Suparno Banerjee

Crossing the Border: The Depiction of India in Ian McDonald's *River of Gods* and *Cyberabad Days*

Ian McDonald's award-winning novel *River of Gods* (2004) and his short-story collection *Cyberabad Days* (2009) present a near-future India as their main location.[1] Paul McAuley mentions in his introduction to *Cyberabad Days* that in sf terms, "depictions of the future aren't evenly distributed," and that most sf stories depict "futures dominated by American sensibilities and cultural and economic values, and inhabited by solidly American characters" (9). McDonald, along with such writers as Paulo Bacigalupi (in *The Windup Girl* [2009]) and Maureen McHugh (in *China Mountain Zhang* [1992]), however, mounts a legitimate effort to present the future in non-American and non-Western contexts while writing from within the Anglo-American tradition. A high degree of exoticism often characterizes the few futuristic representations of non-Western locales/cultures that can be found in Anglo-American sf. In the context of India and Indian culture, examples include Roger Zelazny's *Lord of Light* (1964), Jan Lars Jensen's *Shiva 3000* (1999), Alan Dean Foster's *Sagramanda* (2006), and even the apparently journalistic and non-exotic novel *Dragon Fire* (2000) by Humphrey Hawksley.

In contrast to such exoticism, McDonald's approach to the complex socio-cultural fabric of India is much more nuanced, although still exhibiting distinct traces of Orientalist stereotypes. Arguably, McDonald's India is an excellent example of what Shameem Black calls "border-crossing fiction"—fiction that "embraces the challenges of representation" of alterity (Black 3-4). In this essay, I examine the degree of McDonald's complicity with the Orientalist tradition in negotiating what Black would term his "invasive imagination" (32) of India. I argue, however, that the problem of "invasive imagination" does not arise only because of the author's position as an outsider, but also from the difficulty of drawing a neat insider/outsider boundary (especially in the Indian context). An indigenous hegemonic structure closely resembling world power/political systems further exacerbates the problem. The flaw of native informants—i.e., insider narrators rather than outsiders—lies in their false claims to the universality of the native experience and the pretense of authority. Joseph Jeyaraj argues perceptively that native informants are as prone to misrepresentation as so-called outsiders unless they are adequately and self-consciously situated within a specific socio-cultural context; such an insider/outsider split exists not only across global divides (as between the UK and India) but also within a nation itself—across regions, cultures, languages, religions, classes, castes, and so on—and hence it is difficult to find a specific native informant who speaks for the whole nation in any meaningful sense. In other words, this dilemma of Otherness affects any mode of large-scale representation such as a nation, continent, or race, although an intense

engagement with the object of depiction, as Black's border-crossing fiction provides, can help resolve such a dilemma. Thus, I argue that McDonald's fiction marks an indispensable and important step in literature (sf or otherwise) written for the twenty-first-century global community. This is a step that, in spite of its evident flaws, emphasizes the necessity of going beyond the self, of imagining Others, and of acknowledging the possibilities of a future not entrenched in our current hegemonic political structures.

Several inevitable problems arise in the process of representing the cultural Other, however, especially if the author's culture and the culture depicted share a historically unequal power relationship, as appears to be the case for a British author such as McDonald and India, his object of depiction. Edward Said famously argued in his introduction to *Orientalism* (1979) that "The Orient was almost a European invention" (1); that is, representation of the East is less about presenting the truth concerning the East to the West than about constructing a version of the East that repeats the discourse of its domination by the Imperialist West.[2] Said further claims that in order to maintain its discursive dominance, the Occident deliberately homogenizes, misrepresents, and devalues the Orient (3). Pramod K. Nayar's study of British literature about India between 1600 and 1920 confirms many of Said's arguments. According to Nayar, early Westerners depicted India as a land of plenty, of novelty, and of difficulty, a land vast in expanse as well as varied in culture and inhabitants, but ultimately a land to be conquered by the British.[3] Daniel Herwitz very eloquently describes this Orientalist impulse:

> India could hardly be conceptualized by such persons [Westerners] as a place where ruins ring of transience, for nothing in India was in the end ever ruined. India was rather an exotic flower whose every petal, every building and every place was timelessly existent as a piece of the past replayed forever, as a living monument. No need for nostalgia here, for the painter, traveler or poet had arrived at a world where nothing dies, where everything stays the same because nothing is ever new. (220)

Clearly, exoticism and discursive control have been a dominant tendency of Western narratives about India. Thus, a postcolonial reading of any Western representation of the country can only begin with an assessment of the text's representational ethics and aesthetics.

Such an examination becomes imperative in light of the already established mode of Anglo-American sf that repeatedly presents India and Indian culture in the Orientalist vein. While authors such Jensen and Zelazny, for instance, repeat mythical motifs from the Indian past to heighten the effect of timelessness, Foster's exoticism offers sex, tantra, and man-eating tigers without directly referring back to the past or showing the least bit of understanding of modern India. These portrayals blatantly engage in false representation: Jensen's *Shiva 3000* transports India into the spatio-temporal limbo described by Herwitz through a complete lack of historical, geographical, and cultural specificities; Zelazny's *Lord of Light* replays the historical struggle between Buddhism and Hinduism of sixth-to-third-century

BCE India, but on a distant planet, and reinterprets Hindu mythology in a futuristic context, the ideological effect of which is not very different from Jensen's book; and Foster's *Sagramanda*, although situated in a spatio-temporally specific Kolkata, fantasizes about a white female tantric assassin searching for human sacrifices and about people being eaten by tigers or man-eating women (called "admi khana," Foster's failed attempt at Hindi).[4] These portrayals undoubtedly continue the past practices of exoticism into the realms of the future, illustrating how most Western sf dealing with India (and probably with the non-West in general) is more interested in using the location/culture as an estranging device sufficiently alternative to the West than as an actual living culture progressing towards a rationally believable future. All such contemporary futuristic representations consequently sit neatly beside older Orientalist works.

