LONGEVITY AND TEMPORALITY IN THREE POSTCOLONIAL SPECULATIVE NARRATIVES

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Abstract

Despite almost thirty years between the years of their publication, Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), M. G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia* (2006) and Salman Rushdie's *Victory City* (2023) all deploy the trope of longevity to explore temporality in their speculative narratives. The authors use longevity not only to represent histories that are excluded from colonial historiography but also to question the linear temporality that has underpinned colonial and postcolonial projects, one that dichotomises self and other, the modern/ the premodern, and the young/ the old. As our analysis shows, the texts instead represent multiple and entangled temporalities that reject these binarisms; forms of polytemporality that shape the lived experience in a global world.

Keywords: Longevity, Temporality, Postcolonial Speculative Fiction, Science-Fiction.

LONGEVIDAD Y TEMPORALIDAD
EN TRES NARRATIVAS ESPECULATIVAS POSTCOLONIALES

Resumen

A pesar del hecho que han pasado casi treinta años entre la publicación de Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), M. G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia* (2006) and Salman Rushdie's *Victory City* (2023), todos presentan el tema de la longevidad para explorar el concepto temporalidad en sus narrativas especulativas. Estos autores usan la longevidad no solo para representar historias que han sido excluidas de la historiografía colonial sino también para cuestionar la temporalidad lineal que se encuentra tanto en proyectos coloniales postcoloniales; una temporalidad lineal que dicotomiza el individuo con el otro, lo moderno y lo premoderno, lo joven y lo viejo. A partir de nuestro análisis de los textos pretendemos demostrar temporalidades múltiples y interrelacionadas que rechazan los binarismos, y que se pueden considerar formas de politemoralidad que moldean la experiencia de vida en un mundo global.

Palabras clave: longevidad, temporalidad, ficción especulativa postcolonial, ciencia-ficción.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2026.93.09
Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, 93; octubre 2026, pp. 173-189; ISSN: e-2530-8335
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1. INTRODUCTION

As genres deeply concerned with the future and, more broadly, time, speculative fictions offer fertile ground for a postcolonial critique of the hegemonic (European) model of history and progress. This does not mean that they simply bring to the surface alternative versions of history as a way of "writing back"; they can also open up space for imagining multiple, and often entangled and competing, temporalities, that are shaped by local and global cultures and forces. Sibylle Baumbach and Birgit Neumann state, in relation to the ability of speculative narratives to explore the temporal disorder that crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic bring about: "By constructing open, fragmented, and pluralised storylines, oscillating between multiple times that can no longer be subsumed under a singular temporal frame, they give rise to thick, multi-layered temporalities, in which past, present, and future entertain mutually transformative and shifting relations" (2023, 8). In this article, we are particularly interested in analysing how postcolonial speculative fiction about longevity may exploit this potential to question a hegemonic understanding of time.

Longevity is a common trope in speculative fiction, ranging from techno-enabled body transference to forms of mythical immortality. In whatever form, it typically disrupts the human life course and brings into focus dominant assumptions about time and often invites us to reimagine history. To explore the potential of longevity in postcolonial critiques of time, history and progress, we consider three texts: Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), M. G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia* (2016) and Salman Rushdie's *Victory City* (2023). Bringing together the colonial history of India and a futuristic setting in the US, *The Calcutta Chromosome* unfolds from the discovery of a chromosome that is believed to transfer between humans, attaining longevity of its own. *Victory City* engages more firmly with the fantastic in its centuries-long history of Bisnaga, a kingdom in pre-colonial India, a history centred on the extremely long life of Pampa Kampana, the novel's protagonist and the founder of the kingdom. *Nostalgia* is a dystopian novel, set in a future where the world's inequalities include differential access to the technology that allows immortality through physical and psychological rejuvenation. In different ways, the three texts all deploy longevity to represent multiple, entangled temporalities, questioning the linear temporality of colonialism that dichotomises self and other, the modern and pre-modern, youth and age.

Though we might debate how to label our three texts in terms of genre, all three create the alternative worlds – with their flexibility of time and space – that we associate with science, speculative and fantasy fiction. As John Frow points out, texts "do not 'belong' to genres but are, rather, uses of them; they refer not to 'a' genre but to a field or economy of genres, and their complexity derives from the complexity of that relation" (2006, 16-17). As scholarship from SF studies in particular make clear, defining genre is a torturous process (see overview in Langer 2011). John Rieder, in his application of genre theory to SF, notes that definition is at the heart of many debates in the field, and yet often, in recent years, comes down to the sense that SF is constructed in the very act of defining it (Rieder 2010, 191). Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint recognise that genre definition is itself "contingent and

ideological" and that "all histories of the genre inevitably privilege some texts and marginalise or exclude others" (2011, 5). Rather than focussing on the exigencies of definition, therefore, we embrace the fluidity of the genres and terms SF, speculative and fantasy fiction, seeing this as appropriate to an exploration of the postcolonial, since, as Jessica Langer notes, this fluidity of definition is shared with the field of postcolonialism itself (2011, 2-3).

