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Waste-Wor(l)ds as Parables of Dystopian 'Elsewheres' in Postcolonial Speculative Discourse

Abstract: Postcolonial speculative discourse has often treated the threat of potential ecological wastelands emerging from the unwise actions of humankind. Significant examples of this type of writing are the short stories by Manjula Padmanabhan (1999; 2004) and Vandana Singh (2004; 2008), two Indian writers who employ the narrative format to critically address the environmental question and the possible creation of waste worlds, also bearing in mind real-life catastrophes such as the 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy. In particular, in their short fiction, both authors appropriate and reinvent the architexts of utopia and dystopia to build up a complex system of deictic temporal shifts that allow an exploration of the future and a reflection on the central role of nature.

In this article I focus on some literary works by Padmanabhan and Singh dealing with the theme of waste, and I adopt an interdisciplinary approach that benefits from an amalgamation of postcolonial studies, cognitive poetics and ecolinguistics. Here I aim at investigating how discourse worlds of waste are triggered by the texts under consideration through the resources of the language of science fiction. In my view, since the conceptualisation and the rendering of the theme warn and challenge the reader to respond to important ethical questions, these dystopian narratives are set to work as parables that have to be cognitively processed and decoded. In the final part of the article I shortly broaden my research scope and also take into account Ian McDonald's *River of Gods* (2004), SF novel that brings to the fore the idea of water exploitation and pollution in a futuristic Indian subcontinent, thus providing a further insight into the linguistic, stylistic and narrative construction of the waste theme.

Keywords: *architext, cognitive poetics, Manjula Padmanabhan, postcolonial speculative discourse, Vandana Singh, parable*

Introduction: Environmental discourse, postcolonialism and speculative fiction

The significance of ecological discourse and the preoccupation with threats deriving from the unwise actions of humankind often constitute a trope in the literary field, and this presence is even more salient in the case of postcolonial speculative fiction, a subgenre that reconfigures the understanding of reality through the lens of fantasy and imagination. In this article I will examine the theme of linguistic and narrative waste-worlds by specifically focussing on the short stories "2099"[1] and "Delhi",[2] respectively authored by the Indian writers Manjula Padmanabhan and Vandana Singh, who employ the narrative form to critically address the environmental question and the potential creation of waste worlds. By orchestrating stories that depict imaginary futures that blend together utopian and dystopian elements, the two authors, who have experimented with different text-types such as children's literature, essays and

[1] Manjula Padmanabhan, "2099", originally written for the 1999 *Outlook* millennium-ender special issue and now collected in *Kleptomania* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2004). All further references are to this edition, quoted as *K* in the text.

[2] Vandana Singh, "Delhi", originally collected in Nalo Hopkinson and Uppin Mehan, eds., *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Vancouver: Pulp Press, 2004). It is now included in *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet and Other Stories* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2008). All further references are to this edition, quoted as *WTS* in the text.

comic strips, warn about the possible consequences of man's contemporary imprudent exploitation of nature. The images and metaphors they build are illustrations of the vitality of the language of science fiction, but they also operate as parables and architexts that bring to the fore the environmental question and challenge the reader to reflect on the impact of boundless progress onto the planet. Although specifically correlated with the Indian context, these texts also expand their force to represent the state of the entire planet and the active role of mankind in the biosphere at large.

In recent times, the field of ecocriticism, an umbrella term for a variety of theories and methods, has gained critical attention, supported by various publications and scholarship.[3] Recently an array of eco-approaches to literature, the arts and several other cultural domains have been put forward, also including the exploration of the culture and philosophy of the environment as demonstrated for example by Serenella Iovino's body of work.[4] In a similar vein, language and linguistics are now recognised as key elements in this debate, as shown for example by the idea of 'greenspeak' as a way to encode the concerns of environmentalism, in particular via figurative means, since, according to Harré, Brockmeier and Mühlhäuser, "thinking, speaking and writing about environmental matters employ, as do other genres of cognition, a huge range of metaphors".[5] In its broad perimeter, environmental discourse represents a complex and articulated area, especially in the postcolonial scenario.[6] In order to concentrate on the particular theme of waste-worlds, I will follow an interdisciplinary approach that draws from an amalgamation of postcolonial studies, cognitive poetics and ecolinguistics to spotlight how Padmanabhan and Singh manipulate narrative material and reshape the coordinates of speculative fiction, with its reflection on other worlds, utopian or dystopian futures, and super technology, to imagine the effects of waste-wor(l)ds. It is also worth noticing that this type of writing evokes the proximity, in cognitive terms, of fiction and non-fiction, as noticed by Peter Stockwell and other cognitive stylisticians,[7] since the stories here under consideration may extrapolate from or refer to real life episodes and, in thus doing, they further sustain the relevance of environmental discourse.

