

Colonial Legacy and the “World beyond”: Exploring Socio-Political Dynamics in Sami Ahmad Khan’s *Biryani Bagh*

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This article examines Indian science fiction as a tool for exploring socio-political relationships, focusing on Sami Ahmad Khan’s short story *Biryani Bagh*. The story reflects contemporary contexts, inviting readers to contemplate the enduring challenges faced by marginalised communities and the broader implications of historical power dynamics. Through its speculative setting of a dystopian future intertwined with colonial histories, the story reveals the impacts of historical injustices, discriminatory practices, and struggles for identity. It prompts readers to question colonial legacies while envisioning the potential for resistance and unity in the face of oppressive systems. This analysis incorporates Geoffrey Whitehall’s concept of the “world beyond” to understand how the story navigates complexities of reality, truth, and political dynamics. Through thematic analysis and contextual interpretation, this study offers insights into the socio-political commentary embedded within *Biryani Bagh*, highlighting its relevance in contemporary discourse on power, identity, and resistance.

Keywords: colonial legacy, world beyond, resistance, sociopolitics, power dynamics

Introduction

Science fiction is fast emerging as a popular tool for non-Western postcolonial writers to investigate culture-specific themes

like hybridity, alterity, subalternity, body politics, and collective identities. These writers envision postcolonial futures entwined with colonial histories and encounters with the Other. They conjure fantastical settings that mirror and amplify historical, social, and cultural forces. Alternate worlds are reimaged, while navigating complex ideas and social structures so as to propose new insights into contemporary concerns.

A significant motif in science fiction is alterity or the sensation of meeting the Other. Such narratives frequently showcase interactions between different groups, human and alien, indigenous and settler, dominant and marginalised. Writers use these interactions to examine biases, power relationships, and the challenges of comprehending and empathising with the Other. Similar to this, Indian science fiction frequently focuses on subalternity, which is a term for disadvantaged or oppressed populations. Speculative fictional settings are used to articulate the lived experiences of marginalised communities, shedding light on their hardships, resilience, and desires for agency and representation. Indian science fiction also explores concerns surrounding the body, including identity, embodiment, and the influence of technology on human experience. These narratives investigate the connections between biology, culture, and technology, posing moral and philosophical queries about humankind in a changing global environment. Most of the postcolonial science fiction literature revolves around community ideas like shared histories, collective identities, and collective memory. Through communal narratives that either challenge or reinforce established power structures, authors explore how communities originate, develop, and influence individual identities through speculative storytelling.

The article studies Sami Ahmad Khan's *Biryani Bagh* (2021), an Indian science fiction short story, to understand how the story reflects on the parallels between the fictional and the real world socio-political dynamics. Khan explores authoritarian beliefs, prejudice, minority existence, and societal division in several of his works, including "Biryani Bagh". Geoffrey Whitehall's examination of the philosophical concept of the "world beyond" is used to analyse how the evolving nature of collective understanding of reality and truth is represented in the story.

Whitehall's research on the "world beyond" delves into the absence of clear structures in modern world, which once provided a sense of belonging and understanding. He notes the blending of confusion and irrationality with logic, making the differentiation between reality and fiction a challenging proposition. This confusion affects different aspects of lives, including physical boundaries and profound inquiries about truth and existence. Whitehall's research shows that we now live in the age of information overload. The abundance of meaning makes it overwhelming to process, resulting in feelings of being overburdened. This blurring of boundaries necessitates formulating alternative approaches to comprehend and make sense of the world.

Whitehall introduces the concept of the "world beyond" (2003), encouraging a shift in perspective. He proposes that rather than striving to control everything, man should recognise the significance of things beyond his control. This philosophy is extended and applied to a reevaluation of man's engagement with politics. Instead of regarding politics as a means to gain power and dominance, we should engage in it with respect for diverse perspectives in order to foster genuine interactions. Prioritising genuine connections and understanding through this political approach promotes inclusivity and collaboration. It challenges conventional thinking, opening up new opportunities for collective problem-solving. This approach promotes a more inclusive and receptive way of navigating our complex world. The article attempts to analyse how the concept of the "world beyond" is well-merged within the short story *Biryani Bagh*.

