



INDIANNES? — A COMPLEX HYBRIDIZATION OF CULTURES IN SAMIT BASU'S "THE SIMOQIN PROPHECIES"

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Article Received: 06/08/2020

Article Accepted: 25/09/2020

Published online: 28/09/2020

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.8.3.332](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.8.3.332)

Abstract

Fantasy Fiction in Indian English literature is still a novelty compared to the seminal works written in other genres. India's rich heritage of fantastical literature in the native languages has made the importance and requirement of Fantasy Fiction in languages that are not essentially Indian, take a secondary position in its literary world. Samit Basu's "Gameworld trilogy" is widely regarded as the first Fantasy Fiction written by an Indian author in English. In this paper, we have delved into the depths of the first instalment of the trilogy, "The Simoqin Prophecies", to explore the culmination of world mythologies, popular culture references and conventional tropes. The cultural identity of the author has initiated a debate over the "Indianness" of the work. The specific cultural implications and the effects of globalisation have made the novel a mishmash of world culture. The merits of comprehending the references that are intricately woven throughout the work are further heightened as the plot takes shape independent of the references. Despite being a "khichurification" at its core with numerous references to popular works from around the world, the originality of the plot makes the work a worthy precursor in the Indian branch of the genre. In the face of successful Indian SFF writers, the contribution of this novel as a trailblazer is something to be acknowledged. We have attempted to analyse and identify the Indian and non-Indian elements within the novel, and question the concept of characteristics that encompass 1.3 billion people and their inherent culture.

Keywords: Samit Basu, Fantasy Fiction, The Simoqin Prophecies, English literature, Indianness.

Introduction

On publication of *The Simoqin Prophecies* in 2003, Samit Basu embarked on an adventure into the world of writing fantasy fiction and is proclaimed as the first Indian writer of Speculative Fantasy Fiction in English. *The Simoqin Prophecies* is a harmonious amalgamation of eastern and

western fantasy tropes. Tahir Shah in his work, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* writes, "Where does one go in a tremendous city like Calcutta to find insider information? I recalled India's golden rule: do the opposite of what would be normal anywhere else", which perfectly resonates with Samit Basu's *The Simoqin Prophecies*. This work seamlessly bridges the East with the West, blending it with a unique

storytelling technique and became crucial in putting India on the map in the sphere of the fantasy world. In this paper, we shall endeavour to explore the complexities of *The Simoqin Prophecies* in the context of the "Indian" and the "non-Indian" elements simultaneously, debating the very concept of Indianness itself. Basu created a number of characters and plots, borrowing them from other mythologies and cultures in the world, thus we have attempted to locate and assess these multifarious tropes.

On Indianness

Samit Basu was born and brought up in Kolkata and had a keen interest in his own native cultures, which was reflected in his work *The Simoqin Prophecies*. He has very interestingly used elements of Bengali culture in his book through the humorous usage of names, delicious street foods and games from childhood thereby adding a hint of nostalgia. The cultural allusions are easily identifiable among the local readers. There is a plethora of interpretation regarding the "Indianness" of the novel.

Basu's wit is portrayed through characters with Bengali names like 'Borphi' and 'Lalmohan' are the names of Bengali desserts, 'Peyaj' means onion in Bengali and 'Amloki' which is a small sour fruit, thereby parodying the seriousness associated with the genre. The name 'Ulluk' simply means baboon and 'Djongli' translates to wild in Bengali. The name of the rakshasi 'Akarat' in the novel is an anagram of the name given to the fearsome rakshasi 'Taraka', from the Indian epic, *Ramayana*. In fact, 'Prince Chorpulis of Potalpur' and 'Prince Lukochuri' who were participants in a ceremony for Princess Pratima's hand in marriage, have their etymological roots along with 'Prince Kumirdanga' from popular games among young Bengali children. The city of 'Kol' can pertain to the Bengali word for 'lap' or a shortened form of Kolkata. The pleasures of the city of 'Kol' also alludes to the comfort of a 'Kol Balish', a pillow in Bengali, from where Basu might have borrowed the term. 'The Academy of Fine Arts' in the novel can be a reference to the existing place in Kolkata having the same name. The 'Silver Dagger' climbed up the wall of Hooba's

house trying to overhear Bjorkun and Tungz with lizard-like stealth, referring to detectives in colloquial Bengali who are often called 'tiktiki'-s translating to lizards. The 'jajbor tribes' refers to the 'vagabond' tribes of Bengal which is a literal translation of the word.

Basu also sources some of the names from Indian mythology, history and folklore. The stork named 'S.P Gyanasundaram' with his wife, 'S.Padmalakshmi', and their two sons, 'S. G. Raju' and 'S. Balasubramaniam', are conventional names of the members of a South Indian family. Basu puns on the word 'Mati' which can either refer to the Bengali word which means soil or 'moti' in Hindi which means pearl. The 'Bard of Potalpur' refers to Shakespeare who was also known as the Bard of Avon. Moreover, Basu humorously names Robin Hood as 'Rabin of Oodh' in the novel, where 'Oodh' may be derived from rearranging the alphabets in the word 'Hood'. Oudh was an ancient city of India which had a great historical significance.