The concept of Orientalism itself, however, is more complex than its blanket condemnation apparently suggests. Peter Heehs argues that not all forms of Orientalism are derogatory or part of a hegemonic discourse of the Occident. He even points out that it is not only outsiders who practice Orientalism; such discourses, as is the case in India, can also be used as strategies of nationalist self-assertion by insiders. He argues against Said's lumping together of all the different strands of Orientalism under one negative banner. Heehs discerns six different attitudes in scholars of Eastern cultures, especially among Indologists, and indicates that not all of these are negative. Under colonial Orientalism he lists "Patronizing/Patronized Orientalism," "Romantic Orientalism," and "Nationalist Orientalism," and under postcolonial Orientalism he includes "Critical Orientalism," "Reductive Orientalism," and "Reactionary Orientalism" (171-6). Heehs associates the first type with British colonizers and their understanding of Hindu culture: here political power equations determine the relationship between the patronizing and patronized cultures. "Romantic Orientalism," which involves a positive fascination for Indian culture, is free of such a direct power equation. "Nationalist Orientalism" presents ancient Oriental knowledge as essentially superior to Western knowledge and, thus, as a path of national salvation. In the postcolonial category, "Critical Orientalism" frames the study of Indian history within Western theoretical apparatuses, thus falling into Western ideological traps. "Reductive Orientalism" is, according to Heehs, the Saidian mode: by speaking for the Orient, this type of discourse actually takes agency away from the East. Heehs argues that Said's own discourse fits into this category. Lastly, "Reactionary Orientalism" describes the stance of many present-day Hindu Nationalists who desire to restore India to its ancient glory by correcting the historical distortions inflicted by the Muslim and European invaders over the last one thousand years.

Anglo-American sf generally displays a mixture of these different Orientalist stances toward India: the apparent fascination of romantic Orientalism is undercut by the degrading effects of reductive Orientalism. Romantic Orientalism, which Heehs associates mostly with nineteenth-century German scholarship on Indian history and philosophy, often has a positive

connotation. This position, Heehs claims, does not have any direct colonial ramifications, as Germany did not have any political or economic stake in India. Romantic Orientalism, however, tends to present India as an antiquarian culture that has lost touch with the modern world. Consequently, such an attitude, although not necessarily degrading India, creates a false picture—an invented exoticism rather than an extrapolation from reality.

Most of the problems in engaging with the cultural Other in McDonald's India stem from his affinity with romantic Orientalism, especially in his texts' fascination with the complexity of social dynamics and the Hindu mythical vision, although on rare occasions the effect approaches that of reductive Orientalism. McDonald's knowledge of India is much deeper than that of his fellow writers, and he does not primarily choose the location as a story-telling/estranging device. His interest is evident not because most of the action in *River of Gods* and all the action in *Cyberabad Days* is set in India, but because McDonald treats India as an important geopolitical entity of the twenty-first century with concrete cultural and spatiotemporal realities. McDonald's version of India in 2047 (the temporal setting for both books) is a chaotic coexistence of high-tech cybernetic civilization and an age-old religio-mythological tradition. It is a place where the scientific and the supernatural can coexist—continually reinventing and being reinvented by each other. Yet this merging of the scientific and the mythical, which provides so much of the rich texture in these books, also makes them vulnerable to the impulses of exoticism.

Both *River of Gods* and *Cyberabad Days* reflect traces of romantic Orientalism in the basic structure of their narratives. The Hindu cosmological framework that both works exploit is the central element here: both works function within a naturalistic universe that shows a close affinity to the cyclical concept of time in the Hindu tradition and that is often described through Hindu religious metaphors, while nevertheless operating within the known laws of physics The most conspicuous of the religious metaphors is probably the "Jyotirlinga," the column of cosmic light that appears as a portal between two universes and allows for cybernetic communication, while also having severe destructive effects. The almost literal use of this term, associated with Lord Shiva, the destroyer of universes, barely stops short of openly validating the Hindu cosmic system. Similarly, the last story of *Cyberabad Days*, "Vishnu at the Cat Circus"(2009), refers to the same mythological system created by *River of Gods* while telling the story of a "Brahmin" child, one of the genetically enhanced new elite of the nation that continues the biologically inherited social status of the ancient caste system—a perennial Orientalist critique of Indian culture. Although in the strictest sense, McDonald situates such religious discourses in a scientific context ("indigenized," as Jessica Langer puts it), his over-dependence on such mythological imagery situates him alongside traditional Western discourses on India that have typically emphasized its religious and spiritual dimensions more than its material and scientific achievements.