Specifically, Padmanabhan and Singh acknowledge the power of science fiction as a laboratory of ideas, dreams and issues that may stimulate thought and generate discussion in hypothetical terms, but not totally detached from real life. For the former, in fact, SF "offers a writer the opportunity to go directly to the heart of an ironical or thought-provoking situation by setting up a theoretical world" (*K*, viii), whilst the latter holds that "reality is such a complex beast that in order to begin to comprehend it we need something larger than realist fiction" (*WTS*, 203). In this way they both endorse the genre and consider it not merely as narrative entertainment, but also as an imaginative site capable of producing

[3] See for example Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004) or Rom Harré et al., *Greenspeak: A Study of Environmental Discourse* (London: Sage, 1999).

[4] See for example Serenella Iovino, *Filosofie dell'ambiente* (Roma: Carocci 2004); Serenella Iovino, *Ecocriticism and Italy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Serenella Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria* (Milano: Edizioni Ambiente, 2006).

[5] Harré *et al.*, 93.

[6] See for example Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, "Introduction: Towards an Aesthetic of the Earth", the introductory chapter of their edited volume *Postcolonial Ecologies. Literatures of the Environment* (Oxford: U. P., 2011), 4-39.

[7] See for example Peter Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics* (London: Routledge, 2002).

effects in the readership, i.e. of affecting and somehow changing people's stance and behaviour through the route to a *lector in fabula* paradigm by advocating a positioned reader. In other words, the two artists produce "literary works in which the ethical positioning of the reader is altogether allowing of more ambivalence, or which create more potential places for a readerly configuration of personality to settle"[8] and thus consciousness can be achieved and expanded. The text becomes the means by which the warning picture of the waste-land is evoked with the purpose to construct environmental discourse and elicit a pragmatic response. Built upon an ultimate call for responsibility, these narrative works impact on the readers' kinds of social cultural and intertextual knowledge, i.e. the "horizons of expectations by which any text will be measured"[9] so as to refresh and change schemas, ideas and intentions at large.

[8] Stockwell, *Texture: A Cognitive Aesthetics of Reading* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U. P., 2012), 162.

[9] Katie Wales, *A Dictionary of Stylistics* (Harlow: Longman, 1995), 392.

Waste-wor(l)ds: Parables we live by and futuristic architexts

An important aspect shared by the stories written by both Padmanabhan and Singh lies in the conterminous nature of fields such as environmentalism, postcolonialism, and science fiction: at times indeed the three domains are overlapping as they explore the relations between the subject and the surrounding context, or its precarious equilibrium, but also the sense of the future as a direct outcome of the present. The image of the waste-world, in particular, seems to characterise postcolonial speculative writing, symbolically evoking the mistreatment as well as a metaphorical laceration of the earth (and in a parallel manner the exploitation of local communities) and disturbingly addressing man's agency in approaching and organising life.

My argument is located at the interface between the power of SF narratives as sociocultural acts of communication and their rhetorical function as parables of denunciation of ecological degradation. As a matter of fact, discourse worlds of waste are triggered by these texts through the resources of the language of science fiction, not only in rich metaphors, neologisms and other figures, but also at a micro level, where apparently 'banal' linguistic features in reality can become important meaning-making elements, as convincingly demonstrated by the study of Susan Mandala.[10] In my view, since the conceptualisation and the rendering of the theme warn and ask the reader to respond to important ethical questions, these dystopian narratives are set to work as parables that have to be cognitively processed and decoded, and here and in this article I will employ some of the principles of cognitive poetics, in particular the notion of parable as developed by Peter Stockwell and Michael Burke.[11] Both scholars in fact underscore the importance of allegorical messages in literary texts that convey a reconfiguration of the world and require the reader to collaborate in the

[10] Susan Mandala, *Language in Science Fiction and Fantasy* (London: Continuum, 2010); see in particular chapter four, "Extraordinary Worlds in Plain Language", 95-117.