***Biryani Bagh* and the "World Beyond"**

Biryani Bagh is set in a dystopian society called Trumped National Oligarchy (TNO), where humans and extraterrestrial Mussaliens are at odds. TNO portrays the aftermath of the tense coexistence between humans and a group of aliens. The story hints at a postcolonial scenario where the Qa'haQ, a "brutal, bigoted race from beyond the stars" (Khan, 2021, p. 352), left Earth after being given their own planet. However, some Qa'haQ, born on Earth decided to stay and identified themselves as Mussaliens, which led to social unrest and a recurrence of historical cycles of communal and sectarian

conflicts. Despite adapting to Earth's lifestyle and customs, the Mussaliens did not embrace the fundamental principles except for their love of biryani, which became their exclusive diet.

The story is told from the viewpoint of an unidentified narrator who seems to be a journalist. However, the narrative is biased since the narrator provides information for the System (human government). The story is divided into different sections, "I," "You," and "Him," each of which presents a distinct perspective on what is happening but is ultimately narrated by the narrator itself. The story opens by emphasising the significance of biryani as a bridge that connects humans and aliens in the face of constant unrest in a dystopian setting. Different viewpoints are presented in subsequent sections, such as those of a female revolutionary fighting for Mussalien rights ("You") and a soldier stationed at a dystopian checkpoint ("Him"). The soldier notes the challenges in preserving order during protests and muses on the pointlessness of classifying people according to labels. In the climax, the story explores the effects of a biological agent, the Shuddhifier that targets the Mussalien DNA as it pursues its course. However, things go out of hand and everyone gets infected by the Shuddhifier. It is revealed that the narrator is a cyborg who gathers data for broadcast. The dystopia emphasises the futility of prevailing disparities by portraying chaos and equality in death. After the narrator reaches out for singularity in the story's conclusion, readers are left to ponder the consequences of societal divisions and the pursuit of unity.

The narrator observes the physical resemblances between humans and Mussaliens, highlighting that the former government had allowed them to dine together and intermarry to blur the boundaries between them. However, a solid religious crusade led by the NavManavBahini restores the "natural order of things" (Khan, 2021, p.351). People who sympathise with Mussaliens are labelled as "anti-humans" or just "anti-hum," highlighting the division in society and prejudiced beliefs that are pervasive. *Biryani Bagh* aligns with Whitehall's exploration of the contemporary crisis marked by confusion, excess information, and the blurring of boundaries. The story prompts readers to reconsider traditional ways of understanding the world and

encourages the formulation of alternative approaches to navigate and make sense of a reality filled with uncertainties.

Whitehall's research on the philosophical concept of a "world beyond", as discussed in his article "The Problem of the 'World and Beyond'" (2003), delves into the idea that the contemporary world lacks the historically offered structured framework and a sense of belonging and orientation. Whitehall highlights the progressive masking of logic by ambiguity and irrationality, drawing on the theories of Jean-Luc Nancy. Nancy claims that this increasing obscurity leads to a modern dilemma marked by excess knowledge and meaning (cited in Whitehall, 2003).

Humanity's ability to distinguish between the world and its boundaries is called into question by Whitehall's explanation of the disruption. A general sense of uncertainty characterises modern society due to the instability of the conventional frameworks that once offered order and consistency. This ambiguity penetrates deeper philosophical and existential facets of human existence, surpassing geographical and physical barriers. Whitehall's research demonstrates how our understanding of reality and truth is dynamic. Today's overabundance of meaning and information raises concerns about how people navigate and understand their surroundings. The blurring of once-distinct boundaries necessitates a reassessment of conventional modes of thought and comprehension of the world.

The "world beyond" concept embodies a profound shift in perspective, moving away from viewing it merely as a domain to be controlled or manipulated. Instead, it underscores the significance of acknowledging and valuing the inherent worth of the world through substantive political engagements. It advocates a paradigm where the "beyond" is not seen as something to be conquered or dominated but as a realm deserving of respect and consideration in political discourse. This approach departs from traditional literary conventions, often depicting power struggles and dominance over external spaces. By prioritising meaningful interactions and recognising the value of the "world beyond," this perspective encourages a more nuanced and holistic understanding of political dynamics.