Although speculative writing, and SF in particular, has been implicated in imperial desires, driven by narratives of domination, control and conflict based on difference (Rieder 2008), critics see great potential in what they term 'postcolonial SF' (see Smith 2012; Langer 2011). For Eric D. Smith, the very history of the genre brings SF into alignment with critical theory, particularly in its dialectical form. He argues that "Born in the imperialist collision of cultural identities and taking as its formal and thematic substance the spatial dislocations that inhere in the imperial situation, science fiction would seem the ideal instrument with which to engage critically the transition from the postcolonial condition to that of globalization" (2012, 4). Indeed, the seeming dominance of Europe and North America in speculative writing is now shifting, as speculative fiction from China, Africa, India and many other parts of the world gains prominence and readership, often building on longer speculative traditions (Ezeiyoke 2025; Khilnani and Bhattacharjee 2022; Li 2021; Song and Huters 2018; Isaacson 2017) and yet "radically reconfigur[ing] the conceptual machinery of SF and utopia to address the exigencies of postcoloniality and globalization" (Smith 2012, 5). In approaches like these, speculative fiction is valued for the critical eye it casts upon personal experience as enmeshed within social and historical forces, and the ways in which it creates the possibility of both interrogating and reimagining modernity, coloniality and postcoloniality.

Stefan Helgresson suggests that "problems of historical time have long been a central concern of postcolonial scholarship" (2014, 545). Postcolonial scholars have considered how European colonialism dominated through its universalising view of modernity underpinned by the conception of history as linear evolution and progress. In other words, they have interrogated how Europe has imposed "a particular way of doing history" (Gunning 2013, 15), repressing some histories and representing certain nations and subjects as not having reached colonialism's version of modernity. As exemplified by the project of Subaltern studies, the question of whose history is or can be told has therefore been central in postcolonial historiography.

Nonetheless, Helgresson identifies the limitations of postcolonial historiography that continues to operate within the temporal paradigm of colonial modernity. He suggests that postcolonial scholars have challenged this temporal hegemony by emphasising multiple temporalities, implicitly and explicitly linking them to specific cultural locations. He critically summarises two approaches to this. Linear developmentalism, represented by Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992), criticises the universalization of the European model of modernity as an ideological construct and emphasises the importance of recognising different temporalities specific to local cultures. There is a contradiction in this approach, as time is understood as construct on one hand and as historical reality on the other. According to Helgresson, this approach reproduces the binary between the modernised west

and the pre-modern non-west and fails to account for the entanglements of global and local realities since the expansion of capitalism. A similar flaw can be found in the other approach, cultural relativism, that is historically rooted in anthropology, the study of non-western cultures by the western subject. Helgresson explains that although anthropology embraces non-western cultures, it tends to insist upon their separation from western self and modernity and end up marking other cultures by their lateness in the evolutionary historical process. Cultural relativism therefore does not change, and even risks reproducing, the hegemonic relationship between multiple temporalities.

As a solution to these aporias, Helgresson proposes a new conceptualisation of temporal difference that recognises the entanglements of multiple temporalities in the same place and at the same time. He states:

> Time, then, needs to be conceived of as *radically* multiple in ways that far exceed the evolutionist, colonial, and culturalist paradigms. Radical polytemporality would go further than Braudel's *durées* and acknowledge all the different modes of time --- domestic, national, personal, political, spiritual, geological, technological, agricultural, and so on – that continuously give shape and meaning to human life, and that are impossible to reduce wholesale to concepts such as 'culture' or 'capitalism' (2014, 557).

The polytemporality described here evokes a fluid and entangled ecology of multiple temporalities –both human and more-than-human–, in which lived experiences are embedded. Helgresson finds a literary expression of this temporality in the Brazilian author Euclides da Cunha's *Os sertões* (1902), a historical narrative that brings together geological, anthropological and historical times in its story of the late nineteenth-century War of Canudos, a civil rebellion against the central government.

Like Helgresson, others have recognised the importance of literary narrative in the exploration of alternative temporalities. Jeong Eun Annabel We's discussion of the postcolonial and speculative writing (understood in her work as an umbrella term that includes science fiction, fantasy and horror) makes the case for the important role of the speculative in decolonial thought (2024). In particular, We notes, drawing on the work of Kara Keeling, that the decolonial involves "an open acceptance of messy and unlinear temporality" that interrogates "the teleological alignment of the precolonial past, followed by the post/modern present and an enclosed future that lives in the narrow legacies of modernity-coloniality" (We 2024, 462). For We, speculative fiction and decolonial thought are both focussed on the "relation to futurity" and this involves not only the negotiation of imagined futures, but the interrogation and reimagining of the multiple pasts and presents that lead to those futures. As we go on to suggest through our analysis of three novels, extreme longevity, a common trope in SF, highlights the temporal possibilities of speculative genres.