In a related move, McDonald's juxtaposition of myth and religiosity with technoscience seems to draw equivalences between two very different epistemological modes. This approach is most visible in the naming of the parts of *River of Gods*—"Ganga Mata," "Sat Chid Ekam Brahma," "Kalki," "Tandava Nritya," and "Jyotirlinga." These titles suggest the divine flow of Hindu cosmology. Ganga, the divine river (the "river of gods" of the title of the novel), signifies this flow. "Sat Chid Ekam Brahma," which in Sanskrit literally means "true consciousness is one with the universe," may signify the beginning of consciousness, while "Kalki" implies the last age of humanity. These titles can also be read as referring to Brahma the creator (the phrase in the first title is a part of the Brahma mantra) and to Vishnu the sustainer (Kalki is the tenth and last avatar of Vishnu). The last two parts, "Tandava Nritya" and "Jyotirlinga," refer to Shiva the destroyer. While "Tandava Nritya" (dance of destruction and creation) may refer to annihilation, "Jyotirlinga" (literally "the phallus of energy") supplies the cosmic phallic imagery that may signify a new beginning. These religio-mythical ingredients create a subtext in which the divine and the scientific seem to come together.

The discourse of faith is beyond rational explanation, however; faith does not operate using the same paradigms as science, especially traditional Western science. McDonald's attempt to relate faith and science reflects the typical Western habit of seeing the world through the lens of rationalism and science, and validating all other forms of knowledge through scientific associations.[5] When such associations fail to explain the nature of the phenomena operating outside scientific paradigms, the Western vision becomes occluded and overwhelmed: this is a kind of romantic Orientalism.

Such a need for understanding the Other probably explains the presence of Western interlocutors in *River of Gods*. Their strategic placements in the novel suggest the author's need for intermediaries who will render the unfamiliar cultural practices of India more recognizable to Western audiences, and perhaps also to McDonald himself. The most important of these interlocutors are the American scientists Lisa Durnau and Thomas Lull, who mediate the action of the novel and in a sense set everything in motion by creating the self-evolving artificial intelligence or AI of "Alterre," software that simulates the geological and biological evolution of Earth. Moreover, in almost every stream of the tangled narrative a Westerner functions as a link to the larger action. In Tal and Saheen Badur Khan's stream, Swedish-Afghan Najia, who works for an Australian newspaper, plays the role, while Mariana does the same in Vishram's stream; Western-educated Vishram is also a link between the East and the West. Although Shiv's and Mr. Nandha's stories are apparently free of any such presence, these characters are both minions of global capitalism, consuming Western products and enforcing legal or illegal orders demanded by the system.

As with the Hindu mytho-religious structure that often necessitates the use of fictional mediators in *River of Gods*, fantastic legends of India frame most of the stories in *Cyberabad Days*. In this way McDonald does not differ much from his colleagues and predecessors.[6] Neither *River of Gods* nor most of the

tales in *Cyberabad Days* can let go of the discourses of exoticism despite their strong focus on present realities and future apprehensions; rather, these stories only reframe the issues in a more technological way: in "The Dust Assassin" (2008) McDonald deals with the legend of "*vish-kanya*" (literally "poison-girl"), whose kiss kills, through the trope of genetic modification, while in "The Djinn's Wife" (2006), McDonald frames his story about a woman's marriage to an "aeai" or AI made up of nano-robots in the context of the Islamic legend of djinns. As his narrator in the latter story says, "Delhi to me was a city of stories, and so if I tell the story of the djinn's wife in the manner of a Sufi legend or a tale from the *Mahabharata*, or even a tivi soap opera, that is how it seems to me: City of Djinns" (155-56). It is apparent from such a statement that the narrator explicitly associates this future city with its past incarnations and, as a consequence, the narrative itself becomes related to past narratives about the city, thus succumbing to the "eternal" and "unchanging" charm of the Orientalist's vision of India.

On another level, the novel's preoccupation with sex eroticizes Indian space. Embodied by Shiv and Yogendra's repeated sadistic sexual arousals, explicit description of Vishram and Mariana's sexual intercourse, hyper-sexualized-yet-genderless Tal, Shaheen Badur Khan's transgressive sexual preference for nutes (genderless people), the house of pleasures, and references to Tantric sex, it is a space where anything and everything is possible, an Orientalist cliché closer to the Reductive mode than to the romantic one. The fact that McDonald also describes Lisa and Lull's sexual escapades at length in the American episodes does not take away from the sexualized space of India. Rather, Lisa and Lull's traditionally straight extramarital encounters stand as a contrast to the languorous and myriad forms of exotic erotica taking place in the Indian sections of the novel. Men and women, men and nute, nute and nute (even sanctioned by the Hindu god Ardhanarishwara—the half-male/half-female aspect of Shiva), women and machines, harems, multi-gender group sex, male/female sex of various kinds, the nutes' sub-dermal chemical orgasm, object insertions, sado-masochistic pain, and blood pleasure: this fantastic array of sexualities aligns the narrative to one of the most famous exports from India to the West—the *Kamasutra*, which is without doubt one of the most famous examples of popular Orientalism.

McDonald's India is not limited only to this Orientalist discourse, however: logical extrapolations and a deep engagement with his material undercut his apparent exoticism. In discussing McDonald's take on postcolonial world systems, Jerome Winter invokes Shameem Black's argument that, although the privileged position of the outsider story-teller can lead to accusations of "invasive imagination," the allegorical representation of other cultures can assume a "positive ethical-political value, undermining ideological frameworks of power" (459). Building upon Tzvetan Todorov's work, Black sees positive outcomes in some cross-cultural fiction. He argues that:

> Rethinking the ethos of invasive imagination … produce[s] relationships between self and other that allow for productive dialogue across perceived social borders. These novels attempt to engage significant otherness without inevitably trapping their objects of representation within the prisons of their own fantasies and fears. (32)

Black emphasizes the need for direct engagement with the Other, a dialogic commitment that does not "speak of" but rather "speaks to" the represented entity; this dialogic engagement, Black argues, rather than leading to positivistic knowledge, can potentially construct a new representational practice of the globalized and intersecting world (32-33).

