Resisting the Spectacle: Masked Realities and Rebellious Future in the Speculative Worlds of Samit Basu

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Abstract: This paper explores Samit Basu's *The City Inside*, *Resistance*, and *The Game World Trilogy* as major contributions to contemporary South Asian speculative fiction. It argues that Basu reimagines resistance not as heroic or spectacular but as fragmented, affective, and embedded in everyday life. Building on Michel Foucault's theory of surveillance and biopolitics, drawing on Guy Debord's theory of spectacle, Shoshana Zuboff's critique of surveillance capitalism, Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity, Donna Haraway's cyborg feminism, and Gayatri Spivak's theory of subalternity, this paper places Basu's speculative worlds within larger debates over power, technology, and postcolonial identity. Through close readings of Basu's fiction, the study demonstrates how resistance manifests in subtle refusals, fractured kinship, ironic mythic subversions, and digital counter-practices. The paper draws out how spectacle itself serves both as mechanism of control and a site of rebellion, particularly in Basu's explorations of surveillance optics, influencer culture, and commodified dissent. It discusses comparative references to the works of Indra Das, Vandana Singh, Manjula Padmanabhan, and Amitav Ghosh, placing Basu within a larger South Asian speculative tradition. By blending humour, satire, and genre experimentation, Basu challenges authoritarianism, neoliberal capitalism, and the weaponisation of myth, positioning speculative fiction as a critical space for imagining rebellious futures.

Keywords: Resistance, South Asian speculative fiction, spectacle, surveillance capitalism.

Introduction: Resistance as Creative Counterforce

Resistance has long been a central element of cultural expression. Across history, literature and performance have provided platforms for marginalised voices to push back against erasure, whether through oral storytelling traditions during colonial domination or postcolonial novels critiquing authoritarian power. In speculative fiction, resistance often emerges in unconventional forms such as fragmented narratives, satirical subversions of myth and the persistence of characters which refuse conformity. By presenting alternative realities, speculative fiction generates a conceptual space where the future can be questioned and reimagined. The concept of the spectacle is particularly important in analysing resistance in the contemporary era. In *The Society of the Spectacle,* Guy Debord portrays modern society as one where social relations are mediated through images. According to him, the spectacle is not just a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by appearances. In such a world, dissent itself is vulnerable to commodification, packaged and consumed as another product within the circuits of capitalism. Michel Foucault's work on surveillance and biopolitics extends this argument by showing how power in modern societies operates not primarily through violent coercion but through the subtle disciplining of bodies and the management of populations. In the twenty-first century, as Shoshana Zuboff further develops this line of thought, showing how surveillance capitalism intensifies these mechanisms by turning human experience into data for behavioural prediction and monetisation.

Within this framework, Samit Basu, one of the most prominent voices in contemporary Indian speculative fiction, reimagines resistance under these conditions. His fiction demonstrates that resistance is rarely spectacular. It does not always appear as mass protests or revolutionary manifestos, but is often found in smaller gestures, emotional exhaustion, fractured kinship, ironic humour, or the destabilisation of established narrative norms. In *The City Inside* characters like Joey resist not through open rebellion but through affective burnout and micro-refusals against the coercive optics of digital culture. In *Resistance* survival itself emerges as a form of dissent in a world defined by displacement and systemic control. *The Game World Trilogy* rewrites epic fantasy by mocking prophecy, destabilising divine authority, and reworking Hindu myth into ironic parody, refusing the ideological purity that has historically underpinned both empire and nationalism. Across these works, Basu positions speculative fiction as a site where political critique and imaginative resistance intersect.

This paper argues that Basu's contribution lies in his reworking of resistance as a deeply affective, fragmented and every day, practice. Rather than framing resistance as a grand revolutionary narrative, Basu depicts it as dispersed across the domains of spectacle, labour, gender, myth, and marginality. His works highlight the contradictions of living under conditions of surveillance and commodification, where even dissent risks being co-opted into the very structures it opposes. Yet, through satire, humour, and irony, Basu also illuminates the cracks in these structures, suggesting that resistance however small or ironic remains possible. To develop this argument, the paper draws on a theoretical framework that combines Foucault's concepts of surveillance and biopolitics, Debord's notion of the spectacle, Butler's theory of gender performativity, Haraway's cyborg feminism, Spivak's theorisation of the subaltern, and Zuboff's critique of surveillance capitalism. These frameworks provide the tools to analyse Basu's fiction as both a reflection of contemporary power structures and an imaginative reworking of how they might be resisted. Importantly, this study situates Basu within the wider landscape of South Asian speculative fiction. While Basu is among the most prominent Indian writers of fantasy and science fiction, his work gains additional depth when read alongside that of other South Asian writers such as Vandana Singh's *Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories*, Indra Das's *The Devourers*, Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape*, and Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*. These writers similarly grapple with questions of technology, identity, myth, and resistance, though each in distinct ways. Basu's fiction contributes uniquely to this tradition by blending satirical humour with dystopian critique, creating speculative worlds that are simultaneously local and global in their concerns.