Undoubtedly connected to the history of mythical and cultural narratives of extended human lifespans - from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to the Cumean Sibyl - a multiplicity of forms of longevity have long permeated science, speculative and

fantastic fiction (Yoke and Hassler 1985; Clark 1995; Slusser, Westfahl and Rabkin 1996; Lebow 2012; Mangum 2002; Brand 2016; Botelho 2019; Falcus and Oro-Piqueras 2022). If not quite the case in the broader fantastic tradition, then certainly in postwar Anglo-American speculative fiction and SF, extended lifespans and forms of rejuvenation tend to come with dystopian consequences, on an individual and social, often global, level (Lebow 2012). Class and generational conflict, scarcity of resources and violence characterise these societies. Identifying conflict as central to the longevity narrative, Frederic Jameson argues that "the longevity plot" is about history and class polarisation in late capitalism (2005, 335). On an individual level, loneliness and boredom, sometimes extended physical and existential suffering, characterise the experience of a very long life. Longevity narratives also tend to reflect the culturally widespread fear of ageing – and ultimately dying, something that sociologists such as Norbert Elias (1982) have identified in many societies. With advancements in science and technology, and, in many countries, rapid increases in lifespan over recent decades, extended youth seems more and more plausible; yet, longevity narratives often represent this as a form of monstrous anachronism, drawing on ageist discourses to explore the complexities of embodied ageing at individual and social levels. Frequently in these texts, a fragmentation of the self results from a lack of meaning associated with a very long or unfinished life span. As Oro-Piqueras and Falcus state, "as genres that push the limits of the human and our relationships with others (understood very widely), they offer ways of thinking about and representing both the philosophical and experiential aspects of ageing and generation" (2022, 1). The novels we consider here do represent the negative ramifications of extreme longevity, on collective and individual levels, in particular through the dystopian future imagined in *Nostalgia* and the individual condition of Pampa in *Victory City*. Nevertheless, they also exploit longevity as a lens through which to de-naturalise our conception of time and open up space for exploring plural temporalities.

In these three novels, longevity brings about temporal disorder and threatens the continuity of a unified self, identity, memory and history. *The Calcutta Chromosome* is most explicit, among the three, in "writing back" to colonial narratives but it also refuses to produce a coherent alternative history. In a manner typical of the postmodern fiction of the time of its publication, the novel highlights the palimpsestic and polytemporal nature of history by introducing the element of detection to intensify and frustrate the historiographical and hermeneutic projects within the text, and of the reader. *Victory City* is in many ways a form of historical fiction. In typical Rushdie style, the novel offers a speculative alternative history that exploits temporal fluidity, notably in the figure of Pampa Kampana, who both embodies and exceeds the formation and the fall of the nation state. Part of a slew of recent novels that explore longevity as class and generational conflict, in the Jameson sense, *Nostalgia* shares with *The Calcutta Chromosome* and *Victory City* a postcolonial commitment to interrogating privileged histories through a narrative that complicates the spatial and temporal boundaries of the colonial and postcolonial. Considering rejuvenation as one type of longevity, Teresa Mangum states that "while all narratives are profoundly preoccupied by time ... rejuvenation promises and fantasies ... often ... turn outward and become embroiled in larger concerns about time" (2002, 80).

And we see that in these texts. On one level, and to differing extents, these novels are engaged in forms of "writing back", presenting alternative, reimagined histories. At the same time, they offer the kind of "messy and unlinear temporalit[ies]" (We, 462) that disrupt the linear logic of colonial modernity and its inherent binarism of self and other.

2. *THE CALCUTTA CHROMOSOME*

The Calcutta Chromosome is a speculative (detective) novel that plays with temporal and spatial narrative as Ghosh moves back and forth from the colonial to the postcolonial to the present with the aim of, in Chitra Sankaran's words, "decentering the master narratives'" (2012, 17). The novel starts at a point in the future, a 'techno-driven' era with the character of Antar, an Egyptian living in New York, who works for LifeWatch, "a small but respected non-profit organization that served as a global public health consultancy and epidemiological data bank" (1995, 8). Antar finds the file of previous employee Murugan, an Indian living in the United States, with whom Antar had exchanged peculiar conversations around Murugan's obsession with the history of the malaria cure. The narrator then moves from the very last line of the file on Murugan found by Antar, that reads "Subject missing since August 21, 1995 [...] last seen Calcutta, India" (22), to 20 August 1995 and Murugan's first day in Calcutta. Murugan is there pursuing the secret history behind the discovery of malaria cure, which is credited to the British scientist Ronald Ross, a 1902 Nobel Prize winner. On this day, Murugan meets Urmilla, the Calcutta journalist who will help him disclose part of that hidden history. Urmilla is covering the award ceremony of 85-year-old Phulboni, one of India's most prominent writers, who is giving a speech. The speech refers not only to what Murugan is trying to do with his research, but probably also to Ghosh's main motivation in the novel: "Mistaken are those who imagine that silence is without life; that it is inanimate, without either spirit or voice. It is not: indeed, the Word is to this silence what the shadow is to the foreshadowed, what the veil is to the eyes, what the mind is to truth, what language is to life" (27). In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh intends to de-centre the colonial master narrative of scientific progress by locating the discovery of the cure for malaria in the hands of Mangala, the sweeper woman who was helping Ronald Ross' crew in the laboratory, rather than with Ross himself. Through the combination of a historical figure, Ross, and a fictional sweeper woman, Ghosh draws attention to the fact that official history is written by those who have power whereas other stories, such as that of working-class women, are left silent.