The name 'Bolvudis' reminds us of Bollywood, whereas its placement and pattern is a reference to the Hollywood sign in Los Angeles. Basu mentions a 'casting conch' in the novel which is taking a slight jab at the 'casting couch' controversies of the film industries. The character 'Mantric' in the novel makes the 'muwi-visions', which is an allusion to the process of film-making in real life using montage, colour, contrast, exposure, resolution and more. Basu's keen interest in film-making is reflected through his detailed account of the life on this island.

Apart from the Bengali elements that are incorporated within Basu's "*The Simoqin Prophecies*", there are many instances, characters and their traits that are influenced by the Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. 'Ravians' may be a derivation of the word 'Raavan' and 'Danh-Gem' is an anagram of the name 'Meghnad', both characters are borrowed from the *Ramayana*. 'Maricha' is reworked as 'Aciram' in the book, and 'Bali' setting 'Kol' on fire is reminiscent of 'Hanuman' setting fire to 'Lanka'. The young boy who lost his thumb for spying on Asvin's archery techniques might refer to 'Eklavya', and 'Kul-guru' alludes to 'Dronacharya' as he was the kul-guru of

the 'Kauravas' and 'Pandavas' in the *Mahabharata*. Spikes' footprints led up to a strange, flat circle in the forest around which grass grew in a thick ring. There were no footprints inside the circle and also none leading out. Even the earth inside the ring seemed to be of a little darker than its surroundings. This alludes to the famous 'Laxmanrekha' from the *Ramayana*. A feminist re-working of the rekha can be found when Maya, Asvin, Rukmini and Gaam went to the forest with Chorpulis. He trembled with fear and clutched Rukmini's arm as she was about to chase after the stag. Trying to calm him down she had drawn a big circle around him in chalk and warned him that as long remained inside the circle, he was safe. This whole episode is an inversion of Laxman drawing the rekha for Sita's safety. The episode of Sita's abduction is reversed and portrayed through a feminist perspective. Rukmini had learnt that it was Akarat, the Rakshasi who had abducted Chorpulis from her friend, Lalmohan the Eagle, who had chased Akarat to protect Chorpulis. The lines "No, this is not a test for Asvin - it is a test for the mirror as well," refers to 'agnipariksha' where In *Ramayana*, Sita had to walk through fire as a proof of her chastity whereas in Basu's a man had to go through a similar situation to prove his worth as 'the chosen one'.

Using food names as the names of characters adds an element of humour in the story like the character of 'Nimbupani', the Chimaera who is introduced in the very first chapter of the novel and which is the Hindi word for 'lemonade'. There are references to the food served in the finest restaurants of Kol like 'Avrantic biryani' and 'kebabs', 'Xi'en Noodles', 'Potolpuri Roshogollas', 'patali gur' and 'moton roll' (mutton roll). Even Kol is described as 'The Big Mango'. Mangoes are considered to be the king of all fruits in Bengal. Street foods of India have found its way in Basu's book with mentions of 'phuchka' or 'golgappa' and 'bhelpuri'. Thus, we can see that Basu's fantasy world is very closely associated with the real world.

The characters are driven by their own set of moral values and judgements, their ideas and behaviour are revealed to the reader eventually as one proceeds. Asvin, being Avrantic always carried

an extremely old-fashion demeanour which resembled patriarchy to a certain extent. The Avrantic men are posed in the novel to have the orthodox Indian ethos embedded in them and the temperament reflected through the character of Asvin is of stereotyped Indian notions about masculinity. Basu humorously highlighted a scene from old Bollywood movies, where the trees were evenly spaced to allow voluptuous damsels clad in clinging wet saris to run from one tree to another while the music plays in the background, depicting the inherent patriarchy in the movie and Indian society at large. This was a scene which was also to be incorporated in Mantric's muwi-visions.

Basu also took examples from the Mughal culture and history. In the book, we can see how Vul had no quarrel with Danh-Gem and he had already pledged his allegiance to him to save himself. To appease Danh-Gem, Vul had promised to make a special chariot for him imbued with unimaginable powers that would surpass all other gifts. He made a chariot called 'Chariot of Vul', which Danh-Gem considered so valuable that he took Vul prisoner to ensure that he would not be able to replicate his work. This story reverberates with the tale of the completion of the Taj Mahal, after which Shah Jahan, the ruler, cut off the thumbs of all the 22,000 workers so that no other work would be able to surpass the beauty of this monumental creation. Another reference of the secret corridors of Taj Mahal can be found in the description of the secret passage through which Lady Temat goes through to meet Silver Dagger. The walls were hundreds of feet across and were lit with dazzling crystalline vaman lamps. A double row of pillars, smooth and grey which ran through the middle of the tunnel. The Taj Mahal also has secret passages and rooms.

Reference to the Chariot of Vul holds importance too. The structure of the chariot shows similarity with a popular form of vehicle prevalent in Kolkata, Japan, Thailand and China for a long time. It is the 'tana rickshaw'. Vul's chariot is even compared to the one of Arjun's, magnificently built with the ability to travel very fast.