Theoretical Framework

This study approaches Samit Basu's speculative fiction through an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that brings together insights from cultural theory, political philosophy, and postcolonial studies. The purpose of this framework is twofold that is first, to clarify the conceptual tools that guide the analysis of Basu's texts, and second, to demonstrate how these tools illuminate the forms of resistance dramatised in his fiction. Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* remains foundational in understanding how modern power operates through images and representations. For Debord, the spectacle is not simply a collection of images, but a social relation mediated by appearances. It is the stage on which life is performed, consumed, and commodified. In such a system, even dissent risks becoming another consumable image, stripped of its subversive edge. Basu's works, especially *The City Inside* and *Chosen Spirits*, resonate with Debord's analysis, activism, resistance, and identity is entangled in digital platforms where they circulate as optics, hashtags, and memes. The spectacle is thus both an instrument of control and a paradoxical site where counter-images can emerge. Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and his lectures on biopolitics provide a model for understanding how power in modern societies functions through surveillance and the internalisation of discipline. The panopticon Jeremy Bentham's architectural model in which inmates are visible to a central

watchman but cannot see him becomes for Foucault a metaphor for the diffusion of power through surveillance. In Basu's *The City Inside*, this model finds a twenty-first century analogue in digital surveillance systems, where citizens monitor themselves in pursuit of visibility and relevance. Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* extends this analysis into the realm of contemporary capitalism, showing how human experience is transformed into behavioural data that can be predicted, monetised, and manipulated. In Basu's fiction, this logic manifests in the influencer economy, where identity itself becomes the commodity. Basu terms "soft fascism" as the product of these mechanisms, a system in which overt authoritarianism is unnecessary because individuals willingly participate in their own monitoring, motivated by the promise of attention, status, or security. Arlie Hochschild, in *The Managed Heart* coined the term "emotional labour" to describe the ways in which workers manage their feelings to produce emotional experiences in others. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire* expanded this into the category of affective labour, labour that produces and manipulates emotions, relations, and forms of sociality. In the gig economies of Basu's imagined futures, affective labour is central. Influencers like Joey in *The City Inside* are required to manage not only their images but their moods, relationships, and affective ties. Resistance in such a context takes the form of the refusal to perform emotional scripts, the collapse under exhaustion, or the withdrawal from visibility. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* redefined gender not as an essence but as a performative effect produced by repeated acts. Gender, in this view, is what one does, an ongoing performance shaped by social norms. Basu's fiction reflects this fluid understanding of identity. Characters such as Joey embody forms of gender and sexuality that resist categorisation, destabilising the heteronormative frameworks imposed by both society and state. In highlighting these fluid identities, Basu demonstrates how resistance can emerge from the refusals that conform to fixed gender roles.

Cyborg Feminism

Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* challenges binary distinctions such as human or machine, male or female, and natural or artificial. For Haraway, the cyborg is a figure of hybridity that disrupts essentialist categories and opens possibilities for new forms of kinship and solidarity. Basu's speculative worlds reflect this cyborgian sensibility, characters form chosen families that transcend biology, adopt digital selves that blur the line between real and virtual, and forge hybrid identities that resist classification. Resistance here is not a return to purity but an embrace of multiplicity and hybridity. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak*? raises the critical question of whether those at the margins of power can represent themselves within dominant discourses. Spivak argues that the subaltern is often spoken for rather than allowed to speak. Peter Weiss's *The Aesthetics of Resistance* complements this by suggesting that resistance is not always overt revolt but can take aesthetic, symbolic, and even silent forms. Basu's fiction amplifies subaltern voices of migrant workers, precarious labourers, hacked identities who resist erasure not necessarily through speech but through survival itself. Their persistence, invisibility, and refusal to conform, constitutes a radical form of dissent. These theoretical perspectives provide the scaffolding for the analysis that follows. By bringing together Debord, Foucault, Zuboff, Butler, Haraway, Spivak, and Weiss, this study situates Basu's fiction at the intersection of global theoretical debates and South Asian cultural contexts. Basu's novels dramatise how the spectacle, surveillance, affective labour, gender, hybridity, and subalternity function in speculative futures, and how resistance can be imagined within and against these structures.

