Comics and Science Fiction in West Bengal

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Abstract: In this paper I look at four examples of Bengali SF (science fiction) comics by two great authors and illustrators of sequential art: Mayukh Chaudhuri (*Yātrī*, *Smārak*) and Narayan Debnath (*Ḍrāgoner thābā*, *Ajānā deśe*). Departing from a conventional understanding of SF as a fixed genre, I aim at showing that the SF comic is a 'mode' rather than a 'genre', building on a very fluid notion of boundaries between narrative styles, themes, and tropes formally associated with fixed genres. In these Bengali comics, it is especially the visual space of the comic that allows for blending and 'contamination' with other typical features drawn from adventure and detective fiction. Moreover, a dominant thematic thread that cross-cuts the narratives here examined are the tropes of the 'other' and the 'unknown', which are in fact central images of both adventure and SF: the exploration and encounter with 'unknown' (*ajānā*) worlds and 'strange' species (*adbhut jāti*) is mirrored in the usage of a language that expresses 'otherness' and strangeness. These examples show that the medium of the comic framing the SF story adds further possibilities of reading 'genre hybridity' as constitutive of the genre of SF as such.

WHAT'S IN A COMIC?

Before addressing SF comics in West Bengal, I will first look at some international definitions of comic to outline the main problematics that have been raised in the literature on this subject. In one of the first books introducing the world of comics to artists and academics, Will Eisner looks at the mechanics of 'sequential art' (a term coined by Eisner himself) describing it as a dual 'form of reading' (Eisner 1985: 8):

> The format of the comic book presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. The regimens of art (e.g., perspective, symmetry, brush stroke) and the regimens of literature (e.g., grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other. The reading of the comic book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit.

With this tentative definition, Eisner encouraged a critical understanding of comics where image and text overlap and work together in the creation of meaning. Both the aesthetic and the intellectual, the 'visual' and 'verbal' skills of the interpreter, are summoned to encourage a holistic approach to the enjoyment and critical analysis of the comics. What has kept the 'sequential art' at the margins of literature and literary criticism was in fact the predominantly visual aspect of the comics, where the text only assists the primary function often designated by the image. While literacy was predominantly associated to the ability of reading texts, the comics sponsored 'multimodal literacy' (cf. Jacobs 2013) through the interaction of the verbal and the visual. The dominant role that image plays within the texture of the comics had for long confined sequential art to the margins of literary criticism, making the task of defining what a comic is much harder than that of recognizing it. Besides this, the idea persists that comics are rooted in children's literature and grounded in the child's psychology, while on the other hand the links between comics and childhood remain under-investigated. Charles Hatfield (2007) has argued that while children's literature studies seem newly receptive to comics, this field of study is perhaps still constrained by a sense of the otherness of comics vis-à-vis literature. Conversely, the putative 'coming of age' of the comics from the late 1990s, especially in the form of the 'graphic novel' of social and political import, including Art Spiegelman's *Maus: a survivor's tale* (1989), spurred a wave of academic theory and research that provided a new literary vocabulary to the 'resurgent' art of the comics (cf. Baetens & Frey 2014; Stein 2015).[1]

The intersection of text and graphic in the comic book, so controversial to traditional literary criticism across the world, functions in a way that enhances the visual and imaginative power of genres like fantasy, horror, porn and science fiction, encouraging a synesthetic 'enjoyment' of the oeuvre through multiple senses, thus comparing to cinema the experience of looking

[1] This paper has emerged from the meeting and discussions raised during the panel 'Gauging Comics and Graphic Narrative in South Asia' that took place in Paris at the European Conference for South Asian Studies (ECSAS 2018). My nostalgia for reading Italian comics (mainly auteur comics like Tiziano Sclavi's Dylan Dog and Hugo Pratt's Corto Maltese) and my curiosity about the various relations existing between the reader and the narrative mode of the sequential art are motives that have significantly driven and animated the writing of this paper.

at and reading the comic book. It is with this view in mind that I use the category of 'mode' in this paper to refer to the intersection of image, text and narrative in Bengali science fiction comics in alternative to 'genre', traditionally more limited to the taxonomic classification of literary types. Moreover, with 'mode' I want to outline a broad and more fluid understanding of science fiction, itself constituting a mode of discourse, that often transgresses the boundaries of its enclosed genre especially when framed by and within the medium of a comic book. That is why the idea of 'mode' seemed to me more appropriate to explain the exchange of tropes and languages that takes place among 'fantastic' graphic narratives, of which these Bengali comics under discussion are an elucidating example. Illustrations of fantastic narratives of Bengali literature, including books like Majumdar's iconic *Ṭhākurˈmār jhuli* or Sukumar Sen's *Ābol tābol*, have since long offered a widely diversified hotchpotch of stories, characters, themes and tropes that blended the fairy tale with the ghost story, the fable with the adventure story, humorous tale with rhymes and lullabies, often transgressing the boundaries of genres. An interesting case of this 'contamination' between genres occurs in the adventure and science fiction comics by Mayukh Chaudhuri and Narayan Debnath, two great authors and illustrators of Bengali sequential art. What emerges from these sources is that the strategic interaction of text and image within the medium of comics offers room for experimenting with Bengali science fiction, blending it with tropes, languages and narrative modes that inform also other 'established' genres, such as adventure and detective stories. One such feature that cuts across SF, fantasy, adventure, thriller and horror fiction is the trope of 'otherness', illustrating the continuity of language and narrative among these different genres. My analysis shows that genre hybridity is constitutive of science fiction narratives, especially when these are accommodated in and enriched by the medium of the comic book.

FANTASTIC AND SCIENCE FICTION IN BENGAL

Post-millennial Indian fiction in English has shown a predilection for 'fantastic' or 'weird' narratives. These have proliferated and enjoyed discrete success in the global and domestic Indian literary market in a diverse range of narrative forms, including novels, graphic narrative, movies and TV series (cf.

Varughese 2017). Especially the Indian commercial or popular literature, falling under the umbrella tag of 'genre fiction', has been oriented toward fantasy,[2] with a predilection for horror and gothic elements, while to a lesser extent it has also informed science fiction.[3] Although there have been signs of a growing interest for science fiction comics written in South Asian languages, especially in the form of conferences and initiatives of digital archiving,[4] the adaptation of this genre into sequential art in South Asia still lacks serious critical reception. Sandip Roy (2019) has noticed a revival of science fiction but recognized its marginality in the Indian literary canon and the reluctance of literary criticism to offer new readings and a serious critical reception of the genre. He further noted that, as compared to the growing popularity of 'fantasy', SF has been consumed more as an elite and 'niche' genre by nostalgic readers of this type of narrative. Possibly following this wave of nostalgia and the resurging interest for the low-brow, the marginal and entertaining character of pulp literature, scholars have turned their attention to the multiple theoretical, historical and material horizons of the genre of science fiction (cf. Chattopadhyay, Mandhwani & Maity 2018) and of adventure comics in India (cf. Kaur & Eqbal 2018). In the case of science fiction, some writers and fervent readers of the genre, like Dip Ghosh and Sandipan Ganguly, have started the 'science-fiction/fantasy' webzine *Kalpabiswa* to draw attention to new and old vernacular writings in the genre, creating a visible platform also for the young acolytes of the genre.