Furthermore, in a country as rich in diversity as India (home to over two hundred languages and twenty-nine culturally unique states), even the so-called native informants can succumb to invasive imagination. Joseph Jeyaraj argues for a close examination of the affiliations of all such speakers before accepting the extent to which they represent local ethics:

> Western discourses … valorize postcolonial native informants and treat them as unique individuals inspired by genius. Hence, access to postcolonial information gives native informants enormous rhetorical authority in Western discourses. This authority enables them to not only construct unsituated universal perspectives but also keeps the unsituatedness in those perspectives from being interrogated. (83)

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak takes a similar stance regarding the problem of subaltern discourse: that of the well-meaning elite conveying the voice of the oppressed. She writes: "I am afraid of speaking too quickly in academic situations about the women—the tribal subaltern, the urban sub-proletariat, the unorganized peasant—to whom I have not learnt to make myself acceptable other than as a concerned benevolent person who is free to come and go" ("From" 390). While Spivak recognizes an affirmative yet risky role for native intellectuals and native informants abroad in making the voice of the subaltern heard (most notably in her *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* [1999]), Jeyaraj urges self-examination by all such informants when speaking for Others who may not actually identify with these speakers. Both Spivak and Jeyaraj thus foreground the problem of authenticity and the motive of the speaker in any discourse. For Spivak, the articulation of any subject position is an act of self-examination, destabilizing the very concept of authenticity; for Jeyaraj, the articulation of such positions is essential in speaking authentically about specific groups. To put the matter differently, claims to authenticity or misrepresentation depend on authors' intimacy with the objects they depict, and also on the articulation of these relationships in their discourse.

Such problematizing of authenticity can also be applied outside the confines of strict subaltern discourses to discourses in which the represented object may be able to represent itself; the object can function as a self-representing subject, although its self-conception is different from its depiction in outside discourses. An excellent example of this type of representation within the Indian milieu is the regional stereotyping in various vernacular cultural

productions that work at cross purposes: for example, Hindi movies of north India frequently represent all south Indians as Madrassis (residents of Madras, now Chennai) and all Bengalis (from northern India) as awkward intellectuals. Similarly, in Bengali cultures, Punjabis (from the northeastern state of Punjab) are regularly represented as stupid hot-heads and Marwaris (from the north-western state of Rajasthan) as uncultured but rich businessmen. Such stereotypes, especially within popular culture, are no less engaged in representational violence and exoticism, albeit sometimes in a less hegemonic manner, than European Orientalist practices. Jeyaraj cites the language movement—the rejection of Hindi's hegemonic position by the southern Indian states—as an example of such struggle against indigenous cultural hegemony. He argues that from such a perspective, a Hindi-speaking scholar's "native informant" status regarding "oppressed" Indians becomes fallacious (73). Although disempowered in the face of world hegemonic systems, such scholars' positions with the indigenous elite make them unrepresentative of the repressed population, at least on the surface.

Although native-informant theories such as Jeyaraj's are critical, a need for broader cultural representation still remains. Over-emphasis on the group membership of the author can foster regionalism, as is often the case in India. Such a representational ethics seems to suggest that only a Bengali, or a Tamil, or a Marathi is privileged enough to write about his or her respective culture, and even then we encounter problems of class, caste, and other ideological affiliations. Under such circumstances, a narrative representation of the nation is well-nigh impossible even for the native informant, precisely because it requires an imagination that supersedes small group affiliations while maintaining cultural-territorial contiguity.

The problem of native-informant theory is that, when reduced to its logical extreme, it suggests the impossibility of any meaningful representation beyond oneself. In a sense, the very act of representation presupposes some type of border-crossing, from inside to outside, from the self to the Other. Black suggests that the greatness of much literature lies in its ability to blur the boundary between the self and the Other:

> [T]hese novels work toward representations that seek to avoid reinscribing socially repressive hierarchies of value: their practices are fundamentally *relational*, not solely descriptive. Such an ethical, as opposed to positivist, view of another visualizes that other as having the capacity to engage and alter the self. Representations that acknowledge their own indebtedness to others, that express self-consciousness about their own limitations, and that exhibit fragility in the face of alterity may stand the best chance of eventually surmounting those limits and weaknesses. (46)

In order to elicit a meaningful representation in literature it is necessary, then, to forge strong connections to the objects of representation. Membership in an inner group is less important than this desire for engagement. That such engagements will in almost every instance also result in misunderstandings and at least partial misrepresentation is unavoidable.

Although, as we have already seen, McDonald liberally deploys Orientalist instruments, he plainly uses Black's approach in his representation of India: he shows a manifest interest in engaging with different aspects of Indian society, using them as devices of estrangement. More importantly, he works to construct a postcolonial futuristic worldview that interrogates global power structures and situates India as a prominent entity within the new world-system. In making these comprehensive moves, McDonald himself seems to grow in his understanding of the Indian cultural space and its place in the new global order.