Surveillance and Soft Fascism

Basu's *The City Inside* offers one of the sharpest fictional explorations of surveillance in contemporary Indian fiction. Set in a near-future Delhi, the novel imagines a society in which public life is dominated by influencer culture, political optics, and digital visibility. Surveillance is not imposed by an authoritarian

state. It is willingly reproduced by citizens who perform themselves for constant monitoring and approval. The protagonist Joey works as a "Reality Controller" managing influencers whose lives are broadcast as immersive feeds. The text describes how "every mood swing was monetised, every gesture converted into data, every breakdown into a commodity" (Basu *The City Inside* 67). This line exemplifies Shoshana Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism, where human experience is transformed into behavioural data for profit. The fact that breakdowns themselves become profitable signals a disturbing collapse of public and private boundaries. Foucault's concept of the panopticon also resonates here. Unlike Bentham's prison model, where inmates feared an invisible watcher, Basu's Delhi demonstrates a situation where citizens internalise the logic of being watched because visibility is equated with survival. As Joey reflects, invisibility is tantamount to social death: "If you were offline, you didn't exist" (*The City Inside* 101). Basu thus illustrates what he terms "soft fascism" is a system of power that does not rely on overt violence but on voluntary participation, where coercion is disguised as consent. Resistance in this context is subtle and fragmented. Joey's moments of burnout, where she refuses to maintain her influencers, emotional labour, signify small but powerful refusals. Theorists such as Arlie Hochschild and Michael Hardt help frame this as a refusal of affective labour, she resists by failing to perform the emotional scripts that sustain digital capitalism, the act of withdrawal becomes a form of dissent, even when it is invisible. In *Resistance* surveillance is literal and militarised, set in a dystopian scenario of migration and displacement. Yet, even here, Basu complicates the narrative. Characters find small ways of resisting through anonymity, adopting fluid identities, or simply through persistence.

Genre Subversion and Myth

Basu's *Game World Trilogy*, *The Simoqin Prophecies*, *The Manticore's Secret*, and *The Unwaba Revelations* function as both homage to and parody of the epic fantasy. Unlike traditional epics, that elevate prophecy and divine authority, Basu destabilises these tropes through satire. The trilogy opens with a mock-heroic prophecy that collapses almost immediately, undermining the expectation that narratives are driven by divine destiny. A passage in *The Simoqin Prophecies* illustrates this parody, "The prophecy was vague, self-contradictory, and subject to constant reinterpretation yet everyone followed it because it was all they had" (*Simoqin* 23). Here, Basu critiques the ideological function of myth, which often justifies power structures through claims of inevitability. This aligns with Darko Suvin's notion of cognitive estrangement, by defamiliarising myth through irony, Basu forces readers to see its constructedness. Suparno Banerjee argues that South Asian science fiction often reworks myth to critique postcolonial politics. Basu exemplifies this trend by showing how divine figures are flawed, Gods are petty, and prophecies unreliable. Resistance, in this context, emerges through laughter and irony. By refusing the seriousness of myth, Basu resists its ideological use in nationalist and authoritarian discourses. Importantly, Basu's mythic parody resonates in contemporary India, where myth is frequently weaponised in political rhetoric. His irreverent treatment becomes a subversive act, showing that speculative fiction can challenge cultural essentialism by destabilising its narrative foundations.

Gender, Queerness, and Identity

Basu's speculative universes consistently foreground fluid identities and non-normative kinships. In *The City Inside*, Joey's identity cannot be contained by heteronormative categories. Her relationships, affective ties, and performances of the self, reflect Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity: gender is not essence but enactment. Joey's refusal to conform destabilises normative expectations and becomes itself a form of resistance. In *Resistance*, queer characters form chosen families that resist both the biological determinism of kinship and the coercive structures of the state. Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" helps

illuminate these dynamics. Characters become cyborgian not because they are literally hybrid with machines, but they embody fragmented, fluid, and hybrid identities that can break binaries. Considering a moment in *Resistance* where a queer collective provides sanctuary to migrants, "No one asked where you came from, who you were, or what you had done. Survival was enough" (*Resistance* 141). This radical openness rejects the state's demand for legibility. It is a politics of refusal, grounded in hybridity and multiplicity. Basu's depiction of queer kinship also resists the commodification of identity in digital capitalism. Unlike influencer-driven optics, these relationships are sustained through solidarity and care. Resistance here is relational and it is enacted through the creation of spaces where difference is embraced rather than policed.