[2] For instance, Varughese has introduced the term 'Bharati Fantasy' with reference to post-millennial 'mythology-inspired' fiction in India. Regarding the proliferation of 'fantastic' narratives in South Asia, it is worth mentioning *An anthology of Indian fantasy writing*, published by Sahitya Academy (Lal & Agarwal 2017), which can be seen as symptomatic of the growing critical reception and official recognition of the genre.

[3] Sami Ahmad Khan's English novel *Aliens in Delhi* (Niyogi Books, 2017) is one such example drawing upon 'classic' motifs of the genre accommodated in the Indian contemporary space of the city of Delhi.

[4] That is the case for the conference 'Workshops of Horrible Creations' (November 2018) and the project 'The Comic Book in India' both hosted by Jadavpur University in Kolkata (School of Cultural Texts and Records). This project included, among other tasks, the digital archiving of old comics to collect and preserve scattered materials of popular literature, making it accessible to international readers and scholars alike. Unfortunately, the website is only partially completed, and one gets the feeling that the British Council, East India, that originally provided funding to the project, has not extended its support to go on with this very important project of digitization and preservation.

Notwithstanding this late reassertion of science fiction in West Bengal, Bengali literature has had a well-established tradition of science fiction writing since colonial times. One can identify some variations in the approach and treatment of SF in Bengali colonial and postcolonial writings: a strand that extolls progress, technology and the rationalism of science, making it the legitimizing logic of narration; and another that subverts the 'universal' scientific logic to create alternative scientific facts out of the peripheries of the Empire. Early Bengali SF, based on the premises of science and technological progress, accommodated Western science into an Indian world-view, while at the same time it also developed a critique of the 'universality' of Western and colonial science, progress and rationalism (Sengupta 2010: 115). Often Bengali SF literature has tried to mock the scientific language of natural sciences (i.e. Sukumar Ray) and to subvert the classic stereotype of 'the East' as the land of spirituality (i.e. Premendra Mitra). For example, Sukumar Roy's *Heśorām Hũśiẏārer ḍāẏeri* (The diary of Heshoram Hushiyar, 1922) offered an ironic critique of the accuracy of scientific knowledge by making fun of the pretention of science to 'label' things with Sukumar's typical 'upside-down' language (Sengupta 2010: 117-18). However, the first examples of the genre were concerned with 'real' science and its future possibilities, such as interplanetary and interstellar travels. The literary genre evolves out of realistic scientific concerns and 'true' experimentations with the realms of science. The first Bengali writers of the genre were in fact scientists: Jagadishchandra Bose and Jagadananda Roy are considered as the initiators of the genre in Bengal.

Jagadishchandra Bose, more popularly known for his research on electromagnetic waves, wrote one of the first SF short-stories, 'Palātak tuphān' (The runaway cyclone, 1886), a story narrating the mysterious disappearance of a terrible cyclone in the Bay of Bengal caused by the 'hailing' Kuntalin hair oil. The short story follows the memories of a man who embarks on a sea-journey to cure his illness. When the sick man's daughter reveals him the powers of the oil, which helps hair to regrow, he keeps one bottle in his bag before embarking on the sea-journey. The cyclone that had uncannily disappeared from the Bay of Bengal came back to haunt the ship passengers with gigantic waves and storms. When all hopes seem to be lost, the man remembers the recent discoveries about the calming effects of oil on water waves. When he throws his daughter's bottle of the 'hailing' hair oil into the stormy waters,

'like magic the sea became calm, and the wonderful cooling oil even calmed the entire atmosphere'.[5]

Another prolific scientific writer of the time was Jagadananda Roy, whose contributions included books on several scientific subjects, including astrophysics and botany, especially written for young readers to educate them in modern science and to impart a rational temperament and an awareness of the natural environment. Jagadananda published 'Śukra bhramaṇ' (Travels to Venus) around the 1890s where he describes an interstellar journey and visit to another planet. Here the alien creatures are described in terms mirroring evolutionary theories about the origin of man.[6] The language of sciences, of botany, chemistry, geography, history and physics became constitutive of SF stories written throughout the twentieth century, in continuity with the origins of the genre in Bengal and its creators. SF was in fact often used as a didactic means of mediating modern science and disseminating knowledge (cf. Sengupta 2010: 120-1).

With Premendra Mitra's much-loved character of Ghanādā and Satyajit Ray's Prof. Śaṅku, Bengali SF addressed a critique and subversion of the universality of Western science. Through the 1950s and 1960s, Ghanādā, a quintessential Bengali bachelor, scrupulous and down to earth man, travels to space and under the sea to rescue humanity from the failures of science, weaving a moral humanistic narrative of man's triumph over the forces of evil. In 'Maśā' (The mosquito, 1945), the first story featuring this character, Ghanādā tells his eager listeners that he had killed only one mosquito in his life: a mosquito whose DNA was transformed in a laboratory, through the experiments of a mad scientist, so that its bite would kill (cf. Sengupta 2010: 119).

[5] This story shows how early Bengali SF relevantly centered on the power of science to control and to legitimate the narrative. The story participated to the Kuntalin Story Competition instituted by the inventor of the oil on one condition: the stories had to promote and refer to his Kuntalin oil in some essential way. Bose, who was also active in the Swadeshi movement, through his story turned the Kuntal Keshari hair oil into a powerful nationalist symbol that combined scientific endeavors with nationalist concerns (cf. Chattopadhyay 2013).

[6] 'They resembled our apes to a large extent. Their bodies were covered with dense black fur. Their heads were larger in comparison with their bodies, limbs sported long nails and they were completely naked' (cf. Sengupta 2010: 117).

Unlike Premendra Mitra's Ghanādā, the typical image of the smart masculine Calcutta-based *bhadralok*,[7] Satyajit Ray's Prof. Śaṅku re-inscribes the history of science from the 'peripheries' of Europe by locating the greatest scientific discoveries in Egypt, Japan, and Iraq (Chattopadhyay 2016: 446). In these characters the power of the human mind cannot be overcome by technology and the machine. In their own ways, both Mitra's Ghanādā and Ray's Śaṅku put forward a consistent critique of Western – and therefore colonial – science: they incorporate it while introducing subverting ideas regarding the universality of Western scientific knowledge.

WHAT IS KALPABIJÑĀN?