[11] See Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics* (London: Routledge, 2002), and Michael Burke, "Literature as Parable", in Joanna Gavins and Gerard Steen, eds., *Cognitive Poetics in Practice* (London: Routledge, 2002), 117-128.

[12] Burke, "Literature as Parable", 115.

meaning-making process and elaborate further details, inferences, and implications.

As Burke holds, a "parable is a fundamental, continuous, cognitive instrument of thought that we employ, largely unconsciously, both in real-world meaning construction and in literary interpretation procedures".[12] Parables therefore emerge as mental and cultural structures utilised to understand the world, and the didactic nature of stories in reality is socially rooted and perpetuated through time thanks to narrations. In particular, parables, like all stories, rely on the inner means of projection, that is the capacity of the subject to mentally arrange images and meanings, and of blending, i.e. the ability of the self to mix, adapt and process previous ideas and notions. In this perspective, the stories authored by Padmanabhan and Singh – and to some extent McDonald's writing as well – transform a wealth of ecological themes such as air pollution and nuclear contamination into a series of admonitions via the linguistic strategies of science fiction and fantasy, so that the readers have to juxtapose what they know about the current condition of the planet with the imaginings of the future, its perils and its mutability. Ontologically these narratives are thus akin to other forms of discourse centred on environmental anxiety and, considering the personal involvement of Padmanabhan and Singh as activists who have often spoken out against the exploitation carried out by authorities, corporations and other bodies in many neglected territories, also function as critical tools to stimulate social conscience about working for collective human wellbeing.

Stylistically, the two writers in their short fiction appropriate and reinvent the prototypical SF device of time travel to build up a complex system of deictic temporal shifts that allow an exploration of the future and a reflection on the central role of nature. This imaginative strategy is instrumental to the stories I am here concerned with and allows the construction of what Peter Stockwell, with Genette in mind, labels as architext, or "any science fictional narrative which configures a fully worked-out, rich world, and also provides stylistic cues that encourage a mapping of the *whole* textual universe with the reader's reality".[13] Such notion is grounded upon the power of metaphor to compare images and hence conceive new meanings, shifting from the real to the fictional via creative imagination. The main frames of the SF architext are utopia, dystopia and apocalypse, three 'elsewheres' that nonetheless may partially be close to, or at least draw from the construal of the real world by virtue of metaphoric and metonymic relations. With regard to the realm of dystopia, for instance, Sandrine Sorlin remarks that "[elle] relève en effet davantage de la caricature déformée de notre réalité qu'elle ne crée un monde alternatif".[14] The SF stories of Padmanabhan and Singh creatively develop possible, alternate worlds, in which the borders between utopia and dystopia (with the recourse to

[13] Stockwell, *The Poetics of Science Fiction* (Harlow: Longman, 2000), 204 [emphasis in the original].

[14] Sandrine Sorlin, *La stylistique anglaise* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014), 200.

apocalyptic traits too) are often porous, and the representation of nature incessantly foregrounds the possibility of huge catastrophes. In the following sections, some key passages from the texts by these writers will be subjected to linguistic analysis with the purpose to investigate the construction and relevance of the waste-land trope.

Dystopian elsewheres in Manjula Padmanabhan's waste-worlds

The notion of waste, in various forms, is a recurrent image in Padmanabhan's writing: in her novel *Escape*, published in 2008, it is identified with a huge sort of desert, devastated and contaminated by nuclear bombs, probably located somewhere in the Indian subcontinent, where people have to wear special suits to survive.[15] Not only is this type of representation significant for deictic reference, i.e. it depicts the locative dimension of this future world (and its unstable condition), but it is also symbolically noteworthy because it reshapes environmental discourse as an open condemnation of a certain world order that neglects the 'non-western souths' of the earth, namely those territories that do not belong to the privileged nations. Padmanabhan's short fiction too deals with the same theme, for example in the stories "Gandhi-toxin" or "Sharing Air", which pivot around the question of waste and pollution in the air, but here I will take into account another story, titled "2099". This from the very title introduces the idea of a future time, in which Mr M, the protagonist, awakes thanks to the perma-sleep programme, a hyper-technological machine that allows people to be 'frozen' and then resuscitated in another time. Having left in the past a country stricken by atomic bombs detonated with the purpose to solve the problem of overpopulation, the time traveller is now amazed by the utopian setting he finds himself in, a future India often referred to with the synthetic acronym I-O-I, in which "food was plentiful" (*K*, 156) and which was "at the forefront of the space-colonization campaign" (*K*, 156) with immense star ships called Gandhi I and Gandhi II transporting people to the communities settled on other planets, in particular Mars, now called Kalki.[16]