Pop Culture, Digital Optics, and Techno-Resistance

In Chosen Spirits (the earlier version of *The City Inside*), Basu satirises how even resistance is commodified in digital cultures. Activism becomes a performance for optics, "Hashtags burned bright for a day, and then the next spectacle replaced them" (*Chosen Spirits* 89). This echoes Debord's argument that the spectacle consumes even its own negation. Basu critiques what might be called "performative activism." Characters post radical slogans but remain complicit in the system. Yet, he does not dismiss digital culture entirely. Instead, he shows its ambivalence, while the spectacle commodifies dissent; it also provides tools for counter-narratives. Memes, satire, and digital art in Basu's fiction become ways to subvert state propaganda, even if temporarily. Foucault's idea that power is everywhere but so is resistance is apt here. Digital platforms are both mechanisms of surveillance and spaces of creativity. Basu captures this paradox by showing how influencers may be trapped in optics but can also exploit visibility for subtle forms of dissent.

Subaltern Voices and Marginal Resistance

Finally, Basu foregrounds the voices and lives of those at the margins. In Resistance, migrant workers are depicted as precarious, invisible, yet central to the survival of society. Their struggles echo Spivak's question, can the subaltern speak? Basu shows that while they may not be heard in dominant discourse, their persistence constitutes a form of speaking through survival. Weiss's aesthetics of resistance helps frame this. Resistance is not always a spectacular revolt, sometimes it is the quiet endurance of the marginalised. In *The City Inside*, hacked identities that exist outside legal frameworks embody this silent resistance. Their very existence challenges systems that demand legibility and control. A striking passage in *Resistance* describes migrants moving invisibly through Delhi, "They were everywhere, yet seen by no one. The city could not function without them, yet it denied their existence" (*Resistance* 203). Here, Basu highlights the paradox of the subaltern indispensable but invisible. By giving narrative space to these figures, Basu's fiction amplifies their resistant presence.

Comparative South Asian Context

While Samit Basu is one of the most visible figures in Indian speculative fiction, his works gain greater significance when placed in dialogue with other South Asian writers who also explore resistance, identity, and futurity through speculative tropes. Situating Basu within this broader literary landscape not only highlights his unique contributions but also demonstrates how Indian and South Asian speculative fiction collectively challenges dominant narratives of modernity, technology, and myth.

Vandana Singh: Climate, Multiplicity, and Everyday Resistance

Vandana Singh's *Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories* presents a body of work that is deeply invested in ecological futures, scientific imagination, and the everyday lives of ordinary people. Like Basu, Singh does not portray resistance as a grandiose revolution but as small everyday gestures and acts of care, persistence, and questioning authority. Her stories often draw from Indian philosophical traditions of plurality and relationality, offering alternative models of temporality and subjectivity. Basu's emphasis on the quotidian lives is similarly depicted to that of Singh. Joey's exhaustion in *The City Inside* or the migrants' persistence in *Resistance* parallel Singh's insistence that resistance emerges through the ordinary rather than the extraordinary.

Indra Das: Queerness and Mythic Reimagination

Indra Das's *The Devourers* combines fantasy and historical fiction to tell a queer, postcolonial story of werewolves in Mughal India. By blending myth with queerness, Das destabilises heteronormative frameworks and challenges colonial histories of categorisation. Basu's works resonate with Das's in their shared concern with hybrid, fluid identities that resist normative boundaries. However, Basu departs in tone whereas Das deploys lyrical intensity, Basu uses satire and humour. Together, they demonstrate how South Asian speculative fiction reclaims myth as a space for resistance, whether through Das's queer poetics or Basu's ironic parody.

Manjula Padmanabhan: Dystopia and Gendered Resistance

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* envisions a dystopia where women are almost extinct and strictly controlled. Her work explicitly links gender oppression with authoritarianism, showing how control over reproduction becomes a mechanism of power. Basu's *Resistance* and *The City Inside* echo these concerns but frame them in the context of surveillance capitalism and digital optics. Both writers highlight how gendered bodies are sites of control and how alternative kinships whether queer, cyborg, or chosen families function as resistant strategies.

Amitav Ghosh: Science, History, and the Postcolonial Imagination

Amitav Ghosh is not usually classified as a speculative writer, but his work *The Calcutta Chromosome* is a landmark text that engages with science, secrecy, and colonial knowledge systems. Ghosh demonstrates how scientific discourse itself was shaped by colonial hierarchies, and his novel stages a subaltern intervention into scientific history. Basu's fiction, particularly Resistance, echoes this concern with how knowledge and control intersect. By giving narrative space to migrants, hackers, and marginal voices, Basu extends Ghosh's interrogation of who has the authority to define truth and progress.