The genre of the *kalpabaijñānik*, a term composed of *kalpa* (imaginary) and *bijñān* (science), refers to a type of literary narrative that draws from the empirical world of natural sciences, technology, and more generally on the 'cognitive norms' of the author, although it departs from that empirical logic to project an 'estranged' possible reality. Notwithstanding the multiple points of contact that Bengali SF shares with 'international' SF, scholars have pointed out the need of redefining the genre outside the Anglo-American space. Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, for example, has shown that a redefinition of SF in 'marginal' spaces outside the peripheries of the Empire must center on the transformations in history of the concept of what he calls 'scientificity' (2011), as I will show later.

Before turning to theoretical and linguistic aspects of Bengali SF, it is worth addressing the plethora of definitions of SF that are current in the Anglo-American literary criticism to make sense of the formalist discussions about 'genre' that have surrounded science fiction, as well as to highlight the traits that have more commonly distinguished this narrative mode. In the widely reprinted book *Metamorphoses of science-fiction*, Darko Suvin argued for an understanding of this genre as the 'literature of cognitive estrangement', emphasizing the ways it differentiates from other 'fantastic genres': 'SF is a developed oxymoron, a realistic irreality, with humanized nonhu-

[7] The Bengali word *bhadralok* denotes the gentry, a class of Bengali 'gentlemen' that arose in Bengal during British colonial rule.

mans, this-worldly Other Worlds, and so forth. Which means that it is – potentially – the space of a potent *estrangement*, validated by the pathos and prestige of the basic cognitive norms of our times' (1979: viii). In Suvin's view, the 'novum', denoting an innovation which is scientifically plausible (like time travel), is the dominant aspect that distinguishes the genre from others that only aspire at reproducing the rules and conventions of the genre (i.e. *Star Wars*).[8] For instance, *The encyclopedia of SF* differentiates among multiple entries describing 'mainstream' and 'genre' SF, let alone the numerous subgenres and hybrids that merged science fiction with other genres (i.e. 'science fantasy').[9] However, recent scholarship has encouraged to view SF as belonging to the broader horizon of fantastic writing, prompting and mirroring the proliferation of sub-genres of science fiction in writing and other media. John Clute, for example, suggested to view science fiction as part of the wider cauldron of 'fantastika' genres, while Broderick described the 'megatext' as a 'shared cultural thesaurus' of science fiction encompassing tropes, images and rules that SF and fantasy narratives share ('Fantastika', *The encyclopedia of SF*). Attebery further broadened the horizon of the genre with the etiquette of 'speculative fiction', all non-mimetic genres, while 'genre-fiction' designated the commercial orientation of these 'fantastic' narratives (Oziewicz 2017: 2).

[8] The distinction between genre and non-genre SF has represented the major area of literary criticism since the 1980s. However, attempts at expanding the horizons of SF have shattered the distinction between conventional and non-conventional SF mirroring a more 'relaxed' reading and understanding of the fluid and flexible boundaries of SF, often mixing with cyberpunk, horror, gothic, fantasy and other subgenres (cf. 'Definitions of SF', The encyclopedia of SF).

[9] For example, the term 'genre SF' denotes 'sf that is either labelled science fiction or is instantly recognized by its readership as belonging to the category – or (usually) both', the identification with the genre usually depending on certain conventions and rules of that storytelling (cf. 'Genre SF', The encyclopedia of SF). Mainstream SF lacks precision but more usefully uses SF in its opposition to 'genre SF' writers. Slipstream SF designates 'stories which make use of SF devices but are not genre SF' (cf. 'Slipstream', The encyclopedia of SF). The coexistence of a plethora of definitions gives an idea of the challenges of 'fixing' the category in one critical box.



Fig. 1: Phyānṭās'ṭik (1977), *Āścarya!* (1969), and *Bismaẏ sāẏens phik'śan* (1971)
SF magazines edited by Adrish Bardhan (Roy 2018)

Coming to the Bengali compound word *kalpabaijñānik*, this vernacular adaptation of the 'fanta-scientific' is a quite recent formulation, tracing back to the 1960s when the Bengali writer Adrish Bardhan published his first SF magazine *Āścarya*! in which for the first time he used the Bengali 'portmanteau word stapling together imagination and science' (Deb 2007: 7). In perfect SF style, the magazine covers introduced the reader to the new worlds of weird monsters, giant ants, and floating astronauts (fig. 1). Bardhan became an icon of Bengali SF, creating his own mad scientist Professor Natbaltu Chakra, arranging SF radio plays and setting up India's first science fiction cine club (Roy 2018). His formulation of *kalpabaijñānik* seems to reproduce certain problematics that are also entailed in the English word-constructions for science fiction, such as Hugo Gernsback's scientifiction (1926) or 'scientific romance', until the modern and widely shared sci-fi, in a way that literally reduplicates the 'original' English phrase. Chattopadhyay rightly points out the term's association with a cluster of 'fantastic' literature that is more generally identified with the *āścarya*, the sense of wonder, including horror, fantasy and 'science', as well as other fictions of the inexplicable and visionary (2016: 435). The two Bengali words that make up the composition *kalpabaijñānik* (lit. imaginative science) are linked to different connotations and meanings of 'science' and 'imagination' in Bengali. *Bijñān* is a construction that merges the Sanskrit suffix *vi-* [10] and the noun *jñān* denoting the vast field of knowledge

[10] The v in Sanskrit is b in Bengali.

according to classic Indian philosophical thought, both mundane and transcendental. Yet the addition of the suffix *vi-* brings this holistic, gnostic approach to knowledge down to earth, reducing the field only to technical and material knowledge. However, it seems that Adrish Bardhan derived the usage of kalpa not from its first connotation as Dharmic unit of time but from the definition of *kalpanā*, which in many Indian languages denotes 'imagination', as an 'act of conceptualizing transformation' (Chattopadhyay 2016: 436). It is not the scope of this paper to solve the tensions and conflicts implicated in the translation and adaptation of the genre to the postcolonial humus of Bengal. However, it is worth mentioning that *kalpabijñān* through the years has tried to challenge universal understandings of science and to enrich them by searching local 'particulars' of the socio-cultural imaginary, and especially through the reproduction of local 'myths' of science, which Chattopadhyay has called 'mythologerms' (2016).[11]

Anthologies of SF Bengali fiction take account of the long discussion about the definition of the genre and are rather reluctant when it comes to subsuming the 'many different worlds of science fiction' under one label (Deb 2007: 7). In spite of that, Anish Deb identifies the key features of SF stories, and especially the role of science as that which controls the visible (*pratyakṣa*) and invisible world (*parokṣa*), the search for unknown (*ajānā*) worlds and living beings (*prāṇī*), and the future. Often Bengali 'classic' SF stories do not reflect the common tropes expected by the reader who is familiar with Western science fiction. As someone commented after reading Anish Deb's *Serā sāẏens phikꞮśān* (Best SF stories), the book was not what 'Hollywood would have us believe[d] science fiction is – you know, space, and aliens, and rocketships, and monsters, and mindboggling CGI and all that'. On the contrary, the stories collected are meant for the 'soul of simple middle

[11] He shows this by arguing that Satyajit Ray's character Prof. Śaṅku challenges the universality of science by re-inscribing the history of science from the 'peripheries' of the Empire, of the West, as well as of urban India; that Marathi science fiction writing, especially that of Jayant Narlikar, reproduces the tensions between science and religion and solves them by showing the dual nature of science as a source of benefit and harm; that Amitav Ghosh's postcolonial science fiction novel *The Calcutta chromosome* negotiates with the colonial past exploring and proposing a counter-science voiced by the 'subalterns' (cf. Chattopadhyay 2016).