Longevity is expressed in Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* in two ways, each questioning the certainty of the western epistemology and self. Firstly, the novel suggests longevity through the close interconnection among characters, since all of them are connected to the history of the cure for malaria in Calcutta at different historical periods; and secondly, through the implication that Murugan's research is also related to the discovery of a specific kind of chromosome, named Calcutta in the novel, that would grant longevity. In the first case, longevity is expressed as the

close interconnectedness of the characters that compose the complexity of the novel. Whereas Antar goes back to Murugan's story and his obsession with finding out about Ronald Ross, Mangala and the cure for malaria, Murugan and Urmila trace the story of Lutchman – a character who appears with several names at different historical times and who was connected to the poet Phulboni – and back to Mangala's work in Ronald Ross' laboratory again. As Ghosh has expressed in some of his interviews, trace is difficult to establish, especially in India's history, but fiction – the novel in this case – somehow manages to do so, just as *The Calcutta Chromosome* does through the connections between characters and stories, and especially through Mangala. Whereas Ronald Ross is introduced in the novel as a British colonial subject who did not really know what to do with his life, went to medical school and started research on malaria because it was the fashionable topic of the times among the medical community, Mangala is described as a "genius". According to Murugan, "she wasn't hampered by the sort of stuff that might slow down someone who was conventionally trained: she wasn't carrying a shit-load of theory in her head, she didn't have to write papers or construct proofs" (243). As John Tieme argues in his analysis of the novel, these different traces that Murugan puts together "involve a counter-epistemology, which promises a form of immortality through the erosion of Western conceptions of discrete subjectivity, through the dismantling of the shadow-line that construct notions of autonomous selfhood" (2003: 136). In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh implies that all knowledge is connected and the fact that only a small part of history is recorded does not negate the existence of valuable knowledge that extends from precolonial times to the present. However, such traces are neither linear nor completely reducible to the logics of the (western) scientific method.

This rejection of the certainty of scientific method and its history is emphasised by the second case of longevity in the novel. *The Calcutta Chromosome* poses the possibility that Mangala and the team at her lab have found "immortality" (105) through some kind of "technology for interpersonal transference" (106). As Murugan explains to Antar, "'Now what would you say, Ant,' he asked, 'if all of that information could be transmitted chromosomally, from body to body?'. . . . Just think, a fresh start: when your body fails you, you leave it, you migrate – you or at least a matching symptomology of yourself. You begin all over again, another body, another beginning. Just think: no mistakes, a fresh start'" (106). Mangala's discovery, thus, challenges a unified chronological understanding of time and space, as the structure of the novel in which characters seem to survive through other characters similarly exemplifies. According to Chitra Sankaran (2012), the fact that Mangala not only finds the cure for malaria and advances science, but also finds a way of disrupting time and space through the longevity gene, gives meaning to the novel. As Sankaran states, "in the narrative, the sameness of the Self is left "un-circumscribed" and "fluid". Hence, the concept of a linearly progressing Time also permits itself to get ruptured" (2012: 111). As Sankaran's arguments suggest, apart from challenging the western notion of history as linear, logical continuity, the novel also challenges the western notion of self as a coherent and singular entity.

In addition to the trope of longevity, the novel's deployment of the detective narrative is also central in its questioning of the colonial and linear logic. Within

the detective format, the novel brings together different characters from different times connected by the discovery of the cure for malaria. Nonetheless, the mystery of the truth behind the malaria research is not completely solved. The ending of the novel suggests this when Antar encounters many voices as he tries to find out more about Murugan and Urmila by checking some security videos: "There were voices everywhere now, in his room, in his head, in his ears, it was as though a crowd of people was in the room with him. They were saying: 'We're with you; you're not alone; we'll help you across'" (306). The reference to a multiplicity of voices challenges boundaries both of history and realism. Ghosh, through the impossibility of a clear closure to the detective plot, disrupts the colonial narrative of history at the same time as he rejects the logic of the detective pursuit and the scientific approach. Instead, the only plausible answer to Murugan's, Urmila's and Antar's initial question of who discovered the cure for malaria seems to be a combination of myth and alternative science, in the form of the longevity gene. Seemingly impossibly, Murugan and Antar are connected in the same way as Urmila and Tara, Antar's neighbour and friend. Antar recognises the link between Urmila and Tara when he sees Urmila in the video recording: "Now Murugan was standing in the lobby of a large auditorium and two women were running up the stairs. They came closer and suddenly Antar recognized Tara – except that she was in a sari" (306); thus, Antar realises that Urmila is the female neighbour living across from his flat in New York, Tara, an episode which also points to the plausible existence of that longevity gene personified in the character of Urmila surviving through Tara.