The presence of Non-Indian Elements

In an interview with FactorDaily, Bangalore in 2017, Samit Basu was asked about his enthusiasm on being the first Indian SFF writer and if his investment in writing a science fantasy novel was at all painstaking. Basu, as humorous as he is, made witty remarks about how most of his readers consider the genre of *The Simoqin Prophecies* a work of science fiction, however, to him, it was an expedition to fantasy world-building. In order to do justice to the genre that he is recognised for, he has started grounding science fiction in the next volumes of his work. This brings to light the fact that Basu himself doesn't polarize science fantasy fiction, but rather reconstructs upon the already polarized opinions and ideas of science fantasy fiction, giving it a whiff of all the flavours of narratives that exist in the world, and ends up developing a form first of its kind in Indian English literature. It is an interesting read in terms of how Basu stitched it all together.

The tendency of formulating the work on bits and pieces, making it a pastiche is what a postmodernist work essentially is and to think of *The Simoqin Prophecies* as a postmodern work suffices to serve the purpose. However, it would not be doing it justice to affirm that it is only a science fiction primarily because of some 'science-sounding' subjects or fantasy as a result of fantastical bestiary imageries. It is rather a combination of a variety of genres. The elements of dark comedy, parody, epic, science fiction, fantasy, absurdist fiction, spoof, alternative historical fiction, so on and so forth are embedded very well in *The Simoqin Prophecies*. Stirring world myths with Basu's own category of erratic humour and a scathing imagination, *The Simoqin Prophecies* is a journey along with the characters in an atmosphere that is as entertaining as any Bollywood movie. As far as the genre is concerned, a reader-response theorist would claim that it is mostly the discourse of the readers to construct the kind of genre that a book associates itself with and is agreeable. On the surface, *The Simoqin Prophecies* successfully constructs a fantastical world and therefore qualifies as a proficient part of the genre of fantasy, in fact, as a weird-west fantasy, if at all science fiction. A weird-west fantasy as a subgenre of

fantasy is defined as that which combines Western elements with other genres, usually horror, occult, steampunk, fantasy, or science fiction. *The Simoqin Prophecies* displays an extraordinary ability to carry forward a fiction through arbitrary digressions and despite numerous allusions to Indian myths and literature, it is engaging even for a reader who is unfamiliar with the intended myths. *The Simoqin Prophecies*, being true to its occidental tonality, history, fantasy, and technique blended with the elements of oral traditions, history, folklore and mythologies from the orient, is a gallimaufry of both Indian and non-Indian bathos and ethos.

One of the primary concerns of the readers of *The Simoqin Prophecies* is its very title. It is indeed an unusual title for a book, that too by an Indian author as some scholars and readers might think. The term 'Simoqin' is not a part of the English lexicon. It is astounding to notice that there was an ancient Chinese historian, hailed as 'The Grand Historian' by the name 'Sima Qian' who belonged to the Han Dynasty (206-220 A.D) in China and inscribed his quintessential work *Record of the Grand Historian* famously known as *Shiji*. In it, he incorporated his skilful depiction of historical characters using details of their speech, conversations, and actions; his innovative use of informal, humorous, and varied language; and the simplicity and conciseness of his style, intended to discover the patterns and principles of the development of human history and emphasising upon the role of the individual man in affecting the historical development of China. His historical perception is that a country cannot escape from the fate of growth and decay. In *The Records* or *Shiji*, Sima Qian does not treat history as "a continuous, sweeping narrative", but rather breaks it up into smaller, overlapping units dealing with famous leaders, individuals, and major topics of significance.

This can be understood in terms of Basu's *The Simoqin Prophecies*, his skilful depiction of mythical characters with fine detailing to their speech and actions, informal and humorous in the varied language is intended to deconstruct the patterns and principles of the development of human history and the role of men in affecting it

collectively. Basu too is underscoring history, not as a continuous sweeping narrative but bits and chunks of overlapping units dealing with legends as well as regular individuals and their major concerns.

The fact that one copy of Sima Qian's *Records* is placed in the imperial capital of Xi'an and Basu's allusion to Xi'en Empire in his novel, makes this seemingly far-fetched assumption viable. Sima Qian's work, *The Records* is composed in the form of a historical narrative along with a number of myths and legends from Qin and Han dynasty and in the Kingdoms of Wei, Shu and Wu which means power, skills and shamanism or sorcery respectively. Therefore, the historicity of legendary kings of the ancient periods given by Sima Qian is questionable. The point of bringing it to light is to justify the use of sorcery, skill and power that is incorporated in Basu's *The Simoqin Prophecies*. Sima Qian began the *Shiji* with an account of the five rulers of supreme virtue, 'The Five Emperors', who modern scholars, such as those from the Doubting Antiquity School, believe to be originally local deities of the people of ancient China, thus sifting out the elements of the supernatural and the fantastic which seemed to contradict their existence as actual human monarchs and was criticized for turning myths and folklore into sober history. Interestingly, *Shiji* is about 526,500 Chinese characters, making it four times longer than Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* and even longer than the *Old Testament*.