Unsurprisingly, McDonald looks to the future more than he does to the past: although *River of Gods* exploits the exotic mythical elements of Indian culture, it does so metaphorically. The gods of the Hindu pantheon become digital representations of high-tech electronic gadgets or advanced AIs suited to their divine qualities: for example, Indra, the god of thunder, becomes the icon for a gun capable of destroying both humans and AIs. McDonald's use of mytho-religious elements, except in the few instances mentioned earlier, suggests his subscription to a worldview alternative to the West's, rather than a literal interpretation of Hindu religious doctrines. In addition, McDonald presents advanced technology as a mundane matter, not as some incongruous implant within a mythical non-technological landscape, as is the case with some other narratives: the ubiquity of man/machine interfaces in the novel suggests that engagement with such technology is the norm, not the exception in the future India. This approach, which extrapolates from current technological trends in India (especially the drastic spread of mobile phones), implies that McDonald sees India in its present reality before constructing its future.

Furthermore, geographical and temporal specificity sets India firmly on the map: the book is set in 2047 CE, the centenary of India's independence from the British Empire. These spatio-temporal coordinates (including twenty-first century Bangla, Awadh, Varanasi, and Delhi) are important, because they are readily recognizable, geographically and culturally, as India, yet are different from today. McDonald's extrapolation of the future from current socio-political and technological trends in India signifies not only his awareness of the Indian present, but also his awareness of sf as a mode of writing that can be used to create a future beyond hegemonic representational practices.

Such authorial intention is a key to our understanding of McDonald's works as border-crossing fiction. Following Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.'s claim that the concept of the Empire is often science-fictional (239), Winter argues that McDonald uses sf to mount a tricontinental critique in *River of Gods* and his later novel *Brasyl* (2007) to highlight the science-fictionality of empire. According to Winter, "Far from simply being an exoticizing move, McDonald's decision to explore the science-fictional nature of postcolonial sites consistently evokes both the rampant inequalities of the world-system as well as the hybridized subversion of these dynamics" (459-60). McDonald uses such postcolonial sites as India, Brazil, Kenya, and Turkey in his attempts to examine the condition of the non-West/Global South in the current

postcolonial-neoimperial age.[7] Such an approach indicates the author's embrace of the challenges inherent in dealing with the cultural Other, "speaking of the other" while also "speaking to the other." In other words, McDonald tries to present a rational and logical future India to a globally aware Western audience, while all the time striving to understand and engage with the world he is creating. *River of Gods* and *Cyberabad Days* are his attempts not only at depicting India, but also at understanding it.[8]

McDonald's extrapolation of the country depends to a large extent on foregrounding a series of contradictions that characterize postcolonial India. Probably the most visible of these contradictions is that between science and religion. Although, as I have argued above, McDonald's use of a Hindu cosmological framework can be seen as an Orientalist device, it still provides a metaphor on a cosmic scale, the use of which demands the author's constant engagement with the cultural implications of the framework and its significance in the technologized modern world. Set in the same fictional universe, both *River of Gods* and "Vishnu at the Cat Circus" rely on M theory, which explains the structure of the universe as manifolds of multiple dimensions, and on John von Neumann's self-evolving AI theory, combined with the assumption that AIs can evolve sentience over a world-wide distributed network. These AIs (named Brahma, Vishnu, and Kalki) develop over time into dispersed mega-intelligences that can maneuver human actions so as to make them appear to be the result of human social dynamics; the AIs even manipulate the physical texture of the universe, opening up a dimension in which they can evolve without conflict with humans. *River of Gods* suggests that these phenomena of immense power, which stretch and bend the fabric of the universe, place the AIs at the same level as gods, engendering, sustaining, and destroying universes. The repeated allusions to Hindu gods and the avataric terminology only reinforces such associations, the most important of which is the evolution of Kalki, the Generation 3 AI that leads to the ultimate human-machine confrontation and the creation of a new universe for the AIs. These events in the novel parallel the myth of Kalki, the tenth and last avatar of Lord Vishnu, who arrives to end the corrupt last age of humanity (the age of Kali) through violence and to initiate a new beginning. In the novel, McDonald transfers this myth onto the machines, thus underpinning the juxtaposition of the mystical and the mechanical. *River of Gods* also shows that the humans hold the position of gods for these AIs, however, and in their new universe they weave myths about the beings who created, sustained, and almost destroyed them. By sending a "tabernacle" back in time and space containing images of Lull (the creator of Alterre), Lisa (the preserver of Alterre), Kalki (the man-machine interface), and Mr. Nandha (the AI-destroying Krishna Cop), they also tell *their* story within a framework that corresponds to some extent to Hindu cosmology.

As I have argued before, McDonald's fascination with Hindu cosmology strongly resembles Romantic Orientalism, but the apt metaphorical use of this cosmology also speaks to a deep engagement with his subject, an engagement that goes beyond exploitative and invasive imagination to cultural border-

crossing in an effort to understand the Other at its epistemic roots. Hindu cosmology is not only different from the dominant Judeo-Christian mythical framework that informs Western civilization but also signifies a different, cyclical temporal scheme that rejects the straight arrow of traditional Western progress and is more in tune with the holistic notion of space-time proposed by postmodern science.

