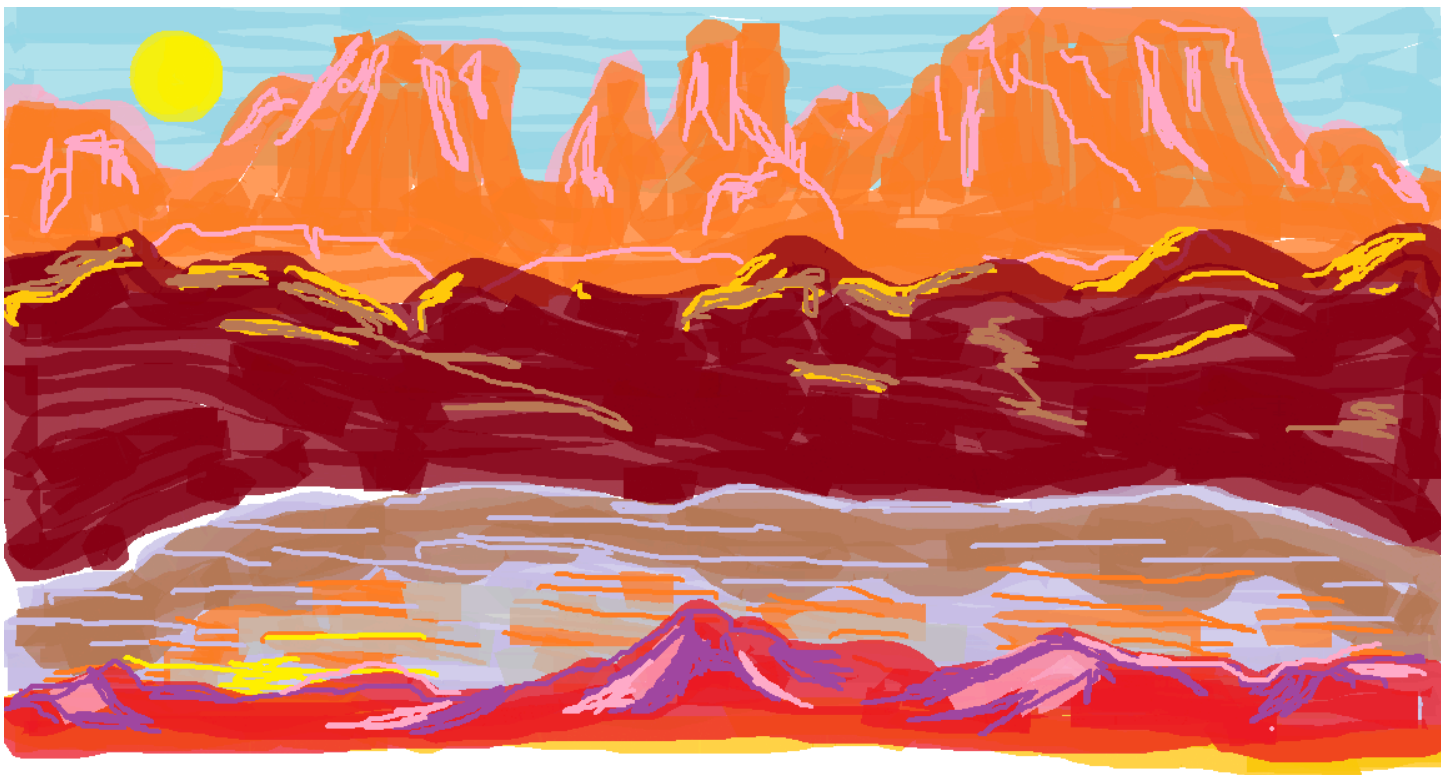


Journeys in Space, Time and the Imagination

## A Speculative Manifesto

**Note:** At the request of several people, I am reproducing below the afterword I wrote (at my then editor, Anita Roy's urging) for my first short story collection, *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet* (published by Zubaan, New Delhi in 2008 and reprinted in 2013). Although today, in 2021, I would write it somewhat differently, perhaps add and emphasize some things, I stand by the key ideas expressed in it. (And I've added, for a bit of colour, a slapdash bit of art I did on Paint while I was thinking about an alien landscape. I make no claim to being an artist, however.)



([https://vandanasingh.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/doodling\\_aug29\\_2021.png](https://vandanasingh.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/doodling_aug29_2021.png)).

### A Speculative Manifesto

*By Vandana Singh*

At the dawn of time, the first humans told tales about ten-headed demons, flying chariots, and gods wielding thunderbolts. The earliest writings in almost every tradition are part of what we call imaginative literature or speculative fiction today. The modern descendants of the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Mahabharata are the genres of science fiction, and fantasy, including various sub-categories like magic realism, alternate history and

But humanity has grown out of its childhood, as each of us grows out of it as individuals. Why not discard the old myths, legends, tall tales, and their modern counterparts, as we discard other childish things? Why not leave them for the children? Aren't grown-ups supposed to read realistic fiction? What good are these wild tales, anyway?

Take, for instance, myth. Speaking entirely from a non-religious perspective, what's the use of these impossible stories? In our times mythology is often dismissed as a hodge-podge of incorrect explanations for natural phenomena. But the role of myth is much more than an attempt to explain thunderstorms or eclipses. In ages past, mythical and fantastical stories recounted people's hopes and fears in relation to the vast universe they inhabited. They were an expression of the human relationship with nature, when the boundaries between the two were blurred. They seem strange and quaint to us because in modern times we have lost connection, not only with each other but with the natural world — to our cost.