There is a resemblance to the world-building of Sima Qian to that of Basu's world-building skill and therefore it is believable that Samit Basu, being a well-read author drew inspiration from Chinese folklore, myths and legends and that Samit Basu owes much to Sima Qian's fantastical world. The way Sima Qian had set the narrative tone for Chinese history, similarly Samit Basu set the trend of fantasy fiction in India. The language acquisition and the narrative technique that Basu used are heavily borrowed from Western domains of *Ulysses*, *The Bible*, the Arthurian legends, the Greek myths and Tolkien's world of the hobbit-hole. In fact, Basu also included other mythologies such as Arabian folklores, Egyptian cultures, Xi'an Buddhist concepts, Chinese

mythology, Japanese mythology and more that remain uninitiated and unearthed. Such exceptional vastness of embedded information reveals how well-read an author Samit Basu is.

It is not only a mishmash of stories and tales from all around the world but also a topsy-turvy transition of the actions of the characters and events. In the book, the terror of Danh Gem and the prophecies cultivated three-quarters of the book and by the end, the readers are confronted with another version of the story, Danh Gem's own version that is being revealed to Kirin. The love triangle of Danh Gem, Isara and Narak is similar to the love triangle of Kirin, Maya and Asvin, which is a clever device in Basu's writing. As far as the main plot is concerned, it can be argued that Basu complicates the concept of a conventional plot by problematising the concepts associated with the idea of the chosen one. Here, the supposed hero turns out to be the anti-hero by the end of the book. Bathos that turns something serious into something trivial exists as a key element in Basu's writing. The entire plot consists of patches from ancient myths and fantasies of the west and of the east implying that there is not necessarily a conventional plot required and it is meaningless to look for one. Such an absurdist notion reflects Terry Pratchett's *Disc World Trilogy* from where Basu has heavily borrowed. The plot foreshadowed in the past is parallel to the story of Kirin and seems like a reiteration of Danh Gem's own story. Kirin at the beginning of the story says,

"I remember living in the forest, being trained to fight and hunt by a band of ravian warriors. We lived in simple halls, secret and very well guarded because the woods were full of the Enemy's spies. We never stayed in any one dwelling for more than a month",

by the end of the novel Kirin chooses to be the heir of the Dark Lord. It makes *The Simoqin Prophecies* doubtful regarding the possibilities of its plot and that it is a repetition of the plot in itself. Danh Gem maybe Kirin who was asleep for two hundred years until Spike found him in the Great Forest or probably reincarnated. The anti-hero plot

resolution is not Indian in the sense that it might be considered as morally flawed.

Brandon Sanderson says that the best comedy ever produced is all very absurd. The concept of absurdism itself emerged in the west, of the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard and in this sense, it can be understood that the design Basu's fiction *The Simoqin Prophecies* entails not only Indian but continental fictions as well. Some of the characters, as well as events, throughout the novel, are completely absurd, such as the situation where Hihuspix (he who speaks) is asked to stay quiet or the episode of Jinn who ate the person who freed him. These elements show Basu's intention of using absurdity as an essential trope of his fantasy world-building.

The etymological properties of the characters in *The Simoqin Prophecies* are very interesting because some of them have no meaning in and of themselves and appear as bizarre, while some of the characters in the novel are taken from legends of the world, either historical or fictional. Such includes the character of Kirin, the supposed hero of the novel who turns out to be the son of the Dark Lord by the end of the novel.

The name, Kirin can be related to 'Qilin' or Kirin, who is a mythical character in East Asian cultures and is believed to be the most powerful and secret beast of all, so much so that the appearance of a Qilin is believed to be the sign of the arrival of a great leader or a wise man. The character of Unwaba, the foreteller chameleon in the novel, is a direct reference from the Zulu mythology which mentions Unwaba as a mythical chameleon or a lizard sent by the Sky God to tell the people and creatures of the earth that they had immortal life. The character of Hihuspix might have been taken from the philosophy of Lao Tzu, a Chinese philosopher who says that "he who speaks doesn't know" and the same is parodied in the novel as Hihuspix is a confused minor character and doesn't know much about the prophecy. Ravians might have also been an allusion to the ravens from Greek myth who represent prophecy and insight and act as psychopomps. Claude Levi Strauss proposed a structuralist theory which suggests that

they (psychopomps) obtained mythic status because they act as the mediators between life and death. Ravians in the novel appeared to be the "dead race", yet existing in another world, acting as a moderator between life and death, between the two worlds. The Roc and Jinn used by Basu in the novel appeared in Arabic geographies and Islamic history, popularized by Arabian fairy tales and sailors folklore, thus Basu reconstructed and parodied upon *One Thousand and One Nights*.

The character of Maverick stands as an unorthodox independent-minded man and Basu might have taken the character from an American comedy series of 1957 starring James Garner by the same name, while Yahoo might refer to American slang for a loud-mouthed noisy person. In the novel, Maverick and Yahoo play two sides of a coin. The character of Grand Vizier and Sultan in the novel might be the reworking of the story of Akbar and Birbal whereas, Ajaxis might refer to Greek legend. Artexerxia is taken from the name of Achaemenid King of Persia called Artaxerxes I.

