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Indicting Governmental Control, Military-Industrial Complex and Rogue AI: A Political Reading of Three Young-Adult (Science Fiction) Stories

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Abstract

This paper delves into the tangible materiality and political relevance of three Young-Adult Science Fiction stories by Indian writers in English. It analyses how these writers approach, interpret and address socio-political maladies afflicting today's India. Utilising the theoretical framework of Darko Suvin's novum, this paper scans the primary texts to locate how they formulate and highlight pressing issues of a developing India, and how these contemporary problems are foregrounded using the self-aware deployment mechanism of (YA) Science Fiction. It also identifies how these writers view the operationalisation of upcoming technologies.

Keywords: Indian Science Fiction, Science Fiction in Indian English, YA SF Short-Stories, Novum,

Science Fiction (SF) is a genre of rousing dreams and biting nightmares, of ambrosial utopias and ghastly dystopias. SF is a template where every vision constitutes an extrapolation that rises above the prevalent material winds. Interestingly, these very extrapolations are dependent on current material setups to such an extent that SF narratives emerge as a perfect mode to comment on the socio-political milieu of a society. SF in Indian English operates on similar principles, even when aimed towards a Young Adult (YA) readership.

This paper seeks to understand the political and social relevance of ideas, themes and issues raised by three YA SF stories especially when seen in the context of a prismatic India that produced and consumed them. The three stories – “Almaru”, “The Coward” and “Catatonic” – fuse the personal with the political, the YA with the adult, and foreground issues which speak to these SF writers the most. For example, “Almaru” indicts extreme centralisation of authority and how such a political structure can interfere with and intrude in the personal sphere of the citizenry. “The Coward” ideologically combats the Military-Industrial Complex and highlights how national government and trans-national corporations often join hands to bamboozle the very citizenry (read consumers) they are meant to serve and protect. “Catatonic”, on the other hand, comments on the horrors of AI gone rogue and manifests how the family unit curbs individual choice and free will, even in the most democratic of societies.

Using the theoretical framework of Darko Suvin's 'novum', I will focus on how these stories mirror, interrogate, and refract the contemporary national realities and how writers of YA stories use the vehicle of SF to indict the faulty socio-political ecosphere around them. As in some of my earlier attempts directed towards other SF texts, I adopt the novum as a helpful ingress location into the discourse of the tangible materiality of SF since “all the epistemological, ideological, and narrative implications and correlatives of the novum lead to the conclusion that significant sf is in fact a specifically roundabout way of commenting on an author's collective

context” (Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 84). Such an endeavour to pinpoint, isolate, and study specific novums of these short stories can help highlight the perceptions and attitudes of SF writers towards current India.

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. defines the novum as “a scientifically plausible innovation that catalyzes an imaginary historical transformation” (*A Companion to Science Fiction*, Ed. David Seed, 52). It happens to be a vital tool to understand the materiality of SF. Novum is “the historical innovation or novelty in an sf text from which the most important distinctions between the world of the tale from the world of the reader stem” (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., “Marxist theory and science fiction”, 119). The novum is, thus, the innovative heart of a text, and the choice and operationalization of this core provides an unmatched glimpse into the attitude and driving forces of the author who chose it.

All of my primary texts were published in *Shockwave and Other Cyber Stories*, a collection of eleven Speculative Fiction (SpecFic) stories that is mostly uncharted still in terms of critical endeavours directed towards it. Published in 2007 by Penguin (Puffin), all stories contained in this volume cannot be labelled SF, and many might be called SpecFic instead. This paper chooses three (overtly) SF stories and attempts to understand the politics behind their themes and narratives¹.

The first SF story I pick up to dissect for its inherent materiality is Vandana Singh’s “Almaru”. Set a few years into the future, this story is located in an autonomous City-State of Delhi – a technological, seemingly utopian, marvel that is walled off from the vast expanse called the ‘Outside’ – wild plains of fields, mud villages and ‘Agri-Complexes’. These Agri-Complexes, as the name implies, are vast acres of fields taken over by the city-state and used to grow supplies for a population that lives in relative prosperity of this futuristic Delhi. These are also the times of ‘Peasant-Wars’: farmers from outside the walls often go on a rampage against these ‘Agri-Complexes’. These wildlings have declared a war on the city-state, and the latter protects itself with the help of the city guards, which comprises civilian militia and *kathputlis*² – robotics beings which can sometimes be controlled by human mind(s).