McDonald's bringing together of the apparently contradictory concepts of religion and science through Hindu cosmology, however, segues into another contradiction in the Indian landscape: the clash of rationality and irrationality in the Indian socio-political sphere. McDonald presents India as the coexistence of a modern high-tech civilization with a traditional faith-based life-style that often explodes into irrational bursts of violence. Central to this scheme is the character of N.K. Jivanjee in *River of Gods* (the leader of the Hindu fundamentalist organization, Shivaji Party), who is actually the manifestation of a super AI. McDonald portrays Jivanjee, whom nobody has actually seen, as a wily politician trying to exploit religious zealots against a secular government. Apparently, McDonald bases Jivanjee and his political antics on the real-life leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), L.K Advani. Their names are phonetically somewhat similar; the mass agitations over the proposed destruction of the statue of a Hindu god are comparable to overzealous right-wing Hindu demonstrations; the killings (including that of the Prime Minister) and destruction of a minority population in the riot following a military setback reeks of the religious riots so often associated with Hindu right-wing politics. The most obvious hint, however, is Jivanjee's proposed cross-country "rath yatra" (chariot ride) echoing similar tactics embraced by Advani in 1990 to challenge the politics of minority appeasement practiced by the secular government of India. Such resurgence of hard-line Hindu nationalism permeates the whole socio-political fabric of contemporary India, where advanced technological civilization is no safeguard against the pitfalls of irrational impulses of religiosity and superstition. In this respect, McDonald's perception is very similar to Indian author Rimi B. Chatterjee's. Her novel *Signal Red* (2005) foregrounds the role of religious fundamentalism in India's defense establishment, depicting a total disconnection between reason and technological advancement. McDonald takes this scenario to an extreme by turning Jivanjee, the leader of the religious fundamentalists, into an AI functioning solely with advanced logic, an excellent expression of the paradox of modern Indian existence.[9]

The convergence of advanced technology and entrenched irrational social dynamics also seeps into McDonald's exploration of India's stratified family, class, and caste structure through the biological perpetuation of the social elite, the rigidity of family and social relationships, the iron grip of patriarchal control, and so on. Such exploration permeates not only the voluminous novel but also all of the short stories in *Cyberabad Days*. Probably the most significant aspect of this future addressed by McDonald is India's current gender imbalance. The already lopsided birth-rate of 1.12 males/1 female (see CIA, "India") and the patriarchal control over female reproduction that

characterize contemporary India anticipate the almost dystopic scenario that McDonald presents in the future. As the narrator in "An Eligible Boy" (2008) explains:

> *A lovely boy* was how it began. *A fine, strong, handsome, educated, successful son, to marry and raise children and to look after us when we are old*. Every mother's dream, every father's pride. Multiply by the three hundred million of India's emergent middle class. Divide by the ability to determine sex in the womb. Add selective abortion. Run twenty-five years down the x-axis, factoring in refined, twenty-first-century techniques such as cheap, powerful pharma patches that ensure lovely boys will be conceived and you arrive at great Awadh, its ancient capital Delhi of twenty million, and a middle class with four times as many males as females. (*Cyberabad Days* 80; emphasis in original)

Such an insight into one of the biggest challenges facing Indian society of the twenty-first century further demonstrates McDonald's attempt to incorporate the real social dynamics of India into his fiction.

Similar concerns with female infanticide and gender imbalance inform several social critiques by Indian authors and film-makers, the most shocking of which are probably Manish Jha's movie *Matrubhumi* (2004) and Manjula Padmanabhan's novel *Escape* (2008). While *Escape* takes McDonald's future to one extreme through programmatic killing of women combined with high-tech male cloning practices, *Matrubhumi* goes to the other extreme, with an uneducated and misogynistic rural population following false patriarchal myths to engage in brutality against women and female infanticide. The end results are the same in both cases—gender discrimination of an apocalyptic proportion. Compared to these works, McDonald's treatment of the topic is more muted and mundane, creating a near-future scenario that is different, yet readily identifiable.

McDonald also uses this play of contradictions to set up his Indian landscape. The main action of *River of Gods* takes place in Bharat and its capital Varanasi, one of the oldest cities in the world. The city itself becomes the emblem of the contradictions co-existing side by side in India: beneath the glitzy skyscrapers of New Varanasi exist the shabbiest of slums; the superstitious devotees pay their obeisance to the river Ganges on which float decrepit barges containing high-tech bio-labs capable of creating new human bodies out of old ones; and a god-loving Hindu entrepreneur's son opens up the door to another dimension through his "zero-point energy" project. The protagonist of "Vishnu at the Cat Circus" best describes this India as two distinctly existing nations:

> India was a place where the visible and the invisible mingled like two rivers flowing into each other…. Humans and aeais met and mingled freely. Aeais took shapes in human minds, humans became disembodied presences strung out across the global net…. India was located as much inside the mind and the imagination as between the Himalayas and the sea or in the shining web of communications…. Bharat was poor. Bharat had cracked hands and heels, but she … cleaned and swept and cooked and looked after children, Bharat drove

and built and pushed carts through the streets and carried boxes up flights of
stairs to apartments. (265)

Here Bharat does not signify the new splinter state but the indigenous Sanskrit
name for India—Bharatvarsha.[10] The two names, India and Bharat, correspond
to the two worlds existing side by side in the same country. Vishnu, the
protagonist of the story, associates "India," the name assigned by the Western
world, to signify the urban (usually wealthy), Westernized, postindustrial,
cybernetic society existing as much in bytes of data streams as in the material
world. "Bharat," the indigenous name, however, connotes the traditional, non-
technological, solidly agrarian, rural India where the heart of the country still
exists. Contradictions can also be seen in the composition of the share holders
in Ray Power Company in *River of Gods*—they range from straightforward
businessmen and village micro-credit organizations to an economic front for
a sentient AI. This incongruous coexistence of highly advanced technology and
a still traditional rural life, however, does not seem out of place in
McDonald's India; in "The Djinn's Wife," he combines the superstitious belief
in djinns and ghosts with concepts of computerized nano-machines that can
literally simulate a human body by working in swarms; he creates a dialogue
between the divine and the cybernetic in "The Little Goddess" (2005); he
juxtaposes the cyberpunk trope of teenage computer wizards manipulating
killer robots with the story of a rural migrant in "Sanjeev and Robotwallah"
(2007); and, most notably, he brings together the concepts of god and
machine, as well as religion and cyberpunk, in *River of Gods*.