There are several historical references too in the novel such as the Tiger Hill of Darjeeling, famous for its splendid sunsets and the War Temple, a reference to Janus, whose doors open during the war and remain closed during peace. The Great Colosseum being a direct reference from ancient Roman amphitheatre used for animal fights, executions and re-enactments of famous battles based on classical mythology. There are also episodes from eastern mythology weaved within the western tropes, that Basu might mock or allude to in the novel such as the Circle of Darkness in Imokoi in the novel is from the Stonehenge of Celtic myth. In fact, Imokoi itself is the name of a Japanese sweet dish popularly known as 'Ikinari Dango'. Also, the events of the sword in the stone like that to Excalibur from Arthurian Legends or the Eurakus and the sirens alluding to *Ulysses* and the sirens are some of the instances that reflect Basu's usage of continental literature and history.

Science or scientific things don't exist in this novel, what exists is magic which reflects what Brandon Sanderson calls "scientific" things; things that appear science like and not necessarily science.

Magic too appears science-like as it has its own rules, its own equations that culminate to produce something new, both beneficial and destructive.

Tolkienesque world-building and most western fantasy fiction generally are based in a medieval setting, but in *The Simoqin Prophecies* magical elements are some sort of modern-day technological advancements, thus Basu, by condensing elements and incidents of the past in that of the present, reflects how history repeats itself every time, having no alternative, on nothing new and how Basu fixes his characters as well as his readers in that framework of time. Magic is an illusion, a science-like thing which is but an illusion of science, hence is fantasy an illusion, a world-building illusion. Such intertwining of time, space and action is depicted and questioned by the characters in the novel who undergo a transformation by the time readers reach the end of the book.

The heroic virtues and the status quo associated with each character are fascinating. The supposed hero, Kirin, is a secret competitor, much like the Silver Dagger, another prominent figure in the novel and Basu by portraying many heroes from different aspects, questioned the very fact of a conventional setup and the idea of a standard hero in any world. Unlike Tolkien, the characters and the geographical settings are not elaborated in *The Simoqin Prophecies* as Basu doesn't provide any cartographical imagery, description or map, thus challenging the world of fantasy fiction while simultaneously parodying it. The novel provides an atmosphere of Brecht's alienation technique where the audience is aware of the characters as non-existing entities, some of the characters such as Asvin, Maya, Lady Temat, and many more can be seen in the novel as true to life characters, while some characters such as Stork, Kirin, Gaam, Imp and others either lack description or appear more imaginary. To understand it better, supposing that a reader from a non-literary background may read the novel as a work of popular culture and one might not necessarily be able to connect with or consume the world mythology embedded in it, unless one is well acquainted with it, except for the significant tropes, puns, myths and history but

nonetheless, *The Simoqin Prophecies* can equally be interesting in its own perspectives and is successful in terms of world-building. It doesn't matter what world one calls this world as, because it all comes down to a great fuller circle in a repetitive mode, thus making it an 'Orange' cut in two halves, each mirroring one another, (how does it matter Sambo?)

To sum up in Basu's own words

"What's that? Speak up, please. Did I create this world? I think so, yes. I'm not quite sure, though. I remember saying a word, though I've completely forgotten what the Word was ..."

Race, class and caste in *The Simoqin Prophecies*

The reality of racial discrimination has been addressed through numerous texts of the modern age and the genre of Speculative Fantasy Fiction has not been excluded. Even though magic shimmered through these alternate worlds and dragons soared in the air, the swords and wands were almost always drawn to remedy the inequality among the beings that peopled these worlds. Hence, the subtle treatment of real-world problems through the fantasy world gave these characters and plots an air of relevance that has fascinated the readers all over the world.

Discrimination on the basis of race and socio-economic class is a malady that has plagued every nation since the beginning of civilization. Naturally, it has found its echoes in the world literature. Its impactful presence in the fantasy literature, too, has been reverberated through the plots and still continues to do so. Popular fantasy fiction, *Harry Potter* series (1997) by J. K. Rowling, has its whole conflict of interest built around the distinction between "pureblood" and "mud-blood" wizards, and other "inferior" creatures. *The Lunar Chronicles* (2012) by Marissa Meyer revolves around the idea of "lunars" with bioelectricity manipulation abilities, "earthen" vulnerable to and exploited through that force of will, and cyborgs being treated inhumanely. In contrast, the *Mistborn* trilogy (2006) by Brandon Sanderson shows the "allomancers" with magical abilities being treated as prized possessions, and often kept hidden from

the world and used as weapons in wars. In several *Grisha Universe* (2012) books by Leigh Bardugo, the Grisha power is feared and they are hunted throughout the world. The racial distinction is primarily felt in the way they treat each other, but Bardugo even heightens the language barrier between the races to show the arbitrary differences that the people choose as the foundations of their prejudices. *The Folk of Air* (2018) trilogy by Holly Black also portrays different races of magical creatures inhabiting separate spaces. The politics of cohabitation with humans and one another is also explored here through frequent wars and treaties. The *Villains* (2013) series by V. E. Schwab draws attention to the fear of and fascination with the powers of the "Extraordinaries". In another duology by Schwab, *Monsters of Verity* (2016), the distinction between monsters and men are blurred in the city amidst war as the so-called humans engage in bloodlust and the apparent "monsters" exercise restraint and rational thought. Whereas, *The Ash Princess* (2018) duology by Laura Sebastian, portrays racial discrimination that escalates to genocide, along with experiments being performed on humans to infuse them with magical abilities.