The city-state of Delhi has a highly centralised polity. The primus inter pares is the Prime Minister, a Big Brotherly figure – “the PM’s tower, soaring over the rest of the city, was spangled with lights, topped by a bright beacon that was sometimes referred to as the PM’s Eye” (2). This description mirrors the all-seeing Eye of Sauron located in Mordor in *The Lord of the Rings*. To complete the picture of a highly centralised society, for example, these *kathputlis* have to report to ‘Central Processing’ often, and news is available only via ‘NewsCentral’.

In a plot reminiscent of Asimov’s *I, Robot* set in Orwell’s 1984, the story discusses the themes of AI’s quest for true freedom, and how AI can be used by a central authority to oppress the masses. It explores AI as a tool to maintain status-quo, but one that has the revolutionary

¹ I focus primarily on those narratives which are coterminous with the Suvinian definition of SF – stories that contain a novum propelled by a drastic disruption, though one that is explainable by science (or least attempted to be explained from a quasi-scientific perspective). Also, my focus here is on the micro-politics of Science Fiction (SF), and not of Speculative Fiction.

² Kathputli, literally ‘wooden doll’, means a ‘puppet’ in Hindi – an inanimate entity being controlled by a sentient being. Mechanised beings here are but puppets in the hands of their human masters, just as those who are at the receiving end of the class/caste paradigms in the real world, the ‘hands’, happen to be at the disposal of their ‘superiors/masters’.

potential to overthrow existing oppressive power structures in place. Of course, the AI-enabled kathputlis are also an allegory on the current caste and class paradigms.

The novum pertains to the usage of AI to support an insular, authoritarian society. The kathputlis keep the society running. Dr. Manek Kumar, a scientist, has managed to create a device through which human masters can connect directly with the brains of these kathputlis:

Robot-to-human mind-links were now a reality, and the PM had suspended all human-to-human experiments. The kathputlis that were now in every neighbourhood, every apartment block, were not only servants of the citizens of the City-State: they were the PM's voice, his defence system, his army of willing-slave minds. The PM himself had cybernetic enhancements to extend his lifespan beyond that of ordinary human beings. Some people believed he would live forever. (9)

With kathputlis fully integrated into such a society, this technological innovation leads to a historical transformation. Not only do the kathputlis form the logistical backbone of this insular 'utopia', they also maintain status-quo and enforce the will of the PM, whatever it may be. For example, a 'traitor' is executed by one such kathputli by electrocution – the same kathputli who was a friend of this family.

The themes of this story are clearly influenced and shaped by Indian material realities, as evident from how the novum can be linked with immediate socio-political problems. From the figure of a charismatic leader swaying the masses, to the story of two Indias, and the socio-economic clashes driven by the global market, the story brings the intra-national tussles to fore. For example, forceful land acquisitions and farmer suicides are two thorny issues at the forefront of public imagination as the Indian government, with its desire to become more pro-business and pro-industry, constitutes SEZs in a traditionally agricultural country. Singh raises both these issues in her story.

Here is a broadcast from an off-Network channel, Delhi Underground, that has been covering the events Outside. Forces of the City-State of Delhi razed 34 villages to the ground last week. Sixteen people are still missing. A contingent of the bereaved is gathered outside the main Agri-Complex. Tensions are running high... (16)

In a classic Naxalite/Maoist move, the poorly-armed peasants aim to 'encircle urban centres', making the politics all the more revolutionary. This also indicts government media. NewsCentral is the only approved channel of mass-media in Delhi State, and it never reports any facts or events which run contrary to the government's perspective. But alternate media, as exemplified by Delhi Underground, does. Bereaved farmers protesting against forceful land acquisition are regarded as enemy combatants by the city-state. Also, Delhi Underground reports, "... Farmer suicides two months ago. The City-State seemed determined to take over the ancestral lands of our people for the newest Agri-Complex..." (17)

It is not difficult to link these themes with external reality. First, I turn to this article published in the *Indian Express*:

Farmer from nine villages of Ludhiana district on Monday lodged a protest against the Punjab government notices seeking to acquire their land under the Land Acquisition Act of 1894. The farmers from nine villages... gathered at the Greater Ludhiana Development Authority (GLADA) office. They said that they were not interested in giving up their land and under no circumstances under the old and archaic Act of 1894, which had been enacted by the British to snatch the land of people.

