

World Science Fiction Spring 2019

So Long Been Dreaming: Post-Colonial Science Fiction and Fantasy

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Final Thoughts

Uppinder Mehan, co-editor

*I had crossed de line of which I had so long been dreaming.
I was free; but dere was no one to welcome me to de land of freedom.
I was a stranger in a strange land.*

– freedom fighter Harriet Tubman, describing the first time she set foot on land where she was not a slave

Harriet Tubman's quotation above spells out an assumption that she, Moses, and Heinlein's Michael Valentine all might share when she refers to herself as a "stranger in a strange land." She may be free now that she has crossed the line dividing the North from the South in nineteenth-century U.S. but she has little sense of herself as a free person and of the free land she finds herself in. It strikes me that many of us who might call ourselves postcolonial are in a similar situation.

Perhaps the strictest definition of a postcolonial person is one who is a member of a nation that has recently achieved independence from its colonizers, but by shifting from the adjective "postcolonial" to the noun "postcoloniality" a more inclusive and I think truer definition comes into play. Postcoloniality includes those of us who are the survivors – or descendants of survivors – of sustained, racial colonial processes; the members of cultures of resistance to colonial oppression; the members of minority cultures which are essentially colonized nations within a larger nation; and those of us who identify ourselves as having Aboriginal, African, South Asian, Asian ancestry, wherever we make our homes.

Some of the stories in this anthology might be categorized as science fiction, some as speculative fiction, and some as fantastic but they all broaden their labels. The simple binaries of native/alien, technologist/pastoralist, colonizer/colonized are all brought into question by writers who make use of both thematic and linguistic strategies that subtly subvert received language and plots. One of the key strategies employed by these writers is to radically

shift the perspective of the narrator from the supposed rightful heir of contemporary technologically advanced cultures to those of us whose cultures have had their technology destroyed and stunted. The narrators and characters in these stories make the language of the colonizer their own by reflecting it back but using it to speak unpleasant truths, by expanding its vocabulary and changing its syntax to better accommodate their different world-views, and by ironically appropriating its terms for themselves and their lives. Postcolonial visions are both a questioning of colonial/imperialist practices and conceptions of the native or the colonized, and an attempt to represent the complexities of identity that terms such as “native” and “colonized” tend to simplify.

Coming back to Harriet Tubman and company, postcolonial writing has for the most part been intensely focused on examining contemporary reality as a legacy of a crippling colonial past but rarely has it pondered that strange land of the future. Visions of the future imagine how life might be otherwise. If we do not imagine our futures, postcolonial peoples risk being condemned to be spoken about and for again.

Postcolonial writers have given contemporary literature some of its most notable fiction about the realities of conqueror and conquered, yet we've rarely created stories that imagine how life might be otherwise. So many of us have written insightfully about our pasts and presents; perhaps the time is ripe for us to begin creatively addressing our futures.

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