Samit Basu's *The Simoqin Prophecies* (2004), draws references from the popular fantasy fictions of the world. Its prominent allusions to ancient Indian epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, emphasise upon the distinct qualities of the Indian society and the not-so-exclusive ailments that gradually take on universal significance through the prompt actions of the plot and its international setting.

The diverse society of India is a casteist one, unsurprisingly, Basu's fictional world is a caste-ridden, classist society that borders on racism. In Basu's world of "spellbinders" and "demons", the humans do not consider "vanars" and "crows" to be intelligent or smart enough to pose an actual threat. Years of normalised neglect and insult manifests itself into the vengeance of these creatures as they simply wish to overthrow the existing structure of power to back the people who promised them a more even distribution of the same. Predictably, it is the mutual effort of these

"inferior beings" that play an important role in uniting the servants of Danh-Gem.

On the other hand, the prejudices against the "asurs" have such deep-rooted foundations that the humans refuse to learn their language which ultimately results in the "Untranslatable Books" being left untranslated for two hundred years. This is apparent in Maya's reaction to Kirin learning the language of the asurs,

"Maya had been surprised and a little shocked when Kirin had learnt how to speak the language of the asurs but had quickly accepted that it was only ancient and deep-seated prejudice that had prevented her from learning it herself."

An important secret is kept out in the open solely depending on the distaste of the humans towards the "asurs". Even isolated from the majority of the society, the "asurs" are themselves divided into arbitrary groups. In an attempt to fit into the refined society of "Kol", the city-dwelling "asurs" heighten the differences between their manners and practices, and the supposedly uncouth "danavs" of the countryside. They end up drawing a distinction between the same race depending on the geographical and cultural distinction.

The "Avrantic" preconceived notion of other nations and "pashans" also renders the dynamic between the characters on the quest, more complicated. Gaam takes up the task of dissuading the Avrantic prince, Asvin, from acting according to the stereotypes that has been taught to him as part of his formal education. Gaam emphasises upon the similarities between the people across borders and the ineffectiveness of judging others based on discriminatory notions,

"In your words, I see the work of Ventelot and of Imokoi," he said. "I cannot understand the hatred the Avrantics and the Artaxerxians bear for each other...You have so much in common, your languages, your food, even your race...the old hate remained... And Danh-Gem used it well in the Great War, promising Artaxerxia

dominion over Avranti and using that bait to destroy the mighty armies of Elaken.”

This lure of discrimination against all that represents the "other" is seen in the "ravian" society as well. Narak is sent into this new world despite mortal danger simply because he is a lower caste ravian, implying that he is replaceable due to his lowborn status. After Danh-Gem takes his place, the rejection of the King of Asroye in not letting him marry the princess, Isara, is again based on the caste difference. Despite his considerable economic success and reputation as a demon-hunter, he is not accepted into the elite society. The prejudices are entrenched so deep that both Isara and the "rakshas" Narak are banished from "Asroye" after their marriage and Kirin, effectively the prince of "ravian"s, is forced to live in exile.

Basu's brilliance lies in collapsing this interrelated structure with the inclusion of human spell-binders who attend "Hero School in Kol" and are considered superior to humans. Ironically, these spellbinders, ignorant of their own ancestry, practice "rakshas" magic by virtue of their mingled blood all the while refusing to respect "rakshases" or their culture due to the insubstantial differences between their races.

The aspect of interracial attraction between Maya and Kirin, as well as, Narak and Isara, adds to Basu's aim of challenging the conventional tropes. Ventelot and Imokoi's proposed world domination is also portrayed as racially biased, which draws parallels to the pure race concept of fascism. Whereas, through the introduction of Xien and Artaxerxia, Basu portrays a passive-aggressive Asian and Middle Eastern power struggle.

The similar ideas of these nations to racially dominate the world and their inevitable failures are highlighted through the plot. The aim of portraying unbiased narratives is achieved through diverse representation and employment of conventional fantasy tropes to finally challenge these fundamental ideas. Despite all the questions raised through the journey of the protagonists, it is important to remember that it takes heroes from all seven nations to fight the forces of evil and

defeat Danh-Gem the first time. Asvin's party, as well as Kirin's, did not discriminate on the basis of race, class, caste or gender but prioritised the abilities of the individuals when choosing their members, effectively proving the socio-political distinctions to be superficial attributes.

Western Textual References

Samit Basu undertook a mammoth task when he attempted to write his work, *The Simoqin Prophecies* as he meshed almost every iconic world that is associated with the Fantasy genre. In this text, we see that the infamous allusions and references are not limited to the West, but this work is a motley mix of the Eastern and Western spheres. This is regarded as India's first Science Fantasy Fiction in English and therefore, this novel is more than just a work of fiction because it helps place India on a map which is primarily dominated by the West.