The vicious fangs of the regressive Land Acquisition Act of 1894 are visible still. P. Sainath writes in *The Hindu* on the second issue: “Suicide rates among Indian farmers were a chilling 47 per cent higher than they were for the rest of the population in 2011. In some of the states worst hit by the agrarian crisis, they were well over 100 per cent higher.”

Not only are these farmer suicides and excesses by the state not reported, they are also justified by a ‘democratic’ state using hegemony – as evident from the vilification of all those who dare express dissent and question the orders of a central authority. This entire political ecosphere is directly linked to the kathputlis – those who follow orders without questioning them. Interestingly, these kathputlis have a gentle, benevolent, helpful persona of their own, but it could be overridden at any moment by the PM’s wishes: “The PM can take over anytime he wants. Bhim’s brain has an override circuit – a device known as a linker connects him to the PM’s brain and makes him subservient to the PM’s commands” (11).

Dr. Kumar, in this story, creates a virus that burns the linker circuit that earlier enabled the kathputlis to connect to PM’s brain. Kumar hides this in a flashdrive, and hopes his daughter Vrinda can get this to Bhim, their family kathputli, so he might free himself and assert his own identity. She succeeds and this is what happens:

He found his balance. His eyes lit up – an unfamiliar green. He said, slowly and wonderingly: That was a virus, Vrinda. It burnt one of my circuits. Vrinda – I am no longer linked to the PM. What is my purpose? What am I meant to be? (15)

This Frankenstein’s monster, fortunately, meets Vrinda at this defining moment. She tells him he is no servant or slave, he is a citizen of the city-state, and helps him assert his AI identity. With his newly found true-sentience, Bhim seeks to carve an independent place for himself in the new world order. It goes without saying that this liberation of kathputlis can also be seen as a metaphor for caste (the name ‘Bhim’) and class struggle. Upon realising the ‘citizens’ (read bourgeoisie) urgently need their willing cooperation to run their own world smoothly, these kathputlis (the proletariat/backward castes) assert their identity and claim their rightful place. No longer do they defer to someone else’s judgment or obey instructions from a ‘human’ – they are citizens themselves, equal and free. The story ends with the beacon at the top of PM’s tower going out, as if to suggest that the coup, the people’s revolution, is underway, and freedom for the marginalised – the kathputlis, the farmers, the workers (and not just the politicians, scientists, bureaucrats and businessmen) – is here to stay.

“The Coward” by Payal Dhar is the next text I take up for study. This story starts as SpecFic, with its alternate setting and a fantastic air to it, but soon settles down to be a hard-core SF narrative. The world in this story is ruled by a High Council, and has recently been a victim of a ‘civil war’ – an uprising that was crushed with the help of the ‘Elite Guards’. In selecting such a loaded yet sometimes precise and sometimes generic vocabulary, Dhar’s civil war could refer to multiple events around the globe in recent times. The example of Iran immediately springs to my mind, when after the 1979 revolution, the Sepāh-e Pāsdārān-e Enqelāb-e Eslāmi (The Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution), often called ‘Revolutionary Guards’ in international media, quashed any challenges to the newly-founded Islamic Republic. Another parallel to this High Council and Elite Guards structure could be the Chinese Central Military Commission and the People’s Liberation Army.

The story features Ariba’s arrest for engaging in anti-state activities. Ariba, literally meaning wise and decisive, is slapped with ‘Classified Information Law’. Dhar’s attempts to indict legislative knee-jerk responses to terrorism (such as the American Patriot Act or India’s

POTA/TADA), find a voice in how Ariba, a respected citizen, is treated – she is not even told why she has been detained as “the Classified Information Act denies her captors to even speak to her of the matter” (33). Ariba is ultimately saved by Nira and Noah, expert computer-network-systems operators, who act as her vigilante defence counsel, and use a stealth version of a novel technology (‘EXTRANET’) to delete the evidence of her guilt (video footage of her transferring money to rebels so that they can stop the unsafe and extremely hazardous technology of Quantum Computers from being deployed in the market).