The emphasis on genuine political engagements within the framework of the “world beyond” concept challenges prevailing norms that rely heavily on predefined distinctions and hierarchies. Instead of operating within rigid categories, this approach fosters active participation and dialogue that transcends superficial boundaries. It promotes a politics of authenticity, where encounters are based on mutual respect and understanding rather than on predetermined roles or positions. This perspective opens avenues for collaborative problem-solving and inclusive decision-making by centring on authentic interactions. Ultimately, it advocates for a more dynamic and inclusive political landscape that values diversity, dialogue, and the recognition of intrinsic worth beyond conventional frameworks. Science fiction is a genre that often explores the idea of disrupting the established order of the world. This disruption can be achieved through futuristic technologies, alternate historical timelines, or encounters with alien entities. Such themes allow creators to delve into wide inquiries about human nature, existence, and the essence of reality.

In “Star Warriors of the Modern Raj” (2021), Khan perceptively highlights the intricate social structure of India, which revolves around elements such as caste, religion, gender, and class. Within this framework of “inhabited particularities,” (Khan, 2021, p.43) the depiction of the ‘Other’ in Indian science fiction in English (ISFE) goes beyond surface-level storytelling. It becomes an exploration that delves deep into the essence of the nation, its diverse populace, and the development of the modern individual. While race and ethnicity may not always be the main focus, ISFE narratives shed light on the nuanced processes of identity formation and subjectivity. This exploration unfolds in a context that includes traditional categories such as caste and class and introduces a religious ‘foreign’ Other - a concept characterised by distinct racial and ethnic origins beyond India’s borders. Incorporating elements like invading aliens, zombie hordes, mindless clones, and rampant AI in these narratives serves a deeper purpose than mere fantasy. They function as allegorical representations that metaphorically mask the underlying prejudices prevalent in society. Through these imaginative tropes, science fiction

narratives offer a lens through which subtle biases and societal structures are critically examined and brought to light (Khan, 2021).

In *Biryani Bagh*, the dystopian setting of the Trumped National Oligarchy (TNO) represents a society where the traditional frameworks of order and understanding have been disrupted. The ongoing protests between humans and Mussaliens, an alien group, symbolise the blending of confusion and irrationality with logic, mirroring Whitehall's observations. However, there is no understanding of differences between the characters. The narrative showcases how the blurring of boundaries affects various aspects of life, including physical boundaries and profound existential inquiries. The importance of biryani as a common link between humans and aliens amidst the protests emphasises the challenges of distinguishing reality from fiction in a world filled with ambiguity. The introduction of a cyborg narrator collecting data for broadcast highlights the age of information overload depicted in Whitehall's research. The narrator's biased reporting for the System reflects the overwhelming abundance of meaning that makes it difficult to process and comprehend the complexities of the dystopian society.

The story is narrated from various points of view, providing a glimpse into the differing reactions and viewpoints within a dystopian society. The sections entitled 'I', 'You', and 'Him' shed light on the complex power dynamics at play. The use of the derogatory term 'anti-hum' and the presence of anti-human sentiments highlight the divisive and discriminatory language employed by the dominant group. This mirrors postcolonial struggles for identity and resistance against oppressive systems.

Khan expands upon the imaginative world established in his novel *Aliens in Delhi* in his short story *Biryani Bagh*. In the introduction to *The Gollancz Book of South Asian Science Fiction*, Tarun K. Saint remarks:

Biryani Bagh takes its cue from contemporary protests and resistance movements as it constructs its novel take on the role played by flavoursome biryani in the current configuration. The popular dish becomes the novum around which the narrative unfolds, set in 2038 at a time when biryani-loving aliens (later

disclosed to be a stereotype) live on Earth, in a cryptic yet recognisable instance of cognitive estrangement (Suvin's term). In the process, *Biryani Bagh* provides a visceral take on the dilemmas of minority existence and the changes being wrought as a result of attacks on constitutional morality in today's Delhi/India. The story deals with local concerns as well as the global ramifications of the techno-dystopia being ushered in today, resulting in regressive loops back into the history of communal/sectarian violence (Saint, 2022, p. xxv).

The narrative is a satirical reflection on the present situation in India, particularly of the Northern region. The social milieu of North India is shaped by deep-seated prejudices stemming from caste and religious differences. Despite being speculative fiction, the story parallels real-life concerns and exposes the pervasive discrimination in our society.