Basu's awareness of the works of Western fantasy fiction is very apparent. The geography presented in *The Simoqin Prophecies* resounds with Terry Pratchett's *Discworld Trilogy*. Kol is seen to be similar to Ankh-Morpork, Enki is considered to be its Unseen University, and among others, the vamans are reminiscent of the battle loving engineer dwarves and golems are compared to the giant men of clay, found in Discworld. From the world of J.R.R. Tolkien, Middle Earth is seen to make an appearance as Bleakwood and Imokoi reminds the readers of Mordor. The ravians are believed to be an echo of the elves of Middle Earth who sailed to the West and the asuras are similar to the orcs. The beginnings of *The Hobbit* and Basu's work are also very similar as Tolkein starts his work with the phrase, "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit" and Basu begins his work with the same phrase but with a minor alteration, "In a hole in the ground there lived a rabbit." This work also reverberates with many aspects of *The Star Wars* where Kirin is like Luke Skywalker who uncovers a fearsome truth on his quest, Spikes is believed to be similar to Chewbacca, who is very threatening for everyone other than his chosen master and Gaam is believed to be a combination of the characters of Obi-Wan-Kenobi and Master Yoda.

Maya is reminiscent of Princess Leia but with a sharper wit and having magical powers. There are many instances where this work reminds the readers of the *Harry Potter* series. Asvin is the chosen one in Basu's work much like Harry Potter in Rowling's books and Peyaj of Potolpur strongly resonates with the character of Hermione Granger. Both these works also have characters named Fluffy, who are absolute contraries to the name and have tasks of supreme importance, which is protecting the central aspect of the books. Fluffy in Basu's work is the name given to Steel Bunz, a rabbit, who despite his adorable demeanour is a brave warrior who is tasked with protecting the central figure of the first book of Basu's trilogy, Asvin, the chosen one. Fluffy in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, the first book of the series is a large three-headed dog that guards the most important aspect of the book, the Philosopher's Stone. Along with the geography and characters, this book has many situational similarities and references to other works. Gaam is seen having to solve the riddles of the Sphinx to move forward in his quest, which is a reminder of Gollum in *The Hobbit* and to the Greek tragedy, *Oedipus Rex* as the riddle is the same in both the works.

This is a work that has borrowed many of its elements from other well-established texts ranging through centuries, but what makes this work truly intriguing is the way the same tropes and situations are subverted and manipulated to present humorous effects in this work belonging to an otherwise serious genre. This novel has a plot of its own, with additions from other sources and through these additions, Basu questions the practicality of the tropes which were unquestioned before. Through this trilogy, Basu is able to debase the seriousness of the whole genre of Science Fantasy Fiction. However, this work is not merely a lampoon as it is more than just a mockery of the tropes. This book delves into many aspects of the fantasy genre and problematizes it, thereby forcing the reader to question the tropes at every level. He complicates the ideas of a hero and a villain, blurs the lines between the concepts of good and evil, and in such ways is able to make his work much more than just a spoof.

This work is a conduit where the West seamlessly blends with the East. However, there have been questions raised about how far a Western audience would be able to understand the Indian elements and nuances in the work as Basu provides no explanation about what they are. However, it may be argued that since the West is never expected to provide explanations for their references, and therefore it is unfair to expect an author from a different part of the world to do so. It is also unfair to think that Basu is writing his work to be understood by a Western audience as it has the potential to entertain any audience from around the globe. In a post-colonial world, it is incorrect to believe that the West is the only part of the world which primarily uses the English language as a mode of communication and expression. This work, therefore, may be regarded as a subtle protest against the monopoly held by the West over this genre and over English literature in general, by mocking the tropes associated with the genre and thereby, the genre itself.

Indianness- Appreciation of Indian Culture or a Colonial Hangover

In *The Simoqin Prophecies*, Samit Basu uses certain ideas that only a reader well aware of the Bengali culture or rather familiar to Indian traditions as a whole will find funny and thus names like "Lukochuri", "Chorpulis", "Potolpur" appear almost like an inside joke. The novel reflects some Indian elements inextricably woven within it, however, it does not give the so-called vivid picture of India. Basu, rather, infuses certain indigenous practices and terms into the novel and defamiliarizes them in a way that even a reader well acquainted with that very culture, feels for the first time, seeing the same culture through a glass tinted with Western ideas. A claim thus made could be that Basu is constricted by the western mode of language and that the Indian culture is deeply rooted in Indian languages and so it is difficult, if not impossible, to capture the authentic sensibility of the culture through a foreign language. However, this claim would not be justified in the current world of "Englishes" as English no more is just a colonial language but has been 'Indianised' by several Indian writers who successfully express the

Indian ethos through this medium. A contemporary example of this instance is the description of jhalmuri, a popular Bengali street food, found in the opening lines of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (published just a few months before the publication of Basu's novel).