3. *VICTORY CITY*

While *The Calcutta Chromosome* blends longevity, science and detection to enact and explore postcolonial historiography and polytemporality, *Victory City* explicitly engages with India's history as a nation, employing magic realism to create the extraordinarily long-living protagonist, Pampa Kampana, the founder and the chronicler of the Bisnaga empire. In the novel, an un-named, self-reflexive narrator in the present time tells the story of the empire, drawing on a text that is purportedly written by Pampa, who magically creates the empire from seeds and lives for 247 years witnessing and recording its history, until her death on the day that the empire falls. Modelled on the medieval Hindu kingdom, Vijayanagara (Yogalakshmi & Vijayalakshmi 2023), the history of Bisnaga, beginning in the fourteenth century and ending in 1565, spans a time before much of the Indian subcontinent was brought under European control. The book's magic realist narrative combines the mythical and the modern in depicting this period, emphasising the kingdom's transitory status. The novel's interest in the national historiographic project is also emphasised by the way that the book is divided into four parts that are entitled: Birth, Exile, Glory and Fall. The story of Bisnaga, however, does not represent a nostalgic "authentic" pre-colonial India. Instead, just like Bombay in Rushdie's many novels, Bisnaga is a cosmopolitan city that embraces cultural hybridity, a "world-city" (268) embedded in the global movements of goods, people, cultures and texts:

"Trading ships from Bisnaga were traveling everywhere and spreading the news of its wonders, and now foreign visitors – traders, diplomats, explorers – thronged its streets, applauding its beauty and comparing it favourably to Beijing and to Rome" (267). For Ananya Jahanara Kabir, this affirmation of cultural hybridity and tolerance is particularly valuable, coming as it does at a time that marks the 75th year since India's independence and yet in the midst of the rise of Hindu nationalism and its oppressive impact on Indian Muslims (2023). Reading the novel, we see this affirmation of hybridity extending to the way in which it interrogates and seeks to re-imagine India's nationalist historiography through the character of Pampa, the supernaturally long-living "mother of empire" (239).

The conceptualisation of time has been central in the postcolonial historiography of India. In his consideration of historiography in India, Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests that British colonization meant that the diverse pasts of the subcontinent were reduced into "a homogenizing narrative of transition" that sees India perpetually struggling to move from the past to the present, from traditional to modern times (1992, 5). In this narrative, India stands as a "figure of lack," whose transition to modernity is permanently incomplete (1992, 6). He goes on to explain that in the attempt to counter this meaning of 'lack' while preserving the idea of authentic Indian identity, Indian nationalists in the early twentieth century mobilised gendered spatialisation to locate modernity in the public space and authenticity, and continuity in the private and feminized space of the family. Ira Raja suggests that Indianness was particularly strongly associated with the figure of the mother in the middle-class home, dedicated to the care of the family and the nation (2023, 243). Based on binarisms between past/present, tradition/modernity and private/public, this configuration does not challenge but sustains the linear temporality of the west. More importantly, Raja suggests, this configuration leaves no space for an older woman, seen as a threat to India's progress into modernity. To overcome the static notion of India in linear progressivism, she calls for a recognition of multiple temporalities at the same time, drawing on Helgresson's idea of radical polytemporality, discussed above. Raja finds a literary example that shows an alternative historical imagining of India in the Hindu writer, K. B. Vaid's play, "Our Old Woman." In the play, an old mother uses her silence and ageing body against her younger relatives in ways that insist upon her embodied subjecthood, a subjectivity that questions the ideal of a coherent, unified and young body that is employed in the nationalist and postcolonialist imagining of India's national body. The play then demonstrates the potential of literature for "paving the way for reimagining Indianness as changeable, inessential, and porous" (247).

Similarly to the mother in Vaid's play, with her longevity, Pampa represents the simultaneity of multiple times in her own body and disrupts the linear temporality of the nationalist vision of India. One way she does this is by challenging the genealogical assumptions of the royal dynasty that tends to privilege a patriarchal, singular lineage. As the mother of the empire, who is ambitious, resourceful and powerful, Pampa is far from the self-effacing figure of mother India devoted to the care of the family and, by extension, the nation. When Pampa reaches the age of eighteen, her physical ageing begins to slow down. Her long-lasting youthful and

beautiful appearance allows her to marry or/and serve multiple kings in different generations and exercise her political and magical power to help Bisnaga to thrive. Pampa is also depicted as a woman with her own desires. Her attraction to travellers from the west, in particular, undermines the genealogical authenticity and the patriarchy of the dynasty, exposing hybridity at its heart. While married to Hukka, she gives birth to three daughters conceived with a Portuguese traveller, and their appearance clearly suggests they are not the king's. In these ways, presenting Pampa as a sexually active agential subject, the novel unsettles the gendered discourse of mother India. Furthermore, Pampa's three daughters grow up to be intellectually, physically and mentally exceptional women, whereas her three sons with Bukka, who succeeds Hukka as the king, prove to be far inferior heirs to the throne. Representing and focussing on the powerful matrilineal lineage in the story of Bisnaga, the novel de-centres the patriarchal dynastic lineage that is often the spine of national historiography.