Khan's article "The Others in India's Other Futures" (2016) begins with an opening paragraph that illuminates the contemporary Indian scenario, which he also seeks to establish through his works. He remarks that India is undergoing a rapid and explosive transformation. The country's development is characterised by chaotic diversity and a remarkably diverse range of voices, forming a dynamic arena where global market forces clash with localised political and cultural responses. International influences, mainly represented by multinational corporations, are invading emerging markets to influence and shape the behaviour and consumption patterns of the population. Conversely, indigenous movements advocate reaction, reassertion, and resistance, often drawing inspiration from India's rich historical heritage. As globalisation interacts with Indian society, deep-rooted paradigms related to caste, religion, gender, class, and nationality emerge, creating a complex web of identities coexisting within individuals' consciousness (Khan, 2016).

The revelation that humans and Mussaliens are physiologically similar serves as a metaphor for the inherent commonality among people, regardless of their differences. The previous government's allowance for inter-dining and intermarriage symbolised an attempt to bridge differences and foster unity. However, the emergence of a

“valiant dharmjihad led by the NavManavBahini” (Khan, 2022, p. 351) disrupted this harmonious coexistence, implying a forceful return to divisive practices.

The term “anti-hum,” applied to humans supporting Mussaliens, becomes a critical element in satire. It mirrors the real-world label of “anti-nationalist,” often used to marginalise individuals or groups who question prevailing norms or campaign for the rights of certain minorities. In this speculative future, the term amplifies societal divisions, emphasising the consequences of resisting the established order. By satirising these issues through the lens of science fiction, the narrative prompts readers to reflect on the absurdity of discriminatory practices. The term “anti-hum” becomes a potent symbol, underscoring the irony of labelling individuals who seek unity and understanding as adversaries. The story, therefore, serves as a cautionary tale against the dangers of succumbing to divisive ideologies, urging a re-evaluation of societal norms and a pursuit of genuine harmony.

The revelation that the protagonist is a cyborg narrator introduces another dimension to the story’s interpretation. Functioning as a biased journalist reporting within the dystopian System, this non-human entity symbolises the dehumanising consequences of colonial legacies and discriminatory practices. In this context, the System demands obedience, and the narrator, serving as a tool of the dystopian authority, embodies the subservience demanded by such oppressive structures. Within this dystopian society, where people rely on news as a source of information, the narrator’s bias influences public opinion. Public favour follows suit if the narrative aligns with the System’s agenda. The use of a cyborg as a storyteller underscores the pervasive dehumanisation embedded in the societal structures of the dystopian world. It implies that even the act of storytelling, a traditionally human form of expression, has been co-opted by non-human entities—programmed with specific information—emphasising the erosion of humanity within oppressive systems.

The cyborg narrator, aligned with the System, opposes the Mussaliens and the anti-humans. Functioning as a mouthpiece of the authoritarian System, it narrates the past based on the information implanted within it. Consequently, the narrative serves to justify the

authority's stance while degrading the Mussaliens, contributing to the perpetuation of discriminatory ideologies within the dystopian society. This assertion strengthens readers' suspicions regarding whether the Mussaliens are indeed extraterrestrial beings or simply a marginalised minority group deliberately depicted as aliens to serve the agenda of the dystopian government.

A pivotal moment in the narrative unfolds with the introduction of a human revolutionary, a girl fervently advocating for Mussalien rights. This character embodies the resistance against oppressive societal norms, standing up against discrimination and tirelessly fighting for justice for marginalised communities. Labelling this individual as an "anti-hum" manifests the societal backlash that people challenging the established order had to endure. The narrator's dismissive attitude towards the girl's activism underscores the resistance to acknowledging the legitimate grievances of the Mussaliens. The use of a lachrymator to disperse the protesters symbolises the authorities' oppressive tactics against those daring to speak up for the alien community's rights.

The narrative, subsequently, shifts its focus to a Mussalien woman, once a respected news anchor but now derogatorily labelled as an "abomination" (Khan, 2022, p.354). This characterisation—along with the hint that she may progress from carrying a candle to carrying a bomb—portrays Mussaliens as potential threats rather than individuals with their own agency and aspirations. The revelation that she was initially considered human but later identified as Mussalien, and subjected to increased surveillance highlights the pervasive mistrust and scrutiny faced by the alien community.