Critical Context: South Asian Science Fiction as Resistance

Critics such as Suparno Banerjee's *Other Tomorrows* and Sami Ahmad Khan's *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj* have argued that Indian science fiction is inherently political, often mobilising speculative tropes to address postcolonial anxieties, technological unevenness, and authoritarianism. Basu participates in this tradition but also distinguishes himself through his playful style. His use of humour, parody, and pop culture references differentiates him from writers like Singh and Das, whose tones are more serious. Yet this humour is not superficial, rather it is in resistant mode, destabilising myths, exposing absurdities, and refusing solemnity in the face of oppression. When read alongside other South Asian writers, Basu's work

reveals a distinctive contribution, he situates resistance within the contradictions of spectacle and digital capitalism while simultaneously mocking the mythic and epic traditions often mobilised for nationalist purposes. His fiction is thus both local: deeply embedded in Delhi's urban fabric, Indian mythologies, and South Asian socio-political contexts, and global: speaking to concerns about surveillance, neoliberalism, and authoritarian drift.

Conclusion

Samit Basu's speculative fiction, encompassing *The City Inside*, *Resistance* and *The Game World Trilogy*, represents one of the most sustained attempts in South Asian literature to grapple with the entanglements of power, technology, and myth in the twenty-first century. By foregrounding resistance as a dispersed, affective, and often unspectacular practice, Basu reframes how rebellion might be imagined in a world where power operates less through overt coercion than spectacle, surveillance, and the commodification of life itself. The notion of the spectacle, drawn from Debord, is central to this reframing. In Basu's Delhi, resistance risks being consumed as performance hashtags, optics, and influencer dissent. Yet, precisely because spectacle saturates everyday life, it also becomes a site where subversive cracks can emerge as satire, irony, or even refusal. The "soft fascism" of Basu's worlds depends on voluntary participation, but that very voluntariness creates spaces for hesitation, burnout and refusal representing minor forms of dissent that accumulate significance. Basu's reworking of myth and genre is equally significant. By parodying prophecy, mocking divine authority, and refusing the solemnity of epic traditions, Basu destabilises the ideological use of myth in both colonial and nationalist contexts. His humorous irreverence resists cultural essentialism, reminds readers that myths are not immutable truths but contested narratives. This genre play constitutes a resistant aesthetic, opening fantasy itself as a tool of critique rather than affirmation. Basu's fiction also insists on the centrality of gender, queerness, and hybridity to contemporary resistance. Drawing on Butler's theory of performativity and Haraway's cyborg feminism, his characters embody fluid identities that challenge normative frameworks. Chosen families, queer kinship networks, and hybrid digital selves resist not only state control but also the commodification of intimacy in surveillance capitalism. Resistance here is relational, enacted in acts of solidarity, care, and refusal to conform. Perhaps most striking is Basu's amplification of subaltern voices. Migrant workers, precarious identities, and hacked existences populate his narratives, often invisible yet indispensable. In echoing Spivak's question can the subaltern speak? Basu demonstrates that survival itself can be a mode of speaking. By narrativising these marginal lives, his fiction enacts what Peter Weiss called the "aesthetics of resistance" a recognition that resistance need not be heroic but may reside in persistence, invisibility, or irony. Placed in conversation with other South Asian speculative writers Vandana Singh, Indra Das, Manjula Padmanabhan, Amitav Ghosh, Basu's work reveals its distinctive contribution. Singh emphasises ecological multiplicity, Das explores queer mythic hybridity, Padmanabhan stages dystopian gender oppression, and Ghosh interrogates colonial science. Basu, on the other hand carves out a space that blends humour, digital critique, and satirical fantasy. His irreverence is his resistance, refusing both authoritarian solemnity and neoliberal optimism.

In conclusion, Basu's speculative worlds remind us that resistance is not a singular event but a dispersed practice. It emerges in the exhaustion of labour, the mockery of myth, the opacity of subaltern survival, and the queer refusal of categorisation. It is an insistence on the possibility of other futures, however fragmented and ironic. By reimagining resistance in these terms, Basu not only enriches South Asian speculative fiction but also provides readers with conceptual tools for navigating the contradictions of our own surveillance-saturated present. By exposing the absurdities of surveillance culture, mocking authoritarian power, and celebrating solidarity and hybridity, Basu opens up new ways of thinking about

rebellion. His works prove that even within a world dominated by spectacle and surveillance, small acts of refusal and imagination can still carve out possibilities for resistance.

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