(and sometimes lower) class Bengali-life, but with an "extraordinary element" thrown in'.[12]

If these examples show that Bengali SF writing sometimes lacks the features traditionally identified with the genre, Bengali SF comics, by contrast, do incorporate in their visual component the tropes that are part of the SF 'megatext' or the shared imaginary of this genre, i.e. alien encounters, spaceships, interplanetary journeys, time travels. Unlike contemporary trends in Bengali comic narratives that show more complex characters, the SF narratives developed in the comics under discussion incarnate Darko Suvin's vision, who stated that much of 'SF production is strictly perishable stuff, produced in view of instant obsolescence for the publisher's profit and the writer's acquisition of other perishable commodities' (1979: vii). The Bengali comics that are the object of this study are in fact more representative of SF narratives showing the typical features of this fantastic genre (i.e. interstellar journeys, spaceships, etc.) without being necessarily ideologically constructed, but rather market and readership oriented, produced for the enjoyment of a specific public with genre-specific demands.[13] Often these comics have shown the attempt at metabolizing the Bengali features developed by SF (i.e. the tall tale, the detective and adventure story), blending them with an international version of SF tropes (i.e. introduction of a *novum*, the scientific discovery, alien encounter, interplanetary travels) and thus taking part in a globally shared imaginary about science fiction.

INTERSECTION OF MODE AND MEDIUM: SCIENCE FICTION AND COMICS

In the history of the literary genre, SF has often been interacting with 'visuality', as shown in the early American magazine *Amazing stories* (1926) as well as in the Japanese manga and anime adaptations, such as the popular *Akira* (1988) and *Ghost in the shell* (1995). In West Bengal, too, science fiction became significantly associated to the medium of comics in works that were

[12] The anonymous reader used inverted commas perhaps to point out that the extraordinary was created out of its juxtaposition to the 'ordinariness' of Bengali middle-class life, which is a central theme developed in Bengali SF stories (<https://readbengalibooks.com/index.php/sera-science-fiction-samagro.html>, accessed: 12. March 2019).

[13] For example, the tension between science and religion is a dominant theme in Marathi and Bengali science fiction narratives (cf. Harder 2001; Chattopadhyay 2016) but it remains untouched in the science fiction comics under discussion.

mostly published in the children's magazines *Kiśor bhāratī*, *Kiśor jñān bijñān*, and *Śukˈtārā*. What is remarkable about the intersection and interaction of mode and medium in these science fiction comics is the blurriness of the boundaries, where one bleeds into the other 'loosening' the strict definition and category of genre. It is in fact by force of the visuality of the comic that the strict label of science fiction welcomes tropes that are characteristic of other genres, such as the historic (Mayukh's *Yātrī* and *Smārak*), the detective and adventure story (Debnath's *Kauśiker abhiyān*), or *vice versa*: the adventure narrative often blends and incorporates traditional SF elements, to enhance the 'extraordinariness' of the story.

These Bengali children's magazines published various kinds of graphic narrative for children that included comedy, adventure, the science-based, hardcore and 'hybrid' science fiction stories. An example of a 'hardcore' science fiction comic is Narayan Debnath's *Ajānā deśe* (In an unknown land) that contains all the characteristic features of the literary genre of SF; yet it features under the section 'adventure comics' with other more typical stories of this genre (i.e. *Rahasyamaẏ abhiyātrī*, *Bhaẏaṅkarer mukhomukhi*, etc.), all grounded on the premises of a journey to exotic lands in order to solve a mystery (Lāhirī & Ghoṣ 2011: xii). Narayan Debnath, more popular for creating funny duos like Hāṁdā Bhõdā and Naṇṭe Phaṇṭe, has also invented science fiction inspired characters for his detective stories, like Kaushik Roy, the Indian government's spy with a bionic hand. Other creations by the Bengali illustrator are the characters from a light-hearted science-based series called 'Dānˈpiṭe Khāṁdu ār tār kyāmikyāl dādu' (The reckless Khadu and his chemical grandad). The stories always feature Khadu's grandfather creating a technologically advanced object and devices that function as the main reason behind the unfolding of the narrative: these devices can either repair damages, or hunt mice, but they put people in danger if used uncritically, as the curious Khadu usually does.

Another significant aspect in Bengali comics of this genre is the adaptation of hybrid SF narratives in the medium of the comic or of the graphic novel. One strand of these adaptations is well represented by the graphic novels on Prof. Śaṅku, like *Āścarjantu* (The extraordinary animal), *Śaṅku o UFO* (Śaṅku and UFOs), and *Śaṅku o ejipˈsīẏa ataṅka* (Śaṅku and the Egyptian terror), and on Premendra Mitra's Ghanādā, like 'Maśā' (The mosquito), 'Nuṛi' (Pebble)

and 'Pokā' (The insect).[14] The assimilation of the international features of SF is evident also in the series *Biśbasāhitya citrakathā* (World literature in pictures) that offered adaptations of Western classics of 'fantastic' literature into Bengali comics, including H.G. Wells' *The time machine*, Stoker's *Dracula* and *Ben-Hur* drawn by the illustrator Gautam Karmakar.[15] Among other SF comics, Karmakar also illustrated 'Commander Bose' (2003), 'Paiśācik' (Demoniac, 1978), and 'Jībanta jādughar' (The living museum, 1981).[16]

These adaptations of classic (Western) SF narratives and tropes of genre-SF accommodated in the medium of Bengali comics find space for entangling and interacting with themes and tropes from other popular genres, such as adventure and detective fiction. In these cases, the comic functions as a 'medium' that adapts and transfers the SF narrative into pictures accommodating the story in a more accessible and 'fancier' vehicle.[17] If one excludes so-called *auteur* comics, like Mayukh Chaudhuri's comic stories, genre-SF seems uninterested in producing innovations and introducing significant variations in the stories, characters and tropes of SF narratives. The following case study of 'hybrid' SF comics by Mayukh Chaudhuri and Narayan Debnath shows how the visual mode of the comic expands and enhances the capacity of genre-contamination by integrating some typical features of SF narrative into the adventure and detective/thriller story, all genres that are centered on different articulations of the notion of 'otherness'.