It would equally be meaningless to consider that the lack of proper Indianness is a deliberate attempt to authenticate and portray a globally relatable culture that Basu might have intended. Cultural and spatial context does play an important role in work but it is not impossible to understand and enjoy a piece of work set in the backdrop of an apparently unfamiliar culture or setting. An example of this is literary works dealing with British culture and society and is read and appreciated worldwide, for example, Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay's works like *Panther Panchali* or *Chander Pahar*, works by N. K. Jemisin smoothly bridges the gap of different cultures and are acclaimed worldwide. Dr Prayag Ray, in his dissertation on Basu's Game World trilogy, has termed it as a "neo-colonial mimicry" — an over inclination on Western models of Speculative Fiction for a lack of proper Indian prototype of the same as Basu is often termed as the first Fantasy fiction author in India. Nonetheless, this claim can be countered by examples of authors like Anita Desai, whose works are a magnificent study of Indian life, not having a particular Indian model. This claim also threatens the risk of expulsion of the Vasa literature from the milieu of Indian literature. Often only English literature is thought as fit to be a part of global literature and posed in the centre, shaping the so-called canon while Vasa literature is often considered to exist on the periphery. Most of the Indian mythological texts contain maximum elements of Speculative Fiction and can easily be considered as the prototype of the genre. Bengali works like *Thakumar Jhuli* or even *rupkothar golpo* in general, *Bonkubabur Bondhu* and *Professor Shonku* by Satyajit Ray, *Pipre Puran* by Premendra Mitra, characters like 'Hattimatimtim' or Shukumar Ray's 'Ramgorurer Channa' contain some strong features of Speculative Fiction, but they are not often taken into account as such. The first Indian work on Science Fiction is attributed to Jagadish

Chandra Bose's *Palatok Toofan* which is often forgotten by the elite literature lovers.

Aijaz Ahmad said that the elite bourgeoisie readers of India consider "only the literary document produced in English is a national document. All else is regional, hence minor and forgettable so that English emerges in this image not as one of the Indian languages, which it undoubtedly is, but as the language of literary sophistication and bourgeois civility". However, being written in English does not guarantee readership, especially in countries like India which are yet to be entirely free from the colonial hangover. It is often seen that in order to receive acclamation within the country, a work would first have to be recognized by the Western canon and more often than not we find that diasporic writers who write about their culture from outside are celebrated more while the writers writing from their homelands seldom get the opportunity to reach out to the entire world. Samit Basu himself can be sighted as an instance of this. Basu might not be the first Fantasy writer from India but definitely the first Indian Fantasy writer in English, but, in spite of this, he remains unknown to a large section of Indian readers who term themselves as "avid readers". Basu published his first novel, *The Simoqin Prophecies* in 2004 when he was still a student and the similar instance can be seen with Rebecca F. Kuang who published her first fantasy novel *The Poppy War* in 2018 while she was a student in University of Cambridge. Within two years Kuang has been celebrated with multiple awards and recognitions while on the other hand Samit Basu still strives to reach a wide range of common readers. In order to be introduced to a wide range of readership, it is very important to be recognized by the Western canon, however, both the Western canon and the elite readerships claim to be modern enough to stand against orientalist approach but feeds on same. In an interview to 'The Guardian' N. K. Jemisin mentioned that when she wrote about the realistic compassionate white character for which she was refused by multiple publishers, but she portrayed the stereotypical white people troubling a black protagonist in her next project that became popular.

The term Commonwealth literature appears to bridge the gap between Western works and Eastern works but what it actually does is to highlight the gap even more and tracing for authentic culture is an instance of it. Salman Rushdie says in his essay 'Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist', "'Authenticity' is the respectable child of old-fashioned exoticism. It demands that sources, forms, style, language and symbol all derive from a supposedly homogeneous and unbroken tradition". We hardly question the Britishness of a work by British author but are trying to look for authentic reflection of the culture in works of other countries, for example, this whole process of hunting for Indianness in *The Simoqin Prophecies*. The idea of Indianness is itself very problematic and shows a form of colonial hangover. In such a diverse country like India, there cannot be a homogeneous idea of Indianness and thus an attempt to create check-boxes of Indian elements will threaten to have a superficial view of India which will exclude the subalterns. Samit Basu's *The Simoqin Prophecies* does not represent the authentic Indian culture because there cannot be an authentic Indian culture. It tries to portray the lack of proper cultural authenticity in the post-globalization era and thus can be said to represent the "khichurification" of various cultures. Samit Basu gained popularity among the continental readers by familiarizing them to the myth of their taste in the book and freed his readers to consider it from whichever dimension best suited to them, in a manner that almost alienated the readers from its authorial intentions.

Basu's novel is indeed a postmodern work in the sense that it transcends time and space, allowing to the patches of modern fantasy which is underpinned by ancient mythologies and Basu's trivializing references to various indigenous practices and world mythologies and borrowing the terminologies and myths, twisted and transmogrified and stitches beautifully into the novel to make it a characteristic product of postmodernism.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Dr Prayag Ray for introducing us to the novel and the topic. His encouragement and Mphil thesis on Samit Basu that helped make this paper possible. We would also like to thank our peers whose efforts made the paper reach its completion. Last but not the least, we are indebted to Samit Basu for writing *The Simoqin Prophecies* with incredibly rich significance and position in Indian English Speculative Fantasy Fiction genre.

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