However, after the first moment of wonder, the protagonist also learns about remarkable troubles in this dreamland, and the utopian image is subtly turned upside down, to become a kind of camouflaged dystopia. Apparently, in a nutshell, the story is structured as a reversal of utopia shifting into dystopia, but, in reality, a closer reading of "2099" calls into question such a binary vision, as it unfolds crucial environmental criticalities of all epochs, both past and future. In thus doing, the author organises her parabolic storytelling as a form of fantastic speculation about the repercussions of human actions across time. Initially, the architext of utopia is witnessed by the protagonist as a heavenly location, where "mango trees in a nearby orchard filled his senses with their

[15] Padmanabhan, *Escape* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2008); see also Esterino Adami, "Feminist Science Fiction as a Postcolonial Paradigm", in Alessandro Monti, ed., *Scritture e interpretazioni* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2010), 145-157.

[16] It is worth noticing that in Hinduism the name designates the tenth and last incarnation of Vishnu as well as the harbinger of end times in Hindu eschatology.

fragrance. The sky was a blue so deep and pure that it hurt to look at it" (*K*, 151) and this picture vividly contrasts with his own past world, whose description is worth quoting at length:

> Gas masks were mandatory in every city and all buildings had air-seals and elaborate security … well, of course, only those buildings inhabited by the rich. The vast mass of humanity lived and breathed a type of gaseous tar. And the cities themselves had spread like cancerous scabs across and around and under and over every open square mile of the country. There were no forests left anywhere, only 'environment parks' in which a sampling of all the flora and fauna that might have, at one time, been found in that area were crammed together in artificially sustained conditions, soaring high into the sky on pylons. Food was created in underground refineries or grown in domestic mini-farms. (*K*, 153)

The quotation inscribes a stark division of the country, which in hyperbolic fashion mirrors the conflict between social classes, here implicitly reshaped as those who can afford to pay for their wellbeing against the masses of the wretched, forced to live in dire conditions. But in actuality it triggers a broader sphere of meaning. Several linguistic items in fact are foregrounded to emphasise the condition of pollution, decadence and degradation: not only evaluative words such as the expression 'gaseous tar' or the adjective 'cancerous', extracted from the vocabulary of physics and medicine and bearing negative overtones, but longer explanations and references too, for instance the image of dilapidated zoos, or the fact that food is artificially produced in unusual establishments.

Likewise interesting is the way in which the story constructs the India of the future and its Martian colonies: apparently the two contexts are in opposition because the situation on Kalki is quite turbulent due to the appearance of some form of miscegenation and hybrid individuals, making up a kind of "mutant community" (*K*, 157) involved in wars with other groups. Whilst this representation symbolically encapsulates memories and references of colonial discourse, communalism and socioethnic diversity, it also points to wider environmental questions devastating the entire planet and not only the Indian subcontinent: "Among the Ordinaries, the Muslims, Hindus and Minorities each had vast sectors of the planet to themselves, but nevertheless fought vicious battles for space, food, water and political advantage. Cannibalism was the universally accepted social norm everywhere, as there were no local sources of protein" (*K*, 157). In particular the battle for water and food, the latter also disturbingly imaged as human flesh, is a key factor in the collapse of the general conditions of the colonies, and thus it creatively evokes a possible darkly skewered future. From this angle, the earth appears to be a "distant paradise to

which the older generation of all communities yearned to return" (*K*, 157), but in reality several clues interrogate such heavenly portrayal and disrupt the reader's utopian schema, starting from the very naming process. The acronym I-O-I that is used to indicate the country turns out to stand for "Idea of India", and in this manner it provides bitter irony that obfuscates the notion of wholeness and unity of the postcolonial nation: in fact the scientists explain to the protagonist that the future India is not a homogeneous, single territory, but rather a patchwork of various areas, detached from those "vast tracts of the country [that] had been rendered uninhabitable on account of radiation" (*K*, 158). These are linked to each other by means of special gateways and passages that constitute a sort of transportation network and may be reminiscent of a component present in much science fiction, i.e. 'wormholes', a kind of special corridors leading towards other dimensions or worlds.