Pampa is also depicted as a figure who is out of time and brings different temporalities into the otherwise linear and singular history of the empire. Her ideas and policies include those that promote women in public spheres, and cultural and religious tolerance in Bisnaga. She is ahead of time; as Bukka tells her, "your ideas are too progressive for the fourteenth century". She replies: "Let it be the fourteenth century everywhere else. It's going to be the fifteenth century here" (91). Her longevity further accentuates her anachronistic existence, as she outlives her children and the many generations of offspring that follow. As is typical in longevity narratives, Pampa experiences a profound sense of loneliness, feeling that "she had lived too long" (244) and becoming redundant or "beside the point" (232). When she is finally prosecuted, upon the order of the then king, her resultant blindness evokes Shakespeare's King Lear, a king who becomes obsolete and vulnerable. Internally, she increasingly feels old and suffers physical aches, but not being able to die, she develops "a sort of sleeping sickness" (309). Just like the mother's ageing body in Vaid's play, Pampa's body becomes a material manifestation of polytemporality in the present, as it holds both youth and age and future and past. This temporal contradiction not only counters the static image of the mother India but also challenges the linear developmental narrative of a nation.

The novel's metafictional and polyphonic narrative also functions to question linear narrative, emphasising the textuality and the narrativity of memories and histories, something that Emily Timms finds in other postcolonial texts, such as Collins's *The Colour of Forgetting* (2020). The novel represents Pampa writing a narrative verse that tells a story of Bisnaga, and the novel opens by framing this written record and establishing its retrospective perspective: "On the last day of her life, when she was two hundred and forty-seven years old… Pampa Kampana completed her immense narrative poem about Bisnaga and buried it in a clay pot… as a message to the future" (1). The narrator of the novel, a self-claimed "spinner of yarns," suggests that this poem is as good and as long as the real, celebrated epic poem, Ramayana, insisting on its alternative and yet legitimate place in the nation's history. And yet, Pampa's story-telling is mediated by the narrator of this novel, the "humble author" (86), who offers his own "poor translation" (116) of some sections

of her Sanskrit text and inserts comments that question the authenticity of Pampa's account, reflecting on the accuracy of his own re-telling.[1] The novel nonetheless closes with Pampa's final words, reiterating the power of story-telling that represents and preserves palimpsestic histories: "I myself am nothing now. All that remains is this city of words. Words are the only victors" (331). Just like Pampa's narrative verse, which has survived four and half centuries to reach the time of the narration of the novel, the novel emphasises the power of story-telling that creates palimpsestic histories.

As the long-living mother of the empire, Pampa symbolises the promise of its continuity but paradoxically, her temporal difference highlights and unsettles the binarisms of past/future and age/youth that underpin the colonialist and nationalist linear histories that see India always in transition to modernity. Representing her anachronistic longevity and her own historiographical act, the novel brings into focus polytemporal and palimpsestic histories and affirms the power of story-telling that creates these, often elusive, histories.

4. *NOSTALGIA*

Nostalgia uses the tropes of science, speculative and dystopian fiction to imagine a future that is, at the same time, an interrogation of the past, in the process exploring history, memory and nationhood. The novel explores technologically-enabled longevity in ways often seen in dystopian fiction through the experiences of psychologist, Dr Frank Sina. Wealthy and privileged citizens, like Frank, have access to technologies that result in physical and cognitive rejuvenation. Moving into reformed and redesigned bodies, recipients experience the erasure of parts of their long-term memory and their replacement with fictions of the past, including new childhoods and familial relations. As is the case in much speculative fiction about extended lifespans, longevity brings about dystopian consequences: class and generational conflict (between older, wealthy rejuvenated persons and younger generations without access to the technology), a sense of anachronism, and forms of generational and familial loneliness. But longevity also enables an interrogation of the individual, communal and national relationship to the past, memory and time through the nostalgia of the title. Those citizens who have benefitted from rejuvenation and now live with fictional pasts find their present lives disrupted by intrusive memories of other pasts, a condition known as nostalgia. In this novel from a writer whose work is persistently concerned with and interrogatory of belonging, home and history, the possibilities of dystopian and science fiction, and the trope of longevity, are used to foreground the "transformative and shifting relations" between past, present and future (Baumbach and Neumann 2023, 8).

[1] The gender of the novel's narrator is not explicitly mentioned, but reviewers of the novel tend to refer to the narrator as male, seeing Rushdie speaking in the voice of this narrator (see Brooks 2023 for example).

