "[h]aunting is historical, to be sure, but it is not dated, it is never docilely given a date in the chain of presents, day after day, according to the instituted order of the calendar" (1994: 4).

With that in mind, the following paper seeks to explore the ways in which Vandana Singh, in her short story "Delhi," engages in a discussion concerning the intersection between spectral hauntings of the colonial past and the counter-discursive, revisionist practice of reclaiming and rewriting the colonial narrative by the Othered subject, personified by Aseem, the protagonist of the story. Adopting the postcolonial discourse as well as theory of science fiction as the primary methodological frameworks, the paper argues that for Singh, the act of haunting facilitates reclamation of the lost history and memories of the city, and ultimately contributes to the revision of the colonial account. Thus, in Singh's "Delhi," the spectres of the past become liminal, incorporeal entities, no longer confined to the sphere of abstraction and metaphor, enabling the postcolonial act of writing back.

The short story, which first appeared in *So Long Been Dreaming*, an anthology of postcolonial speculative fiction edited by Nalo Hopkinson, a prominent speculative fiction writer, and Uppinder Mehan, is centred around the theme of journey in search of something: the story opens with Aseem wandering the city, recounting his previous encounters with the spectres of the past and the future, and searching for something that would give his life meaning. At the same time, his urban wanderings establish the setting for the subsequent series of events. The story, told in an achronological order, follows Aseem from the moment of his attempted suicide on the bridge over the Yamuna, from which he is saved by a mysterious man who hands him a business card and instructs him to find the people who operate under that address. The card leads Aseem to the office of Pandit Vidyanath and his assistant Om Prakash, who manage to imbue Aseem, until now listless and aimless, with a sense of purpose: he is given a stack of business cards and a printout which forms a picture of a girl, whom Aseem is supposed to find and help in some way at an unspecified point in the future. The girl, as it becomes evident when their paths finally cross, is, in fact, one of the

apparitions which Aseem encounters in his journeys throughout the city. After accidentally losing sight of her before they can conclude their meeting, Aseem begins his obsessive search in the urban labyrinth of the city. "Delhi," then, is a story which has, in fact, two protagonists: Aseem, through whom Singh filters the events of the narrative, and the city of Delhi itself. Aseem, established by Singh as a man out of time, listless and rootless, lives on the fringes of society, invisible to the rest of the crowd. As a social pariah, he feels distanced from the rest of the inhabitants of the city and incapable of finding his own place within the microcosm of Delhi, to the point where his alienation forces him to contemplate suicide, from which he is saved at the last moment by a passer-by at the very beginning of the story. The remaining part of the narrative focuses primarily on Aseem's journeys throughout the city as he bears witness to the spectres of the past and apparitions from the future. This, in turn, is enabled by a peculiar gift of Aseem's: the ability to transcend the constraints of the linear passage of time and the ability to see and interact with ghosts of both the past and the future, while the urban space of Delhi becomes the site of postcolonial haunting.

Thus, in the short story, Singh proposes a vision of the city of Delhi itself which facilitates postcolonial haunting through granting Aseem the ability to bear witness to the spectres of the colonial past as he travels through the maze of the city, which, in turn, becomes a microcosm of the colonial power relations, continuously haunted by the ghosts of the past as they invade the present. Though Aseem's ability to see beyond his own space and time does not extend solely to the times of the imperial rule in India and encompasses both the past and the future, the majority of his sightings are nonetheless tied to the colonial history of the city, emphasizing the points of historical rupture as well as the continued existence of colonial tensions. The story, then, rejects the simplistic view of the postcolonial as temporally detached from the social, political, and cultural heritage of the imperial project, and emphasizes the insidious nature of the colonial legacy, exemplified by postcolonial haunting, since, as Avery Gordon claims, "to be haunted is to be tied to historical and social effects" (1997: 190) of the very thing that becomes the source of the haunting. For the city of Delhi, the remnants of the British colonial rule do not constitute merely dated relics of a past regime. What Singh emphasizes instead is both the grounding in the socio-cultural and material conditions of the city of Delhi and the sense of non-linear historicity brought about by the haunting, which opens up liminal spaces and facilitates the creation of liminal temporalities, which, in turn, allow the processes of reclaiming and counter-discourse to emerge as meaningful practices of postcolonial resistance. The urban space rebels against the constraints of the linear passage of time and

its influence on the material dimension of Delhi, while the city itself emerges as the confined space of postcolonial haunting, enabling Aseem to access the lost colonial history directly, through his own empirical encounters with the spectres of the imperial legacy, rather than perpetuating the mediated, hegemonic account of the colonial past of Delhi.