The parabolic framework of the story envisages a series of opposite images, interpolating elements of the utopian and dystopian architexts, but since it draws extensively from several discourses it also stimulates the readers to respond towards its narrative and thematic core by triggering, blending and refreshing various domains and attitudes. Mr M of course is shocked by the false mirage of future India, whose map is made up of "unrecognisable strips representing the land of his birth" (*K*, 159), but nonetheless reacts vigorously as he decides to use the perma-sleep machine again, not to travel back to his own period but to move forward in time:

> 'Who wants to return to anything?' said Mr M, smiling slightly. 'I know what the past was like – miserable. And the present, so far as I can see, is even more miserable, though in a different way. But I've always had faith in the future. So I'll take my chances with time.' He started twiddling the buttons on his suit to turn himself around. 'Onward,' he said, 'to the end of the NEXT century!' (*K*, 160)

If superficially the forceful reaction of the character may seem to be grounded on a manifestation of ambition and search for power or knowledge, with a time deictic graphologically marked ("NEXT"), it may also testify to some hope for society (in any time) to come to terms with its ecological issues in order to avoid the resulting waste-worlds. From the perspective of cognitive poetics, it is up to the reader to elaborate a personal interpretation of the textual material in order to extract meanings and values, and in this way the entertaining nature of the story functions in tandem with some didactic provocations. By employing the structures and tropes of SF architexts, Padmanabhan allegorically condenses in a short narrative a range of looming questions about the role of mankind in the world and their responsibility in the long-term use and management of natural resources against the possibility of

generating devastating waste-worlds. Such messages resonate across the story and from the fictional form they convey a challenge by virtue of the parables that the readers have to deconstruct and meditate upon, thus highlighting the sense of personal and collective participation. Burke emphasises the importance of parables as narrative tools for the comprehension of the world, and such aspect is particularly salient as to environmental discourse and wastelands:

> Human beings possess a capability, which is arguably as innate and unconscious as the process of breathing itself, to construct ever-larger narratives from small spatial stories. This is how thought and reasoning operate. Current evidence in the fields of cognitive psychology, cognitive linguistics and neurobiology seems to suggest that the ongoing narrative projection of stories is a device by which we constantly create open-ended meaning. In doing so, we are able to navigate our way through the world around us.[17]

[17] Burke, "Literature as Parable", 126.

In this sense, Padmanabhan's writing aims at provoking the conscience of the individual to morally and politically take action against contemporary processes of self-destruction. Waste-worlds and apocalyptic elsewheres are here observed as fictional contexts but they have clear correspondences with our world, as they mirror the consequences of ill-advised progress, urbanisation and industrialisation. The Indian frame of mind for instance is still haunted by the 1984 Bhopal disaster, one of the world's largest industrial incidents, which caused several thousands of deaths and many hundreds of injuries when gas and chemical leaks devastated that area of Madhya Pradesh. Such catastrophic event is treated in many fictional and non-fictional works, and it still dreadfully looms in the Indian public conscience in the hope to avoid similar lethal disasters in the future.[18]

[18] See for example the essay that Pablo Mukerjee dedicates to *Animal's People*, the 2007 novel authored by Indra Sinha dealing with the Bhopal disaster: "'Tomorrow There Will Be More of Us'". Toxic Postcoloniality in *Animal's People*", in DeLoughrey and Handley, *Postcolonial Ecologies*, eds., 216-231.

Waste-worlds through time worlds in Vandana Singh's *Delhi*

I will now turn to another author, Vandana Singh, to investigate her narrative treatment of the waste-world theme in the introspective and almost metaphysical short story "Delhi". The title is not just a deictic marker, but also a symbol of cultural, historical and syncretic stratifications, since it indicates a city that accumulates layers of different civilisations and that in the text is imagined in various time contexts, to some extent similarly to another narrative work, namely the historical novel *Delhi* by Khushwant Singh (1990),[19] which also features a continuous shifting between different time levels and which accounts for the historical stratifications of the city. Given its thematic wealth and textual complexity, this novel may even be regarded as the model from which Vandana Singh draws inspiration to give shape to her speculative

[19] Khushwant Singh, *Delhi* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1990).