Such contradictions correspond not only to the realities of real-life India
(and a host of other postcolonial nations striving for Western modernity)
—sending out spaceships to Mars and the Moon while seeing hundreds of
potato farmers commit suicide every year for failed harvests, and boasting of
one of the biggest IT hubs of the world while recording that at least twenty
per cent of its population is illiterate—but also to the India imagined in Indian
sf. Vandana Singh in "Delhi" (2004) presents similar contradictions by
contrasting destitution and wealth through the overt and underground parts of
the country's capital, and highlighting the coming together of rational science
and irrational speculation in computerized astrology; Rimi Chatterjee exposes
the coexistence of science and irrationality in the Hindutva-driven nationalism
in *Signal Red*; and in *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), Amitav Ghosh
presents a Kolkata where rumor and cult rituals are as true as Western notions
of science. Such overlapping interests between McDonald, the outsider, and
so-called native informants such as Singh, Chatterjee, and Ghosh also testify
to the extent of McDonald's involvement with his object of representation. In
fact, as the above discussion shows, class, caste, and other ideological barriers
make these native authors similar to McDonald in their relationship to their
object of depiction.

McDonald, however, depends not only on presenting contradictions as he
engages with his object, but also on an acute awareness of the geopolitical
situation of the real India; this awareness is reflected in his presentation of the

subcontinent. Taking into consideration the ongoing separatist movements in various parts of the nation, McDonald presents the India of 2047 as a conglomeration of smaller independent states—Bharat, Awadh, Bangla, Maratha etc.—engaged in regional power struggles. Notably, McDonald's divisions are not based on faith; rather, they are mostly linguistic and ethnic partitions.[11] Furthermore, he addresses the predominant environmental issues of water conservation and inter-state disputes over river dams. In the India of 2047 the monsoon has failed for three straight years and the river Ganges, "the river of gods," flows thinly, giving rise to specters of war between the states on the Gangetic plain of Northern India—Awadh and Bharat. The water war creates the backdrop of both *River of Gods* and *Cyberabad Days*. These geographical elements have real resonances in contemporary India. Such topically pertinent settings confirm McDonald's knowledge of the most important on-the-ground reality of the country—monsoon-based agriculture. Moreover, the carved-up India that we see in both these books is only the logical conclusion of the dozens of separatist movements fomenting all over the country—the Muslims in Jammu and Kashmir; the tribes in the northeastern states of Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram; and the Maoists of central India.[12] The way McDonald pursues these geopolitical elements clearly shows his desire to draw attention to a part of the world that is becoming increasingly visible in the new global order and to dwell on the complexity of that locale rather than reducing it to a device for telling a story. The story arises out of the locale; the locale is not invented for the story.

McDonald imagines India in a way that marks him as a cultural outsider, and as an outsider McDonald's imagination picks up some of the baggage left by previous "tourists": hence it is marked by stereotypical and exotic elements. McDonald often succeeds, however, in destroying the boundary that stands between the tourist and the landscape. He sees India as a present reality with social, cultural, historical, and geographical specificities while he extrapolates its future, and that reality is neither inferior nor superior to the West, but different. This is what "border-crossing" literature should be about—engaging the challenges of depicting the cultural Other, with its concomitant success and failure. McDonald's own identity, born to an Irish mother and a Scottish father and living in Northern Ireland, may hold a key to his ability to capture the postcolonial world in his writing. As he himself claims, "I write as a resident of one of the British Empire's last (and first), and unconsidered colonies, Northern Ireland."[13] Jessica Langer also emphasizes such geopolitical positioning as a key to understanding McDonald's negotiation of postcolonial identities (122).

This ability to identify with the culturally Other also explains why McDonald discards Western mediators in the stories collected in *Cyberabad Days*, which was published five years after *River of Gods*. In fact, other than "Kyle Meets the River" (2006), which narrates the story of an American boy in a war-torn Bharat, we do not meet a single Western character of importance in any of the stories. Thus, although still dealing with the exotic aspects of Indian society, he displays a dynamic understanding of the country.

McDonald's growing dependence on believably Indian protagonists perhaps indicates his increasing comprehension of the society that serves as the basis for his extrapolative leaps. His eye for details also suggests the same. McDonald is not over-dependant on stock characters and types; rather, he brings out the vibrant complexity of the society. He paints the crowd but with distinct faces; he highlights the assault on the senses yet also revels in the excesses; he creates a multitude of Indian characters and solidly situates them in their cultural milieus. When McDonald uses the stock themes of "Orientalist" narratives, he manages to give them a unique spin. McDonald's stories are as complex as the space he projects. And in a sense, his othering of India does not differ too much from the various otherings performed by the so-called native informants.