This unmediated access to the colonial past, seen through the spectres he encounters, situates Aseem as the central locus of colonial and postcolonial politics and a disruptive force of counter-discourse, as his encounters with the past, as well as the future, serve as points of rupture, brief moments of ambiguity and uncertainty that ultimately come to facilitate a revision of the colonial history and a reconceptualization of the notion of history itself. The postcolonial haunting in which Aseem participates facilitates the resurgence of the colonial traumas, embodied by the spectres of the past, while Aseem's disregard for the principles of historicity, enabled by the haunting itself, destroys the nostalgic colonial 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, formulated 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" (2009: 136). This concept, in turn, had been utilized in order to construct a vision of time-space continuum which accounts for the perpetuation of the civilizing mission that fuelled and legitimized the imperial project: the mission to bring the supposedly backwards places at the peripheries of the colonial system from the past and into the present. Similarly to Bhabha, Singh regards postcolonial haunting as a primarily disruptive force, which "fractures the time of modernity" (Bhabha 1994: 252) and allows the past to hybridize the present, interrupting "the continuum of history" (Bhabha 1994: 257). Aseem, who experiences the past, the present and the future of Delhi simultaneously through the apparitions that haunt the city, directly resists the Western notions of time, linearity and the historical account, echoing the words of Bill Ashcroft, who claims that

> when we investigate history itself we find that, particularly in its nineteenth-century imperial forms, it stands less for investigation 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 construction of a world reality. (2001: 82–83)

The postcolonial haunting to which Aseem bears witness, then, shatters the myth of history as a linear representation of a certain arbitrary continuity of events, as the spectres of the past, who move beyond the realm of the metaphor and manifest as incorporeal, liminal entities that interact with Aseem through space and time, give rise to paradoxical, liminal temporalities, which Buse and Scott describe in the following way:

> Ghosts arrive from the past and appear in the present. However, the ghost cannot be properly said to belong to the past . . . for the simple reason that a ghost is clearly not the same thing as the person who shares its proper name. . . . The temporality to which the ghost is subject is therefore paradoxical, as at once they "return" and make their apparitional debut. (1999: 11)

What Buse and Scott argue in the passage quoted above finds its reflection in the nature of the apparitions which Aseem encounters at the intersection between the past, the present, and the future of Delhi: they are at the same time shadows of their former selves, returning from the past, and inhabiting their own contemporary timelines. They are, in fact, simultaneously torn away from the past and thrust into the present, and existing in their own times, available for immediate and unmediated access as they pull Aseem toward them, leaving him suspended in between different temporal dimensions. Thus, the apparitions, which accompany Aseem on his journeys through the city, complicate the nature of the relationship between the past, the present, and the future, as the city of Delhi denies the fetishizing, exoticizing fascination of the Orientalist gaze and rebels against the imperial master narrative imposed upon it, enabling confrontation with the colonial traumas as well as the simultaneous critical revision of colonial history and reclamation of the lost memories of the city.

In this way, through the engagement with the spectres of the past, postcolonial haunting facilitates the resurgence of the colonial tensions, seemingly disregarded by the other inhabitants of the city who do not share Aseem's ability. Thus, those inhabitants of Delhi who are incapable of seeing or interacting with the spectral apparitions either remain unaware of the living history of the city, completely overlooking Aseem's presence, or they regard his behaviour as that of a madman. For Aseem, however, the haunted city of Delhi becomes the place of colonial trauma, which manifests itself in his interactions with the apparitions and the way in which he continues to traverse the city in search of the sightings, to the detriment of his own mental and physical well-being. Aseem, then, as the witness of postcolonial haunting, remains singularly influenced by the ghostly traces of the colonial

legacy, which exacerbate his suicidal thoughts and further alienate him from the rest of the crowd, physically trapping him in the city to prevent his departure:

> 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. . . . 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. (Singh 2004: 85)

For Aseem, the act of witnessing in the process of postcolonial haunting remains a deeply distressing act of immersing himself in the colonial history of the city, reliving the trauma of the colonial past in order to document it for future generations, as the city grants him unmediated access to the lost past. Throughout the narrative, Singh emphasizes Aseem's connection with the colonial history through repeated instances of his encounters with the spectral apparitions, as well as the way in which the city itself becomes the spectre of its former self, articulating the traces of the colonial presence. The history of the colonial rule and its influence on the city remain at the forefront of Aseem's consciousness throughout the story, as the narrator states: "Watching the play of light on the shimmering water, he thinks about the British invaders, who brought one of the richest and oldest civilizations on earth to abject poverty in only two hundred years" (Singh 2004: 81). In fact, the haunted—and haunting—vestiges of the colonial past appear in great abundance across Aseem's journeys through the city. In those encounters, Aseem remains keenly aware of the historical implications of his journeys and engages in transgressive resistance against the hegemony of the colonial discourse:

> [The British] built these great edifices, gracious buildings and fountains, but even they had to leave it all behind. Kings came and went, the goras came and went, but the city lives on. Sometimes he sees apparitions of the goras, the palefaces, walking by him or riding on horses. Each time he yells to them: "Your people are doomed. You will leave here. Your Empire will crumble." Once in a while they glance at him, startled, before they fade away. (Singh 2004: 81)

It appears, then, that the modern city of Delhi is, for Aseem, a multi-layered labyrinth teeming with tensions of the past. Indeed, at a certain

point in the story, the narrator observes that Aseem seems to encounter more apparitions in the older parts of Delhi, pointing to the uneasiness and unrest which continue to affect the site of the colonial encounter alongside the hegemonic narrative, creating a point of painful rupture in the collective memory and history of the place—one which allows the spectres of the past to invade the present. As Singh writes:

> He's seen more apparitions in the older parts of the city than anywhere else, and he's not sure why. There's plenty of history in Delhi, no doubt about that. . . . [T]he eighth city was established by the British during the days of the Raj. The city of the present day, the ninth, is the largest. Only for Aseem are the old cities of Delhi still alive, glimpsed like mysterious islands from a passing ship, but real nevertheless. He wishes he could discuss his temporal visions with someone who would take him seriously . . . but ironically, the only sympathetic person he's met who shares his condition happened to live in 1100 AD or thereabouts, the time of Prithviraj Chauhan, the last Hindu ruler of Delhi. (2004: 80)

Moreover, Aseem's apparent inability to leave the city which continues to haunt him, as well as his growing obsession with documenting the history of his encounters, testifies to the incapability of detaching oneself from the history of the place and from the trauma of the colonial encounter, as Singh reveals the lingering, inescapable legacies of colonialism through her use of postcolonial haunting, regarded as simultaneously subversive and traumatic to the Othered subject.

At the same time, however, while the haunting brings about the trauma of the colonial past, it also provides a way to access the lost history, facilitating the practices of reclaiming, which in turn allow the subject to work through the trauma of the colonial encounter. For Aseem, the postcolonial haunting to which he bears witness and which he documents for posterity, enables him to challenge the colonial master narrative and connect with the historical dimension of the city free of the hegemonic attempts at discursive control over the fabric of the urban space itself. Aseem himself admits that "[i]n his more fanciful moments, he wonders if he hasn't, in some way, *caused* history to happen the way it does. Planted a seed of doubt in a British officer's mind about the permanency of the Empire" (Singh 2004: 82). Thus, through allowing Aseem to access the untainted history of Delhi beyond the constraints of a constructed historical account, the city as well as its history become liberated from the burden of the colonial hegemonic narrative, enabling unrestricted, immediate access to the history of its colonial and pre-

colonial days. The apparitions, then, make it possible for Aseem to record his own history of the city, as seen through the visions of the past (and the future), defying the colonial attempts at erasure of local histories or imperial atrocities:

> Among the crowds that throng these places he has seen the apparitions of courtesans and young men, and the blood and thunder of invasions, and the bodies of princes hanged by British soldiers. To him the old city, surrounded by high, crumbling stone walls, is like the heart of a crone who dreams perpetually of her youth. (Singh 2004: 83)

For Singh, the city of Delhi ultimately becomes a city that rejects the hegemonic historical account by means of postcolonial haunting; it violates the constraints imposed upon it by the hegemonic discourse and defies the colonial paradigm, facilitating the revision, reconstruction and reclamation of silenced voices and stories. As Aseem notes, "One of the things he likes about the city is how it breaks all the rules. Delhi is a place of contradictions—it transcends thesis and antithesis" (Singh 2004: 88). What follows is the revelation that Aseem is capable of witnessing the past regardless of the master narrative imposed upon the historical account of the city. This, in turn, enables him to challenge and deconstruct the notion of history regarded as an objective, logical and sequential narrative free of any bias; instead, his encounters with the spectres of the colonial past in the course of postcolonial haunting emphasize the complexity of the ways in which the historical account is constructed and expose the mechanisms behind its functioning. Ultimately, what emerges as a result of Aseem bearing witness to the colonial past of Delhi is a polyphony of voices and stories which enable Aseem to revisit, reshape, and rewrite the history of the city, and—through those processes of counter-discursive rejection of the *status quo*—dismantle the constructed image of the colonial Other, imposed upon him by the hegemonic discourse, and reclaim his identity. This process is illustrated through the metaphor of a tree sapling which Aseem notices near the site of his most frequent encounters:

> At the bridge, he leans against the concrete wall looking into the dark water. This is one of his familiar haunts; how many people has he saved on this bridge? The pipal tree sapling still grows in a crack in the cement—the municipality keeps uprooting it, but it is buried too deep to die completely. (Singh 2004: 92)

The sapling stands in the story for Aseem's reconstruction of the history of Delhi: one which cannot be contained by the colonial hegemonic historical narrative, one which always sprouts through the concrete of the current city of Delhi, just like the apparitions Aseem encounters on his journeys.

In conclusion, it could be argued that by constructing the city of Delhi as a site of a postcolonial haunting, Singh aims to highlight the fact that the act of witnessing postcolonial haunting facilitates the emergence of heterogeneous narratives which resist the vision of the sequential progression of time and history as adopted and perpetuated by the Western, colonial paradigm. The very act of haunting—and witnessing—is, therefore, regarded as an inherently disruptive phenomenon which enables practices of postcolonial counter-discourse. And indeed, Aseem, through accessing the unmediated history of the city of Delhi, reaches beyond the constraints of the historical account left by the legacy of the colonial system and—from his encounters with the spectres of the past—pieces together an alternative account of the history of Delhi, free of the colonial bias but still acutely aware of the legacy of the British imperial rule in India. At the same time, however, Singh points to the degree of anxiety and disquiet which inevitably accompanies postcolonial haunting; despite its counter-discursive potential, the haunting remains a process fraught with uncertainty and plagued by the memories of the colonial trauma, turning its witnesses into a different sort of spectres. As Singh writes,

> He just has to take a step and the city will swallow him up, receive him the way a river receives the dead. He is a corpuscule in its veins, blessed or cursed to live and die within it, seeing his purpose now and they, but never fully. (2004: 92)

This, in turn, reflects the fragmentary, fractured nature of the postcolonial condition and emphasizes the burden of witnessing borne by the Othered subjects in colonial and postcolonial realities, as they continue to confront the trauma of the colonial past. Nonetheless, despite the fact that postcolonial haunting becomes an inherently unsettling and often traumatic experience for the witnesses of the event, its transgressive, subversive potential remains crucial for the postcolonial practices of reclamation and resistance. Ultimately, then, the postcolonial haunting witnessed by Aseem contributes to the creation and proliferation of liminal spaces and temporalities, from which the Othered subjects can articulate the experience of their own colonial trauma and engage in counter-discursive practices of writing—and speaking—back.

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