discourse. By extensively using the device of time travel, the writer interrogates the metamorphosis of a city that mirrors the pathway of humankind, with its intermitting succession of peoples, societies and cultures, including the surfacing of wastelands. This complex text is organised according to the parameters of omniscient narration, and focuses on the protagonist Aseem, a character that has the power to travel across ages and experience "tricks of time, tangles produced when one part of the time-stream rubs up against another and the two cross for a moment" (*WTS*, 20), as he follows a blind girl moving across the time dimensions. For the purpose of this article I will consider how the representation of space, often in binary terms and with a plethora of connotations, contributes to the environmental debate and works through a process of accumulation, because the textual manufacturing of the city points to the sedimentation of various cultural layers, and therefore even the image of dissolution and ruin bespeaks the weight of history:

> One of the things he likes about the city is how it breaks all rules. Delhi is a place of contradictions – it transcends thesis and anti-thesis. Here he has seen both the hovels of the poor and the opulent monstrosities of the rich. At major intersections, where the rich wait impatiently in their air-conditioned cars for the light to change, he's seen bone-thin waifs running from car to car, peddling glossy magazines like *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan*. Amid the glitzy new high-rises are troupes of wandering cows and pariah dogs; rhesus monkeys mate with abandon in the trees around Parliament House. (*WTS*, 30)

The thematic scope of Vandana Singh's project is actually rather ambitious, and in Pak's words it follows "a strategy by which to recover a sense of the city's growth, tradition and history while gesturing toward the possibilities of a postnational future".[20] But, along with the idea of time travel, carrying the protagonist into utopian and dystopian bizarre time worlds, it also adopts the paradigm of the return to nature with its redeeming power. Aseem, for examples, finds a shelter in the woody area around the city, from which he can contemplate the relics of the past and meditate on the sense of the future:

> So he goes to the only place where he can leave behind the city without actually leaving its borders – houses and crowded roads, within Delhi's borders, there lies an entire forest: the Delhi Ridge, a green lung. The coolness of the forest beckons to him. Only a little way from the main road, the forest is still, except for the subdued chirping of birds. He is in a warm, green womb. Under the acacia trees, he finds an old ruin, one of the many nameless remains of Delhi's medieval era. After checking for snakes and scorpions, he curls up under a crumbling wall and dozes off. (*WTS*, 31)

[20] Chris Pak, "The Language of Postnationality; Cultural Identity via Scientific Fictional Trajectories", in Masood Ashraf Raja et al., eds., *The Postnational Fantasy* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2011), 63.

In this extract, nature is evoked not only in descriptive aspects in opposition to the spreading (and somehow threatening) urban milieu, but also with elements taken from the lexis of biology, which activate the poetic schema of the forest as a human body: the lungs, and also the womb, are textually built as synecdochal devices matching the body and natural landscape in an operation that substantiates the moral consideration of all forms of nature and life harmoniously interacting with each other, or in symbiosis. It is an instantiation of an organic metaphor that also signals the connection between nature and woman as life-giving or life-perpetuating agencies through time.

However, the menace of waste-worlds arises from the interstices of clashing time worlds the protagonist visits and in particular impinges on an actual icon of contemporary Delhi, the Metro, which was opened in 2002. The obfuscating images of the Metro in the future are textually interwoven with those of the present, and this type of stylistic ambiguity suggests an overlaying of utopian and dystopian architexts rendered in environmental terms and applied to the growing postcolonial metropolis. With its double, positional imagery (physically and metaphorically expressed by the 'under' and 'over' ground collocation), the reference to the Metro system introduces a hierarchical line of bisection between the wealthy and the disadvantaged:

> Lower Delhi – Neechi Dilli – that is what this must be: a city of the poor, the outcast, the criminal, in the still-to-be-carved tunnels underneath the Delhi that he knows. He thinks of the Metro, fallen into disuse in that distant future, its tunnels abandoned to the dispossessed, and the city above a delight of gardens and gracious buildings, and tall spires reaching through the clouds. He has seen that once, he remembers. The Immaculate City, the blind girl called it. (*WTS*, 33)

As the levels of time deixis constantly and puzzlingly intersect, Singh's writing unfolds significant intertextual overtones in the depiction of imaginary landscapes. On the one hand, the passage may remind the reader of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972), in particular Leonia, the extraordinary city that reshapes itself every day and discards its recent past as a heap of garbage to be disposed of in a never-ending movement. On the other, it appropriates and reverses the 'under/over' ground partition of space of H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), whose future world is populated by the debauched Eloi and the barbarous Morloi.