The novel draws attention to the complexities of human ageing through its narrative of longevity and nostalgia, unsettling temporal experience at the level of the individual. Age itself becomes a kind of uncertain signifier: Frank is chronologically older than his partner Joanie in his rejuvenated, fictional existence, but he also feels his 'real' age, the length of time he has lived. We eventually learn that he is the great-grandfather of one of the younger, unrejuvenated characters and so has lived through generations. And he feels that sense of age in a kind of bodily memory that exceeds his rejuvenated self-narrative: "I... feel the body-age sometimes, in the nuts and bolts, as it were, the connections and interphases. By law, no record of a person's past life exists, nor of calendar age, but the body knows" (7). The ambiguity of emotional connection to others exacerbates this sense of duality. Though those rejuvenated know that their memories are fictional, they nevertheless form kinds of affective attachment to the fictions, as made clear in Frank's memories of his (fictional) mother. The novel therefore draws attention to the role of the past in existence in the present and in negotiating the future, within the time of a human lifespan. Frank lives a kind of "double" existence where he (increasingly as the text progresses) feels the conflict between his current life narrative and the shadows of previous lives and stories.

This individual experience of temporal uncertainty is only one part of the novel's exploration of the multiple times "that continuously give shape and meaning to human life" (Helgresson 2014, 557). The novel also explores nostalgia at the cultural and national levels. In his discussion of what he calls "postcolonial nostalgias", Dennis Walder argues that it may be necessary to undertake the process of nostalgia, as it "open[s] up a negotiation between the present and the past, leading to a fuller understanding of the past and how it has shaped the present, for good and bad, and how it has shaped the self in connection with others, a task that may bring pain as well as pleasure" (Walder 2010, 9). Moving away from a narrow focus on nostalgia as necessarily a negative and retrograde experience, Walder (and others, such as Hofmeyer) is engaging with the recognition that nostalgia has a complex relationship to time, memory and history. Svetlana Boym's influential discussion of nostalgia similarly explores the human relationship to past and present, making a distinction between "restorative nostalgia" and "reflective nostalgia". The former is about returning to a "lost home"; it is about tradition and "absolute truth" (2001, xviii). Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, "dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity" (2001, xviii). Reflective nostalgia, then, recognises the instability of any point of origin, any location of home, and, as Barbara Cassin points out, may encourage a kind of meta-reflection on the notion of home itself (2016, 2-3). It then shares with Helgresson's view of radical polytemporalities an interrogation of any sense of temporal stability and linearity.

Vassanji's novel then offers an exploration of nostalgia that may be characterised as reflective.[2] Nostalgia is the condition experienced by some rejuvenated characters, who find memories of past lives "leak[ing]" into their presents (5). In this new world, the past is a fiction that allows for present existence: "Over time the brain bridges gaps, fudges connections, invents where necessary, and so the actual past disappears. History gets rewritten" (25). As is common in the dystopian novel, this process of fictionalising (or forgetting) the past is controlled by an oppressive ruling force. That could lead the novel to narrativise an idealising nostalgia that tries to create a lost narrative and a lost homeland. But that does not happen here – instead we get something closer to Boym's "reflective nostalgia", which accepts partiality and the combination of loss and recuperation in nostalgia.

Frank is an expert in the treatment of nostalgia, adept at working with his clients to seal off those memories, and his own intrusive thoughts begin as he meets with a new client, Presley, who is experiencing nostalgia himself.[3] The nostalgia experienced by both Frank and Presley is related to a history of colonial conflict that is suppressed by the governing forces in the "North Atlantic Alliance", drawing attention to the politics of remembering and forgetting within post/colonial histories. Frank and Presley suffer the resurfacing of and desire to unearth memories of both time and place, as they are both exiles from previous lives in a different nation. They were brothers Elim and Amirul, sons of a leader of the oppressed and yet rebellious Maskinia, a place behind the "Long Border" (12) that "remains the persistent unknowable alien" (12). Both were taken by forces of the North Atlantic Alliance and forcibly rejuvenated into new lives scripted by the totalitarian forces represented by Dr X. This shared past connects Frank and Presley, but also aligns time and space: memories of the past are, like Maskinia, the "constant dark companion on the bright path of our progress" (12). As Diana Brydon suggests, this alignment suggests a connection between this future imaginary and colonial pasts: "In *Nostalgia*,... the technologies of the future reproduce (and possibly represent) the colonial strategies of control, taken to a higher level". She notes the echoes of the treatment of children in colonial and residential schools in the way that Frank and Presley are rejuvenated into new lives (and ideological frameworks), forced to forget their pasts (Brydon 2019, 104). The exploration of nostalgia in this novel, then, "engages in a similar attention to shifting internal and external borders, mediating between colonialisms old and new, encompassing transnational migration, and ongoing friction between Eurocentric America and its others" (Brydon 2019, 99).

The novel explores reflective nostalgia in two further ways, refusing, like *The Calcutta Chromosome*, to provide character or reader with definitive answers about the past that then determine present and future. The novel, therefore, refrains from

[2] Aris Mousoutzanis and Yugin Teo make the point that SF and speculative writing may be an ideal form for the critical and reflective exploration of nostalgia (2021, 1).