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[14] I am thankful to Dip Ghosh (Kalpabiswa webzine) for drawing my attention to other illustrators of science fiction comics, including Gautam Karmakar and Ujjwal Dhar, who have adapted English science fiction into Bengali comics. He also pointed out a comic story by Tushar Chakraborty where two Bengali sleuths are kidnapped by the people of Atlantis to help them against a powerful alien. Recently there is the trend of producing graphic novels on Prof. Śaṅku, Ghanādā, Sunil Ganguly's Nīl mānuṣ and Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay's adventure series (mail communication, 07.07.2018).

[15] The website comicbookindia.wordpress.com, part of the project based at Jadavpur University, provides examples of comics illustrated by Gautam Karmakar. Other titles and extracts from the comics are available on this website. *Ubhacar mānab* (The amphibian man) was Karmakar's comic adaptation of the Soviet writer Alexander Beliaev's eponymous novel (1928).

[16] I thank Prof. Abhijit Gupta (English Department, Jadavpur University) for having kindly 'disclosed' the huge cupboard in his office, full of dusty original editions of Bengali comics and children magazines allowing me to consult this immense material.

[17] These Bengali genre-SF comics, featuring aliens, robots, and interplanetary journeys, being primarily oriented to commercial market, are often published under the name of the illustrator, more well-known among the readership, while that of the storywriter — if different from the person of the illustrator — remains unspoken.

INCORPORATING SF IN ADVENTURE FICTION: MAYUKH CHAUDHURI

Falling under the category of juvenile literature, adventure stories enjoyed rising popularity in early twentieth century Bengal: they offered to the young reader the pleasure of transgressing the restricted boundaries of a disciplined and obedient childhood exploring the exciting possibilities of 'losing oneself' in the story and recuperating the sense of 'responsibility' and decision-making of the adult's world (Chatterjee 2012: 90).[18]

A master of action-adventure comics was Prasad Ray, who drew under the pen-name of Mayukh Chaudhuri. His favorite subjects were adventures in the wild, exotic lands, encounters with wild animals in the jungle, and episodes from ancient Indian history. Mayukh was known for his 'realistic drawings', overtly influenced by Western comics style and narrative, including graphic narratives realized on literary characters like Tarzan, Robin Hood and Mandrake. His oeuvre was inspired by the Italian explorer Attilio Gatti and his travels to Belgian Congo in pre-World War I Africa, a character that appeared also in *Chāṁder pāhārh* (The mountain of the moon, 1937), one of the most-loved adventure novels in Bengali literature (Gaṅgopādhyāẏ & Pāl 2015: xvi).



Fig. 2: Suresh Biswas in *Baṅgadeśer raṅg* (Gaṅgopādhyāẏ & Pāl 2015: 36).

[18] Bani Basu too, in her *Bāṃlār śiśusāhitya*, makes this point regarding the theme of the *ajānā* (cf. Chatterjee 2012).



Fig. 3: The fight between Chandragupta and a Greek soldier in *Chadmabeśī* (Gaṅgopādhyāẏ & Pāl 2015: 15).

Some of his most popular comic stories made use of famous Bengali characters from colonial history that had had a certain impact on popular culture, like Colonel Suresh Biswas, the legendary adventurer who left his hometown at 15 to become a circus tiger-tamer in Kent and a lieutenant in the Brazilian army (fig. 2). Often his stories are set in foreign lands, such as Africa, the American desert, or Brazil, and are often developed out of a juxtaposition between the cowardice of the *bideśī* (foreigner) and the courage, pride and strength of the Bengali, in a move to build a national Bengali character emancipated from colonial stereotypes of weakness and effeminacy. For example, in his comic story *Chadmabeśī* (Incognito, 1968) the anonymous inhabitant of Aryavarta, after showing courage during a fight with a Greek soldier (fig. 3), is taken to Alexander in order to reveal the path to Magadha, a still unconquered region in Aryavarta. Instead of joining the army, the anonymous protagonist, who will later reveal himself as Chandragupta, future Emperor of the Mauryan Empire, intimidates them into leaving Magadha with all the looted treasures. More common in Mayukh Chaudhuri's style are the stories based on wild animals from the African savanna and jungle; they are almost educational in nature and evoke documentaries of wild life. Unlike these, the comics here examined represent a narrative stream that is less typical of the author but more interesting for our understanding of genre-hybridity, for they display a different treatment of the classical genre of the adventure

story, here enriched by SF elements, as well as of the subject of strangeness and 'otherness', a common thread of these fantastic narratives.

The episodes *Smārak* (Memento, 1983) and *Yātrī* (The passenger, 1984) feature the ex-criminal Paresh Datta and the scientist Mr. Sen (whose real name cannot be revealed), inventor of a secret time machine (*samaẏ'yān yantra*). Paresh used to live on illegal businesses until he started working for Mr. Sen. Although he was jailed because of taking part in 'antisocial' activities, at the time the story unfolds he has become a police collaborator. As one would expect from the protagonist of an action-adventure series, Paresh is also very well versed in guns and always carries a revolver with him. He is known for smuggling rare objects to Europe, including wild animals' skin, claws, and tusks.



Fig. 4: Paresh landing in the future through Mr. Sen's travel machine (Gaṅgopādhyāẏ & Pāl 2015: 157)

These two narratives are entangled through the idea of time travel: while the first (Memento) takes place in the future, the second (The passenger) brings the protagonist back to ancient India. In the first episode *Smārak*, Paresh is offered money for accomplishing his 'time expeditions' on behalf of the mysterious scientist Mr. Sen who is collecting evidence of life in the future. The story begins with Paresh fighting to convince his friend Abhay, collector of ancient artefacts, that the precious animal's claw was in fact stolen from a creature that lives in a far-away future, and not snatched from an animal in the Indian jungle as he believes. Through flashback mode, the reader follows Paresh in his journey to the future, when he ends up in a wild, vast and lonely

prehistoric-looking land (fig. 4). His goal is to bring back to the present evidence of life in the future in the form of the claw of an antique creature. The author plays with time through the visual disposition of the panels and the unfolding of the narrative, arranging the balloons in the typical cloud-like shape that suggests flashbacks. Only at the end of the story, the reader has 'proof' that the time travel has really happened and that the claw truly belongs to a creature from the future.

The reader is invited to take an active part in the unfolding of the story by looking at Paresh's deeds from the point of view of the surrounding characters. After returning the claw to Mr. Sen, he decides to travel again to the future to collect the head of the same creature that Abhay is willing to buy in exchange of a huge amount of money. However, once he has returned to the future land and encountered the dead creature, he discovers that the logics of science and biology have changed over time: the creature's dead body has in fact undergone an 'extraordinary' process of growth (fig. 5). He then realizes that he will not be able to carry such a heavy head in the time machine and prove to his friends that the claw really belongs to a creature from the future.