McDonald's awareness of and fascination with the socio-cultural realities of India speak volumes about his effort; such consciousness and interest also clearly spell out his desire to meditate on a future that is not dominated by Western values and characters. When he creates his India in *River of Gods* and *Cyberabad Days*, he has to cross the border between his culture of origin and his culture of representation. Todorov writes: "my culture is not a negligible quantity, but neither is it all…. Affirming the existence of incommunicability among cultures … presupposes adherence to a racialist, apartheid-like set of beliefs, postulating as it does insurmountable discontinuity within the human species" (qtd. in Black 32). Certainly, socio-historical situatedness is important but such claims to group affiliation should not become insur-mountable. In his stories set in India, McDonald actually does what Todorov advocates for border-crossing literature. The importance of McDonald's attempt is not limited to the evaluation of his faithfulness to the object of representation, however, but also resides in his intention to move the steady focus of the sf future from the Western world to the postcolonial world—to the emerging global powers of the twenty-first century. Such moves within the Western sf tradition (and non-Western sf has long been doing this) expands the awareness of a possible alternative future. There can be no doubt that such awareness is absolutely necessary if sf is truly to reflect the current realities of our world in its imagined futures.

NOTES
    1. *River of Gods* received the British Science Fiction Association (BSFA) award for the best novel in 2005, and *Cyberabad Days* includes "The Djinn's Wife," the winner of the BSFA award for short fiction in 2007.
    2. Said writes: "Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (*Orientalism* 3).
    3. Nayar explains that "The monstrous was a part of the project to dehumanize Indian space, to locate Indian culture as radically different and flawed. With these … aesthetic modes the English mapped India as different, inhuman, chaotic, varied and dark" (5).

4. The correct Hindi term is "adamkhore," meaning man-eater, although there is no reason for using a Hindi word in a Bengali-speaking region.

5. An approach such as this makes McDonald look very similar to the proponents of Vedic science who attempt to prove that Hinduism is a scientific religion.

6. Pramod K. Nayar and Edward Said explain that England and Europe defined their identity by positing non-European spaces such as India and Asia (or Africa) as the Other, everything that is not European, through the deployment of colonial aesthetics. Nayar says, "Early modern travel literature has been variously seen as attempts to define England (and Europe's) sense of nationhood, the problems of the body politic and the identity of an emergent bourgeois" (2).

7. By the term "postcolonial neoimperial age" I suggest the coexistence of two processes: decolonization from the former European occupation while simultaneously eluding the grasp of the new world-empires—mostly American and multinational corporations, although Western European, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian influences cannot be overlooked.

8. An interesting comparison regarding awareness and representation of the cultural Other can be made between McDonald's *River of Gods* and Winter's examination of the novel. While McDonald, despite his exoticizing impulses, makes few errors in presenting the basic Hindu cosmological structure, Winter commits some big ones, in spite of his critical and scholarly intentions. Winter's essay claims that "In the book's Hindu framework, the god-like aeais are as much the agents of Shiva the destroyer as Ganesh the creator and Brahma the preserver" (473-74). This statement displays a confusion about a mythological tradition that is still "exotic" to the Western scholar. Winter demonstrates his unawareness that in the commonly circulated Hindu mythology Brahma is the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer, while Ganesh is the god of good beginnings or achievement (often presented as the son of goddess Parvati, Shiva's consort). McDonald makes no such mistakes in the novel, indicating his thorough immersion in the culture.

9. Other political echoes are also identifiable in *River of Gods*: the powerful woman prime minster of Bharat, Sajida Rana, coming as she does from an aristocratic family, is an obvious parallel to former Prime Minister of India Indira Gandhi. Both Gandhi and Rana are strong-willed, carry on the legacy of their fathers, and are killed through the conspiracy of their bodyguards.

10. The official Hindi name for the Republic of India is "Bharat Ganarajya."

11. Although separatism often grows out of religious affiliations (such as the earlier partition of East and West Pakistan, and the Sikh Khalistani movement), linguistic and ethnic regionalism is also strongly present in India. Recent assertions of linguistic politics in Maharashtra between Marathi- and Hindi-speaking populations bears witness to it. Similar tensions based on linguistic and ethnic identities were also seen in the past in Assam and other northeastern states; the recent division of Andhra Pradesh into Telengana and Simandhra is partially based on linguistic and cultural identities; and the the demand for a separate state for ethnic Gorkhas (now part of West Bengal) is another recent example.

12. The Maoists, however, are not exactly separatists: they are rebels against corrupt government authorities and the land-holding class, but they do not ask for a separate state or country; nevertheless, the Maoists have carved out large swathes of semi-autonomous regions in the backward districts of central and eastern India.

13. McDonald explains in his email to the author:

India is undoubtedly one of the great nations and cultures of the world, and part of the reason I wanted to write about it was because, when I first had the idea in 1999, India

was a huge blind spot on the US mental map of the world. Say Asia to Americans and they immediately think of China or Japan. On this side of the Atlantic, because of the old UK Imperial adventure, we tend to think India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and I wanted to try to correct what I thought of as an American cultural bias.

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ABSTRACT

In this article I argue that Northern Irish author Ian McDonald's works, *River of Gods* (2004) and *Cyberabad Days* (2008), set in India deviate from the prevalent Orientalism of mainstream Western science fiction. Drawing on Shameem Black and Peter Heehs's theories of cross-cultural representation, I claim that despite its flaws the empathetic approach McDonald employs is very appropriate for border-crossing literature in this era of globalization. In this context, I posit that while a deep understanding of the culture is necessary for effective representation, overdependence on "native informants" may actually lead to fallacious expectations.