Clashing elements of pastoral and subterranean life are here at play and also carry a variety of symbols and echoes, from the colonial idea of the exotic garden to the postcolonial tentacular city of the future, with its chromatic purity and whose high spires look like the skyscrapers of western ultramodernity, to the derelict tunnels of the Metro inhabited by people "coming out of the cement

floor of the platform, as though from the bowels of the earth" (*WTS*, 33). Once again, an organic metaphor is here present, though this time by activating specific sensorial and bodily echoes it is employed to underpin the sense of misery and degradation that weighs heavily on the underclass.

But in using SF narratives to explore (im)possible worlds, and implicitly to ponder on the capacity of humanity to regulate their relation with nature and the environment, the author always bears in mind a preoccupation for the society to come, reflecting on how the future is the outcome of the present. Superficially the articulations of Aseem's time wanderings and the succession of different versions of Delhi may look confusing and irksome to process, but in reality the entire text is conceived as a macro metaphor that may be approached from a parabolic perspective, since, regardless of specific cultural or national traits, "the procedure of parabolic projection and the subsequent blending is never monolithic or bounded but is always dynamic and open-ended".[21] In other words, Singh seems to engage the reader in a vertiginous journey across time, a quest for identity that also touches on the issue of the waste produced by the strict oligarchy and plutocracy of those societies blind to the natural changes and devastation deriving from injudicious exploitation of the planet.

[21] Burke, "Literature as Parable", 126.

Concluding remarks: Beyond the borders of the postcolonial waste-worlds

In closing, I would like to briefly mention the case of *River of Gods*, a recent British science fiction novel that tackles the actual problem of pollution, especially with reference to water. Set in the year 2047, exactly a century after the achievement of independence, in the fragmented Indian subcontinent now called with the ancient and almost mythological name Bharat, and made up of quarrelling country-states, McDonald's narrative problematises, from a British standpoint, the question of water availability, management and exploitation in a context that traditionally considers rivers as holy places. In Indian classic culture in fact water is attributed paramount importance in a range of domains, given its power of life and death, for example with the coming of the monsoon, but also within traditional texts such as the Upanishads and the Vedas. According to the *Mahabharata*, the entire universe is constituted by water, and consequently all rivers of India, in particular the Ganges and Yamuna, are sacred, especially those that have a confluence and a ford (called *tirtha*).[22] Nonetheless the text irreverently denounces the contamination of the rivers, and water in general, as they are turned into a polluted harsh environment: "a thin piss of yellow water trickles from the spill-way flume. That is Mother Ganga".[23] The dramatic disintegration of the ecological equilibrium also pertains to another central motif of the book, the plan of subcontinental authorities to melt glaciers in order to solve a grave drought-induced water shortage in various

[22] See for example Stefano Piano, *Lessico elementare dell'Induismo* (Torino: Promolibri Magnanelli, 2011) or M. L. Varadpande, *A Dictionary of Indian Culture* (New Delhi: Arnold Publishers, 1994).

[23] Ian McDonald, *River of Gods* (London: Pocket Books, 2004), 260.

territories. Such an operation of course implies the perennial modification of natural systems and may result in impressive wastelands in the current scenario of the earth. From the greenspeak perspective, *River of Gods* too, with its multiplicity of SF themes and narrative manifestations, including many embedded stories and discourses, works as a megametaphor to caution the future generations, a parable of the results of irresponsible development and advancement at the expense of a larger environmental vision.

Along with the structures of the architext and parabolic writing, the eco-narratives of the waste-land that I have examined in this article are characterised by a further element, which is worth citing, i.e. the governing paradigm of hybridity, as the stories here under consideration draw from ancient myths, ethical debates, time-honoured traditions, innovative language and other domains. In different measures, indeed, these texts apply their ontological poetics of multicultural hybridity to depict future worlds and their oscillating alternatives, and thus it could be argued that "in a sense, all postcolonial science fiction – indeed, all postcolonial cultural production – is about hybridity".[24] To achieve their scheme of admonition, the postcolonial writers skilfully manipulate rhetorical structures, parabolic constructions and other literary devices to illustrate the actual-world danger of pollution and degradation via textual and creative images. In thus doing, they construct narratives with ironical implications that subtly and ethically challenge the reader to observe the shapes of literature as possible threatening realisations of the future, whereas the gap between fiction and reality may become narrower, so that new operational strategies for the environment may be put forward in order to escape nightmarish dystopias and dreadful elsewheres.

[24] Jessica Langer, *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 125.