Fig. 5: Paresh seeing the giant body of the dead creature (Gaṅgopādhyāẏ & Pāl 2015: 159)

In this episode, the questions of the unknown, the other, and the terrific associated with mysterious lands and species are addressed through the repetition of words like *adbhut*, *āścarya* and *bhaẏaṅkar* (strange, wondrous and terrific) that characterize the foreign land of the future. Here Paresh does not

meet 'anything like what exists in our present': the encounter with the 'creature' (*jānoẏār*) from the future seems to echo the classic alien-encounter trope of classic SF, but the juxtaposition here denotes more the discovery of a sense of 'loss' at the vast loneliness experienced on the future earth. As opposed to the representation of the future as a land of scientific and technological progress, Paresh's future is painted as a prehistoric one, inhabited by ancient creatures and dominated by natural rules that are unknown to both present and futuristic science. The encounter with the 'other' is projected onto a future that is non-scientific, as opposed to the more familiar hyper-technological future of classic Western SF. In Mayukh's drawings, the representation of the future provides an alternative to stereotypical images of futuristic landscapes and encounters by figuring a 'an earth after one thousand years' (*hājār bachar parer pṛthibī*) that looks lost, primitive, and deserted to the eye of an urban Bengali *bhadralok*. One possibility of reading this prehistoric future shall therefore include a repositioning of the dialectics of colonizer-colonized that situates the Indian city *vis-à-vis* the village, the forest, and all that remained outside the boundaries of progress, modernity, and civilization in postcolonial India.

In the years following Partition and preceding the independence of Bangladesh, a different image of 'otherness' gradually came into being in juxtaposition to the ideal of the Bengali *bhadralok*, urban and educated. This is the opposition between *bhadralok* and *choṭalok*, *ghaṭī* and *bāṅgāl* [19] (cf. Ghosh 2013), the latter used for refugees coming from East Bengal. In addition, people from Pakistan, Muslims, immigrants, and terrorists came to embody the 'other' and the enemy that threatened the very existence of *bhadralok* society. We will see how this opposition between self and other – urban vs. rural, foreign vs. native – is articulated in all the comics under discussion.

[19] As opposed to the *bhadralok*, the Bengali gentry, the word *choṭalok* generally defines low-class people in Bengal, those who lack a 'proper' education. By extension, it can also denote a dishonest person. While *ghaṭi* refers to a Bengali person from West Bengal, *bāṅgāl* is a more derogatory term that defines a Bengali person coming from East Bengal, today's state of Bangladesh.



Fig. 6: Paresh and friends meeting the Greek soldier Pardicus (Gaṅgopādhyāẏ & Pāl 2015: 166).

In the time adventure narrated in *Yātrī*, Paresh is accompanied by two partners: Biman, a famous ex-boxer endowed with a tremendous physical strength, and Bhombal, a robot with human features, who protects Mr. Sen from unwanted visitors. This time, Paresh's task in exchange for money is to travel back to the year 327 BC in the heart of Aryavarta, at the time of Alexander the Great's expedition to India. Here they meet Pardicus (fig. 6), a Greek soldier escaping from Odeyus,[20] King of Ithaca, whose army is led by the legendary strong Hercules. At the sight of Pardicus, dressed in ancient Greek fashion, the passengers have the feeling that the travel machine has landed in ancient Greece instead of Aryavarta. The intertextual reference here shall be traced to the story told in *Chadmabeśī*, where the Greek soldier Pardicus had already made his appearance. Bhombal offers to protect Pardicus with his superhuman strength, facing Hercules' mythological power, who is tragically knocked down by a punch of the Bengali robot (fig. 7).[21] As already noted above, the Bengali protagonists are generally endowed with positive qualities, clever and smart like Paresh, or physically strong and protective like Bhombal. In the way it is portrayed here, the robot is reminiscent of the traditional characteristics associated with a wrestler, embodying that

[20] The author could have here mis-spelled, or consciously played with, the name of Odysseus, the king of Ithaca from the epic poem the Odyssey.
[21] Here the friends ironically describe Bhombal's punch as one that 'not even Mohammad Ali was able to blow!' (167), creating a funny case of anachronism in the intertextual reference to the 1960s American boxer.

'national masculinity', amply discussed by scholars (cf. Alter 2011), that projected the fears and anxieties of war[22] onto a 'superhuman' defender of the homeland, rescuer of 'good' people and punisher of 'criminals'.



Fig. 7: The Bengali robot Bhombal knocks Hercules down (Gaṅgopādhyāẏ & Pāl 2015: 167).

This time, Paresh and his friends make use of the translating machine (*bhāṣāntarer yantra*) (fig. 8), another incredible invention made by Mr. Sen, which allows mutual communication with the ancient Greek soldiers. The translating machine, functioning as the *novum* of the story, facilitates the encounter with the 'other' (the soldier from ancient Greece): Paresh addresses him as 'friend' (*bandhu*) while the Bengali trio is characterized as the 'foreigners' (*bideśī*). The historical, linguistic and cultural distance that divides the Bengali modern trio from the ancient Greek soldier allows the inversion of the common dichotomy *deśī/bideśī* (local/foreign), erasing the configuration of the 'foreign' as the 'other', source of fear and trouble. Unlike the previous episode, where Paresh meets the 'horrific creature' (*bhaẏaṅkar jānoẏār*), in *Yātrī* the encounter with the 'other' is more friendly. Rather than evoking a sense of loss and incommunicability, the intervention of the 'translating machine' subverts this possibility in order to overcome the boundaries

[22] During the 1960s and the early 1970s, India was involved in several armed conflicts with its neighboring countries: with China in 1962 and Pakistan in 1965 and 1971, during the liberation of East Pakistan/Bangladesh.

of cultural difference. The story ends with the trio coming back to the time machine hoping that Bhombal will drive them safely back to contemporary Calcutta.



Fig. 8: The visitors applying the 'translating machine' to their ears and throat to enable mutual understanding with the strangers (Gaṅgopādhyāẏ & Pāl 2015: 165).

LANGUAGE OF 'OTHERNESS' AND GENRE HYBRIDITY: NARAYAN DEBNATH'S ADVENTURE COMICS.