The novum in this story relates to quantum computing. Scientists have succeeded in creating the proto-type of a quantum chip. Just as ordinary computers interpret data in 1s and 0s, the quantum computers, that is, computers with a quantum chip in them, have an added advantage – they can interpret data as both 1s and 0s (perhaps due to quantum superposition), thereby making these quantum computers much faster than their earlier counterparts: “Well, our computers currently process information in bits, right? Each bit can take a value of 0 or 1. A combination of those 1s and 0s make up the data... A quantum bit can also take the value of *both 0 and 1 simultaneously*... that would mean *much* faster computers...” (40)

However, this speed comes at a price. These quantum computers, propelled by this revolutionary quantum chip, are extremely unstable – and not ready for a commercial placement in the market.

That although they have a prototype for a quantum chip that is compatible with any present day computer running Windows, Mac OS and certain Linux versions, it is still very unstable. Looking at the architecture, I can say this will generate so much heat that it will sizzle! It could blow up microchips, hard drives, the computer – and the person using it. And it’s rolling out for testing in a week! (40)

This represents the cut-throat, shrewd, material realities of a globalised, market-driven economy, not just of India. This take on current socio-political issues seems to be an indictment of the MIC – the military-industrial complex, and how governments join hands with corporations to generate revenue, at the expense of the interests of the consumers and the citizens.

‘Wait a minute’, said Noah, ‘you said it’s unstable and dangerous. So why would they spend money on building samples to give out for testing?’

‘Think about it, Noah. This is the breakthrough we have been waiting decades for. This will totally change the way computers work. Imagine the opportunities, the money in it for those who crack this first. We, *Harvard*, are not the only people working on this. That’s why the unholy hurry. Why waste precious time and money setting up testing systems when you have a world full of guinea pigs at your disposal?’ (41)

The ‘guinea pigs’ here are, of course, the ordinary consumers. Only they can test the chip in its current stage – at the minimum expense to the corporations, unmindful of the fact that millions could be killed by this product being shipped to homes all over the realm.

But thousands of innocent people could get killed! This is murder! Massacre, actually!

If it works, some people could get very rich. If it fails, microchip manufacturers would have to take the fall for it. It’s the perfect plan. Greed overcomes all obstacles... (41)

Dhar’s attempts to use SF to point fingers at the present are overt in its approach and tangible in character. The story ends with Ariba, a single parent of two, declaring that she might have taken a terrible risk in trying to sabotage the quantum chip, an act for which she was

arrested, but “it was necessary. They didn’t care about the consequences (of marketing the quantum-chip). No one would have listened to me and I am not brave enough to take them head-on. I did what I was able to do. I destroyed a part of the code” (43).

“The Coward” is simultaneously a scathing critique of three separate but related issues. The first is the authoritarian streak subtly hidden even in a so-called democratic state. Ariba is arrested and not even informed about what she did owing to the “Classified Information” legislation. Secondly, this story constitutes a critique of the Military-Industrial Complex: How corporations, politicians, and the military join hands to take decisions for their own betterment, not the ones who they are meant to serve. Thirdly, it criticises how those in power, in a mad rush to achieve profits, use dubious, sometimes unethical means to deploy emerging technologies in a market that is protean and untapped. It is easy to link all three of these issues with the world we live in.

Since this is meant for YA readership, the lesson, the moral, is more than easy to grasp. This echoes the age-old dictum: For evil to triumph, it is enough that good men (and women) do nothing. With the hackers Nira and Noah taking the pain to ensure Ariba was not punished for having a conscience, the story emerges as a grim reminder – newer technologies must not be allowed to fall into the wrong hands and their monetisation must be driven by a desire for mutual betterment of the people, and not solely profits or *machtpolitik*. Dhar seems to be hinting that if newer technologies can lead to negative consequences, for example, sustained surveillance and draconian monitoring (Ariba was caught on a CCTV transferring money to the rebels), then the cure must also lie in social media and networking technologies. If the anonymous CCTV acted as a witness against the criminal act of Ariba, though one driven by her conscience, then the hackers who deleted the video footage represent the imposition of human will on computers for constructive ends. Therefore, the emergent technologies contain the seeds of their own limitations within themselves, and the onus is on right-minded individuals to ensure that technology never becomes a master in itself, or allows a central authority to control, shape and contour the behavioural patterns of a people.