[3] This representation of nostalgia links to the origins of the word in medicine and the assumption that it is "a *curable* medical illness" (Hutcheon and Valdés 2000, 19).

providing hermeneutic satisfaction or a restorative nostalgic drive that would reinstate a sense of certainty about home and history. Firstly, nostalgia is a process that leads to death. Without treatment, the condition can be fatal as the self is unable to bear the combination of fragmented memories of the past and present experiences. Nostalgia is, as Barbara Cassin notes in her discussion of Odysseus, connected to age and ageing (2016). Rejecting Kant's assertion that nostalgia is about a return to an earlier time, that of youth, Cassin argues that Odysseus provides evidence to the contrary: that nostalgia is about the acceptance of mortality and age. In Odysseus' case, "nostalgia chooses finitude and *oikade*, home. To return home is to submit to a common fate: aging, dying" (2016, 13). This is helpful in considering the relationship between age, longevity and generation in *Nostalgia*. What Frank chooses is the rejection of longevity and rejuvenation in favour of mortality and the chaos of memory, and a kind of "homecoming". But, crucially, this is not a romanticised or idealised return home. Both Presley and Frank know that accepting nostalgia is a kind of self-annihilation.

Secondly, the novel's narrative structure insists upon uncertainty and unreliability, echoing the narrative instability of *Victory City*. The novel is Frank's retrospective account of his own development and change of perspective (as he uncovers his own previous identity), his attempt to counter the control of narratives of past and present held by the authorities. The prologue is important here, as we are made aware of Frank's future vantage point, "when it's all over..." (1) and he "wait[s] out [his] time" (1). The novel itself is then made up of Frank's account of the time leading up to his death (and that of Presley), within which are embedded his speculative accounts of the experiences of Presley and Holly Chu, a young reporter who is kidnapped and later dies in Maskinia. Frank's reflections and the notebook entries are initially kept electronically, but, in typical dystopian fashion, he later moves to handwriting to avoid surveillance, in this case of "Tom", the AI (154) – who himself may be some form of "transitioned" human (254). The final chapter functions as a kind of epilogue that underlines the power of the authorities in this new world, as well as reinforcing the instability of Frank's account. Taking the form of a conversation between Dr X and Tom, the dialogue suggests that Frank's imagined account of Holly Chu and Presley was 83% correct (257), a determination made, of course, according to the logic of the powers of the North Atlantic Alliance. This final chapter makes clear that Frank's account is now in the hands of the authorities and not, therefore, distributed to others. Given the long tradition of metafictive conclusions of this nature in dystopian fiction, it does not suggest hope for change (see Moylan 2020), but at the same time it does suggest the value of nostalgia as a reflective rather than restorative process (Boym 2001), one that emphasises the instability of all narratives of the past, and the relationship between past, present and future.

5. CONCLUSION

Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), Vassanji's *Nostalgia* (2006) and Rushdie's *Victory City* (2023) all, and in different ways, deploy the trope of longevity. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, longevity seems to have enabled survival through some form of bodily transference, perhaps due to Mangala's discovery, although this is never clearly stated. Rushdie's *Victory City* does not explain Pampa's astounding, seemingly magical, longevity, whereas in *Nostalgia*, medical and technological advancements enable many to enjoy radically extended lifespans. At a narrative level, these extended lifespans bring these characters existential angst and fragmentation of self, the effects that Mangum (2002) associates with radical extension of life. More pertinently for our reading in these three texts, longevity serves as a narrative device for the exploration of history and time. They exploit the trope of longevity and the possibilities of speculative, science and fantasy fiction in ways that unsettle linear temporality and embrace polytemporality. Representing shifting, multiple and entangled temporalities, these texts resist the binarisms of self/other, modern/pre-modern and old/new that have underpinned Europe's colonialism. *The Calcutta Chromosome* produces a narrative that combines speculative and detective genres to connect characters across spatial and temporal boundaries, inviting the reader to follow the traces of these connections, just as Antar does within the text. By interrogating colonial scientific logic and refusing neat narrative resolutions, however, the text embraces a polytemporality that de-centres colonialist historiography and epistemology. Similarly concerned with historiography, *Victory City* utilises magic realism to imagine India before Europe's colonialisation and a supernaturally long-living character to challenge the dominant and gendered historical narrative of India that dichotomises the modern/the premodern and new/old, depicting complex and anachronistic temporalities that emphasise both the power and instability of storytelling. *Nostalgia* explores identity, memory and time through characters whose extended lives continue across generations and nations. It explores the reflective nostalgia that recognises the constructed and unfixed natures of identity and memory, while rejecting the restorative nostalgia that turns to the past as a fixed point of origin of identity and memory. In these differing ways, the three novels invite the reader to imagine time differently, recognising multiple and entangled temporalities that exist simultaneously, and that shape lived experiences in local and global contexts.

Reviews sent to the authors: 3/05/2026
Revised paper accepted for publication: 14/06/2026

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