Mostly known for illustrating the funny stories of *Hāṁdā Bhõdā* and *Nanṭe Phanṭe*, Debnath became also a popular author and illustrator of adventure comics, including numerous types of narratives such as 'the thriller, the journey-adventure, the detective mystery, and science fiction'.[23] The two comics analyzed below represent two examples of Narayan Debnath's adventure comics: if the first one (*Ḍrāgoner thābā*) exemplifies the genre hybridity that

[23] For example, *Svapna nā satya* (Dream or truth, 1379 Beng. era); *Mṛta nagarir dānab debatā* (The demon-god of the dead town, 1380 Beng. era); *Duhsvapner deśe* (In the land of nightmares, 1382 Beng. era); *Andhakārer hāt'chāni* (The gesture of darkness, 1384 Beng. era); *Pretātmār pratiśodh* (The revenge of the ghost, 1385 Beng. era); *Āścarya mukhoś* (The extraordinary mask, 1386 Beng. era), and others (Lāhirī & Ghoṣ 2011: 340).

is typical of adventure fiction, blending elements from the SF, the adventure and the detective story, the second (*Ajānā deśe*) is more representative of genre-SF, displaying in text and image all traditional tropes of the genre, including alien encounter and the hunt for new planets. Besides illustrating the strategies of genre hybridity through the interaction of text and image, these two comics are especially representative of a language of 'otherness' and strangeness that reproduces the ambivalent feelings of fear and desire entailed in encountering the 'other'.

Race, hybridity and otherness are questions that have significantly informed the genre of SF. Narratives based on alien-encounters have inevitably introduced the question of self and other, exploring the selfhood from the vantage point of alterity. The alien, who can be a monster (*Frankenstein*'s creature), a doppelgänger (*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*), or an extraterrestrial on a far-away planet, embodies the enemy, that which stands against the self and mirrors different moments of fear – of Nazis, of flying saucers, of communists, of the 'different' in general (Castelli 2006). Jessica Langer explains that:

> […] the figure of the alien comes to signify all kinds of otherness, and the image of the far-away land, whether the undiscovered country or the imperial seat, comes to signify all kinds of diaspora and movement, in all directions. Their very power, their situation at the center of the colonial imagination as simultaneous desire and nightmare, is turned back on itself (2011: 4).

The bug-eyed alien and the far-away planet ripe for the taking are twin signifiers in science fiction. These signifiers are in fact the very same twin myths of colonialism. However, the 'others' of these Bengali comics — i.e. the horrific creature, the Greek soldiers, the alien species, the native — represent an extension of the traditional signifiers associated with the alien of science fiction narratives. In these Bengali comics, published more than two decades after the Partition, the different encounters with the 'other' show some variation from mainstream SF in the characterization of this face-to-face encounter, portraying a more optimistic view of the self-other relationship in a move to sublimate the fear and anxieties caused by a decade of war on the Indian borders.



Fig. 9: Star-Trek-looking Indian space team (Deb & Ghoṣ 2011: 316).



Fig. 10: Robot-looking aliens pointing at the Indian shuttle (Deb & Ghoṣ 2011: 314).

In Debnath's comic story *Ajānā deśe* (In an unknown land, 1969), for example, the narrative focuses on the exploration of the universe and peaceful alien encounters. The Indian space team, undeniably drawn in reference to the American TV series *Star Trek* (fig. 9), leaves earth with the aim of establishing good relationships (*bandhutva sthāpan*) with other planets in the universe. When the Indian astronauts spot a planet inhabited by a 'strange species' (*adbhut jāti*), they agree on greeting the new peoples (fig. 10). Through the help of a translating machine, not too different from the one imagined by Mayukh Chaudhuri in his time travel stories, the Indian team is sure of a friendly communication with the inhabitants of the unknown planet. However, due to a temporary breakdown of the translating machine (fig. 11), the Indian astronauts are unable to decipher the message of warning sent by the aliens about the 'terrifying' mist that protects their planet, capable of blowing up the space shuttle. As a last warning to keep the Indian space shuttle away from the danger of disintegration, the aliens are forced to attack it with missiles. In reaction to that, the impulsive Samir, captain of the space expedition, orders to fabricate a bomb and punish the obstinacy of the alien people. The only one who opposes Samir's plan of 'revenge' (*pratiśodh*) is the man referred to as 'the professor' by the other members of the expedition. Samir has already

left with his space shuttle to the new planet when the Indian team finally receives the message from the aliens correctly translated into Bengali. They understand it is too late for Captain Samir, for his shuttle has already reached the *kuẏāśā*, the mist that protects the planet, thus provoking the explosion of his shuttle. As soon as the translating machine starts working again, the team finally discovers that the missiles launched by the aliens were only meant to warn the Indian astronauts about the explosive mist.



Fig. 11: The translating machine (Deb & Ghoṣ 2011: 315).

Again, translation functions as a means to overcome linguistic and cultural boundaries and to promote friendship instead of enmity among peoples. Moreover, the didactic intention of this comic story is evident in the professor's concluding words affirming that they 'would be finished without patience and forbearance' (*dhairya ār sahiṣṇutā*), offering the young reader a morale that privileges tolerance and self-control instead of impulsiveness and obstinacy. In the context of the encounter with the alien species, establishing a friendly relationship (*bandhutva sthāpan*) is therefore seen as more desirable and advantageous than attacking (*ākramaṇ karā*) the unknown 'others'.

Let us now turn to an episode of Narayan Debnath's *Kaushik adventures* to have a closer look at how SF elements are weaved into the detective-adventure story and how the trope of 'otherness' is addressed in this comic. Kaushik Ray, protagonist of Narayan Debnath's series *Kauśiker abhiyān* (Kaushik's adventures),[24] embodies the 'hero' of Bengali detective fiction: he is a secret spy of the Indian government who is good at martial arts and boxing. Kaushik's right bionic-arm shoots bullets, intoxicating gas and laser. The nails of his bionic hand can be used as a knife and, attached to it (fig. 12), there is a hidden transmitter (Lāhirī & Ghoṣ 2011: 242). A reader familiar with Bengali cinema and popular culture can easily identify the direct influence of characters like Satyajit Ray's Pheludā and Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay's Byomkeś Baksī, although there is an element of action in Kaushik that is missing in more traditional detective figures, making Kaushik a perfect Bengali counterpart of the British spy James Bond.



Fig. 12 Kaushik speaking at his robotic-hand's transmitter (Lāhirī & Ghoṣ 2011: 243)

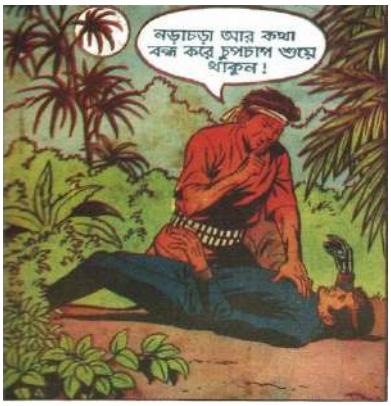

Fig. 13: Kaushik meets the local inhabitant (Lāhirī & Ghoṣ 2011: 247).