Thus it is perhaps it is not too surprising that so much of imaginative literature has been relegated to children's fiction, and that even when it is written for adults it is not taken seriously by the literary establishment. That is, of course, the literary establishment's loss, but it is also ours. Unless teachers in schools and colleges include speculative fiction in their course work, unless they treat it with respect, how will students discover and delight in it? This neglect is a great pity because both children and adults need the literature of the imagination. So much of modern realist fiction is divorced from the physical universe, as though humans existed in a vacuum devoid of animals, rocks, and trees. Speculative fiction is our chance to rise above this pathologically solipsist view and find ourselves part of a larger whole; to step out of the claustrophobia of the exclusively human and discover joy, terror, wonder, and meaning, in the greater universe.

But also, speculative fiction has a revolutionary potential that is perhaps unique.

Why do I say this? Because imagination — that faculty that expands the human mind to the size of the universe, that makes empathy possible (you have to have some imagination to put yourself in another's shoes) — also allows us to dream. Science fiction and fantasy posit other paths, alternative futures, different social arrangements as well as technologies, other ways that we could be. Before we do, we must dream. So Rokeya Sukhawat Hussain, dreaming of the liberation of women back at the start of the twentieth century, writes her utopia, *Sultana's Dream*. So Ursula K. Le Guin, imagining a peaceful anarchic community, writes *The Dispossessed*. As Sahir Ludhianvi said, "Ao ki koi khwab bune, kal ke vaste." Come let us weave dreams for tomorrow's sake. The so-called Third-world is undergoing vast and unpredictable changes, and the world at large — for we have only one world, after all — is beset by war and environmental catastrophe. By engaging our imaginations and making up ingenious thought-experiments, by asking "what-if" questions and attempting to answer them, speculative fiction allows us to question the path we are on today, to live out possible futures before we come to them. What if books were banned? asked Ray Bradbury, and gave us one possible answer in *Fahrenheit 451*. Walter Miller penned a bleak account of a post-nuclear-holocaust world in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. While speculative fiction has not yet fully realized its transgressive potential, dominated as it has been by white-male-techno-fantasies, Westerns and the White Man's Burden in Outer Space, there is still a strong undercurrent of writing that questions and subverts dominant paradigms and persists in asking uncomfortable questions. No other literature, to my knowledge, has written with so much passion about human beings embroiled in technological and social change, from race and gender issues to nuclear war, to genetic engineering.

Yet there is another aspect to speculative fiction, which is also the place where the two distinct sub-genres of fantasy and science fiction meet. While the literal story has its own charm and interest, the characters or tropes in the story often have symbolic or metaphoric value. Symbol and metaphor, according to such thinkers as Carl Jung, are part of the language of our unconscious minds. So good imaginative literature, in being many-

28/07/2024, 09:56 A Speculative Manifesto | Antariksh Yatra  
or what cannot be as yet. But it is also true that when it uses symbol and metaphor in certain ways, speculative fiction is about us as we are, right now. This may be the case even if the story is set on another planet, in another age, and the protagonist is an alien. Because haven't we all felt alien at some time or another, set apart from the norm due to caste and class, religion and creed, gender and sexual orientation?

Underneath all this is the fact that good speculative fiction is fun. Of course much of what is "merely" fun is dismissed by the establishment, as though "fun" is necessarily synonymous with "frothy and shallow". But good speculative fiction can be fun and meaningful at the same time. I'm not talking about the acres of garbage that constitute 90% of science fiction and fantasy (and probably 90% of mainstream realist fiction as well). I'm talking about the grain in the chaff. Here I mean "fun" not only in the sense of enjoyable, but also in the sense of play: both in the sense of playing like children, and in the sense of theatre, with the universe as grand stage. This might result in an intellectually satisfying play of ideas, whether scientific or philosophical, or a hilarious expose' of human nature, or both — think of Premendra Mitra's Ghanada tales, for instance. Art as play-time, in its deepest and most literal sense, all at once. That untranslatable Sanskrit word "Leela" comes to mind.

Emily Dickinson famously said: Tell all the truth but tell it slant. Reality is such a complex beast that in order to begin to hold it, comprehend it, we need something larger than realist fiction. Enter speculative fiction, with its aliens and magic and warp drives, set against the backdrop of the universe itself. At its bedrock, despite the strangeness of the setting, we recognize familiar things: love, rage, struggle, wonder — our selves, disguised, but there. After all, the Mahabharata, for all the marvelous story-telling, is also the battle that rages within each one of us.

Tags: [speculative fiction \(https://vandanasingh.wordpress.com/tag/speculative-fiction/\)](https://vandanasingh.wordpress.com/tag/speculative-fiction/)

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## 3 Responses to "A Speculative Manifesto"

**dmf Says:**

December 7, 2021 at 8:20 pm | [Reply](#)

hi prof. Singh, thanks for all your writing, was wondering if you are familiar with Andy Pickering's work and if so what do you make of his reframing of science (and being-in-an-environment more generally) in terms of performativity? <https://www.cairn.info/revue-natures-sciences-societes-2013-1-page-77.htm>  
best, dirk

**vsinghsblog Says:**

December 8, 2021 at 2:11 am | [Reply](#)

thanks for your comment, dirk, and for the recommendation – I will definitely look up his work. Best, vandana

**dmf Says:**

December 8, 2021 at 3:08 am

my pleasure Vandana, be interested in what you make of it, his famous book (at least in STS circles) is the Mangle of Practice but given yer own background you might want to start with his Constructing Quarks book.