The final segment, entitled "Us," serves a purpose. It reflects on the futility of existing divisions, portraying the devastating impact of both the projectile and the Shuddhifier on every inhabitant of the dystopian world. This powerful analogy highlights the destructive consequences of clinging to divisive ideologies, emphasising that constructed differences between individuals lose significance in the face of catastrophic events. Ultimately, the narrative suggests that there is no longer an 'I,' 'you,' or 'him,' but simply 'Us.'

The narrator's self-diagnosis, revealing an inability to self-repair, serves as a metaphor for the irreversible damage inflicted by oppressive systems. Being referred to as 'I' rather than 'it' symbolises reclamation of identity and autonomy regardless of dehumanisation. As the story concludes the narrator reaches out for singularity, which renders a powerful critique of the catastrophic impacts of oppressive systems and a tribute to the enduring potential for resistance. This echoes the spirit of real-world movements striving for justice and equality.

The use of neologisms such as "Manav Rashtra," "Patritourism," and "Pax Manavika" in the story adds significant thematic depth, incorporating layers of meaning and social commentary. These newly created terms serve as linguistic artefacts that reflect the ideological and cultural changes of the dystopian society, providing insights into the socio-political setting crafted by the author. The term "Manav Rashtra" denotes a newly defined national identity, potentially highlighting a shift from an inclusive, diverse society to one that centres on a specific notion of humanity. The coining of this term suggests an attempt to homogenise and control the population under a singular identity, resonating with authoritarianism and societal control themes. This is particularly relevant and critical in the contemporary Indian scenario. "Patritourism" implies the manipulation of nationalistic sentiments for political or economic gains, aligning with themes of propaganda and the exploitation of patriotism for the benefit of those in power. This reflects the dystopian society's manipulation of collective emotions and highlights the dangers of using nationalistic fervour to further individual interests. The term "Pax Manavika," which combines "Pax", meaning peace, with "Manavika", relating to humanity, suggests a facade of humanitarian peace, hinting at the possibility of oppressive regimes masking their control under the guise of promoting peace and well-being. This term underscores the theme of deceptive practices in maintaining authority and highlights the need to remain vigilant against the abuse of power. These neologisms in the story contribute significantly to the thematic exploration, adding layers of meaning and social commentary. These newly created terms act as linguistic artefacts that mirror the dystopian society's ideological and cultural

shifts, providing insights into the socio-political setting crafted by the author.

Conclusion

Biryani Bagh exemplifies what Whitehall terms, “to encounter the beyond” (Whitehall, 2003, p.191), which refers to engaging with the concept of something beyond the known or the understood, such as abstract ideas, future possibilities, or realms outside conventional understanding. This encounter is described as activating the political dimension within a framework of ongoing transformation or evolution. Instead of assuming that the world operates according to predetermined political structures, this perspective suggests that encountering the beyond makes the world inherently political. It acknowledges that each action contributes to creating, encountering, and evolving different aspects of the world.

Whitehall emphasises the need for a comprehensive understanding of politics to address the complexities of indeterminacy, contingency, and change. He critiques the tendency to overlook or oversimplify these complexities and argues for a nuanced approach that acknowledges the dynamic nature of political interactions. Exploring futuristic or speculative scenarios can provide insights into how “the beyond” influences everyday life and political dynamics. He advocates recognising the diverse encounters and experiences that shape world politics, moving beyond the traditional political frameworks to embrace a more inclusive and multifaceted perspective, as Khan brilliantly depicts in his work.

Biryani Bagh critically analyses societal constructs, urging readers to question the lasting impacts of colonialism. Through its narrative, the story mirrors present-day socio-political environments, encouraging readers to contemplate the ongoing struggles encountered by marginalised groups and the broader consequences of historical power dynamics. It delves into the repercussions of past injustices, discriminatory behaviours, and the ongoing quest for identity within a speculative futuristic setting. By doing so, the narrative prompts readers to ponder the enduring legacies of colonialism and the possibilities for resistance and solidarity in challenging oppressive systems.

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