[24] From 1975 the magazine *Śukᵗtārā* started to publish episodes of Kaushik's adventures: *Sarparājer dbīp* (The island of the snake king, 1975); *Ḍrāgoner thābā* (The dragon's claw, 1385 Beng. era); *Bhaẏaṅkarer mukhomukhi* (Face to face with terror, 1387 Beng. era); *Ajānā dbīper bibhīṣikā* (The horror of the unknown island, 1390 Beng. era); *Mṛtyudūter kālochāẏā* (Death's black shadow, 1392 Beng. era); *Bhayaṅkar abhiyān* (Dreadful adventure, 1398 Beng. era); *Sbarnakhānir antarāle* (In the heart of the golden mine, 1399 Beng. era) and more (Lāhirī & Ghoṣ 2011: 354). One can note the recurrence of tropes associated with feelings of terror, thrill, excitement, and with the search for the unknown in all fiction labelled as 'adventure'.

In 1979's *Ḍrāgoner thābā* (The dragon's claw), Kaushik travels in the middle of the ocean to reach an archipelago of 'undiscovered' islands (*ajānā dbīp*) that are periodically submerged by water during high tide and then reappear on the surface when the waves withdraw again. One of these islands, known as the 'Island of the dragon', is the site where a group of strangers, led by a man in a hood, have recently built an outpost and fabricated prehistoric reptiles to keep any unwanted visitor away from the island. When Kaushik reaches the place, he first meets a local inhabitant of the island (*adhibāsī*) (fig. 13) who warns him against a bunch of 'foreign villains' (*bhinˈdeśī durbṛtterā*) having illegally occupied the island and built an outpost on the top of the hill, regardless of the will of the local people. The configuration of the 'foreign' as evil and the 'locals' as the ones to be rescued seem to reproduce the 'otherness' involved in the colonial encounter between colonized and colonizer. However, the entertaining logic of the graphic narrative sublimates this encounter through the intervention and assistance of Kaushik, himself a 'stranger' to the native people of the island. Kaushik is, in fact, represented as the smart urban Bengali hero coming to rescue the helpless locals under threat, whose main representative is drawn in the stereotypical imagination of a *bāṅgāl* (East Bengali), or a peasant from a rural area of Bengal outside the civilized fringes of the city of Calcutta.



Fig. 14: Kaushik entering the scene with a high kick to rescue his friend (Lāhirī & Ghoṣ 2011: 259)

After having rescued his *adhibāsī* friend from Mr. Dragon's fellows (fig. 14) and fought with the gigantic reptiles, Kaushik eventually faces Mr. Dragon in

a face-to-face fight, managing to knock him down and to blow up the illegal outpost surrounded by the prehistoric monsters.

If one considers the historical context when these comic stories were published (1969; 1979), few years after the Indian armed conflicts with China (1962) and Pakistan (1965 and 1971),[25] one has the feeling that these graphic narratives project the crisis triggered by those events on a metahistorical level. Even the language used in both comics mirrors a state of conflict and the rhetoric of war. Attack, revenge, bombing, explosion, punishment, and obstinacy are all signifiers of the state of war that India was experiencing in those years. Moreover, words like native, foreign, villain, and stranger represent the various facets constituting the 'other' in post-independence West Bengal. The quasi-mythical reality depicted in the comic story then offers a playful ground that allows to give cultural coherence to the loss of peace, unity and coexistence that were disrupted during Nehru and Indira Gandhi's rule, reactivating the trauma of Partition. Instead of picturing the 'other' as the enemy, as some comics have already shown, here Debnath imagines the aliens as a peaceful species that seeks to warn and protect the foreign visitors. This narrative could be seen as countering global narratives about the Cold War years — i.e. American superhero comics, *The twilight zone* movie series — that pictured aliens as evil invaders, representing the threat of totalitarianism, other than nurturing the paranoia of nuclear bombings.

Ajānā deśe is representative in terms of style and themes of genre SF, retaining all the traditional tropes of global market-oriented SF, while it signals an interesting shift from Narayan Debnath's mainstream comics that generally represent the 'other' as a threat to be vanquished. On the other hand, the message of peaceful warning sent by the alien people on the new planet, as well as the *adhibāsī*'s friendship with the Calcutta *bhadralok*, constitute metonymic ways to de-potentiate the threat of 'otherness' experienced in the historical reality of 1970s South Asia.

[25] As already explained in footnote 22.

CONCLUSIONS

Reading Bengali SF comics as 'modes' rather than 'genres' has disclosed multiple possibilities of interpretation. As opposed to seeing these comics as belonging to closed generic categories, such as 'adventure', 'detective' or 'science fiction', the notion of 'mode', on the contrary, permits to enrich the narrative with other elements, including the 'scientific', enhancing the 'extraordinariness' of the narrative and the entertainment of the readership. Strategies of blending, contamination, and hybridization are especially represented by the recurrence of the trope and language of 'otherness' as this is mirrored in the linguistic choices of these Bengali graphic narratives, addressing questions about the exploration of the unknown, the feeling of wonder and terror at the unfamiliar, and the encounter with the 'other'. Meanings and significations of words denoting strangeness and 'otherness' (i.e. *ajānā*, *adbhut*, *bideśī*, *āgantuk*, etc.) encompass feelings related to the sphere of the wondrous, the uncanny, and the dreadful. The places and the inhabitants encountered during Paresh's time travels are described as *bhaẏańkar* or *baẏābaha* (terrifying); exploring a new planet is *romāñcakar* (a mixture of thrilling and terrific); crossing a boundary is *bipajjanak* (dangerous) while what is familiar is denoted as *nirāpad* (safe, without dangers). Fear, thrill and terror about the unknown are dominant tropes of the 'fantastic', always entailing the physical and metaphorical exploration of the unknown.

In this sense, Bengali SF does not need to be conceptualized only within the boundaries of the 'scientific', nor to be explained in terms of being a subversive response to the universality of Western science: these questions are mostly eschewed in the comics under discussion. What emerges, by contrast, from these Bengali comics, is that the blending of the SF element — i.e. Paresh's time travels, translating machines, Kaushik's bionic hand, and the Indian space expedition and alien encounter — with other typical features of the adventure, the thriller, and the detective narrative functions as a way to enhance the extraordinariness of the story aiming at the entertainment of the readership. Moreover, such blending and contamination among 'fantastic' narratives highlight the multiple semantic potentials of some tropes that are explored in these Bengali comics. For instance, one can read them — i.e. the future imagined as a prehistoric land, the sense of loss and unfamiliarity,

the dichotomy between self and other, foreign and native — as part of a shared imaginary of speculative fiction or for their historical and sociopolitical meaning in the context of West Bengal, as I have attempted to show in this paper. Finally, the notion of 'mode' can become a helpful heuristic tool as an alternative to 'genre' in that it helps drawing attention to the multiple interpretative layers that are embedded in the format of the comic, opening new possibilities of reading genre hybridity, trope and narrative contamination as constitutive of the 'mode' of these science fiction comics.

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