“Catatonic” by Vatsala Kaul is a teen cyber-story that seamlessly fuses the personal and the political. It recounts the story of a young school-going teenager (Kat), and how she is affected when her computer – the lifeline of professional networking, social interaction and identity formation in the near future – goes rogue. The story focuses on her dealings with her parents, friends and acquaintances in the backdrop of a phase of teenage rebellion, technological advancement, and existential uncertainty.

The novum here pertains to a computer virus, or a ‘Blended Threat’ to be more precise, which is about to wreak havoc on the world. “A Blended Threat named Mellifluous is fast infecting computers all over the world. A Blended Threat is a malevolent computer program that bundles the worst aspects of viruses, worms, Trojan horses and malicious code into one threat” (102). The experimental AI of this harmful programme takes over computers, multiplies, sends copies of itself to other computers in the network, and infects the entire world within a short span of time. Then, to everyone’s horror, a countdown starts. In an instance of mass hysteria reminiscent of the Y2K bug in 1999, panic grips the globe. People expect the world to end when the countdown reaches zero. The world grinds to a standstill as the hour approaches. Lovers say their final goodbyes, families weep, children cry, and adults go mad, afraid of this cyber doomsday weapon. However, the story ends in an anti-climax. Instead of the infected computers exploding or ending human life when the counter reaches zero, a rock song ‘Catatonic Chaos’ blasts all over the world and continues for 90 seconds, and then the computers return to normal.

The roots of this rather strange Blended Threat can be traced back to its not-so-strange creator. An angst-ridden teenage student, Mani, “with his long unkempt hair and frayed-at-the-edges look,” (94) does something which makes him stand apart from his peers. When forced by parental pressure to study Geology instead of Rock Poetry (the pun on rocks is evident) – which he wants to, considering himself to be a future rockstar – Mani shuts himself up in a room. He works on an incomplete anti-virus programme his father had been working on, and transforms it into ‘Mellifluous’ – a Blended Threat that will bring the world to its knees, which it does, before making every computer in this world blare out Mani’s own creation – a rock song called ‘Catatonic Chaos,’ with “grave protest lyrics against parental guidance and other forms of tyranny... and against the unfairness of the world’s fathers and academic institutes that offered courses in rocks that didn’t quite rock” (105). The historical transformation brought about by this Blended Threat is also very real. It shocked and terrorised the world; people hugged their loved ones, made peace with their creator and prepared themselves to see the end of the world. Though the world doesn’t end, it does ensure mankind thinks about the direction in which it is headed.

Again, Kaul in “Catatonic” seems to echo something which Dhar tried to foreground in “The Coward”. Technology, by and large, is not good or bad. It is how these rapidly evolving, mutating newer technologies are operationalised, deployed and marketed that makes all the difference. It is *how* the humans choose to utilise a particular technology that makes it benevolent or malevolent. For example, CCTVs can act as a deterrent against thefts, but they can also be used to curtail individual liberties and impinge on privacy. Similarly, Mani takes an *anti-virus* his father was working on, and with a few lines of code, transforms this anti-virus into a malevolent entity, a Blended Threat, a virus. Was the virus at fault for hijacking computers or was its creator? Moreover, was it the sole fault of the creator or the social milieu which drove Mani, a budding rockstar, towards cyber-crime? Kaul, I feel, is not critiquing cyber-crime as much as she is the conditions which lead youth to turn towards such a criminal eventuality.

Also, this story is distinctively shaped by Indian material realities. From Kat’s mother complaining about her low-waist jeans to Mani’s father (Srini) forcing him to study Geology instead of a subject he likes (rock poetry), the society parallels India’s fascination with protecting the modesty of a woman and ensuring education that leads to a stable, professional, time-tested job that pays well (at the expense of one’s own personal preferences).

This story, as pointed earlier, fuses the personal and the political. She indicts the over-reliance on computers, and how these machines can shape our social interaction. When Mellifluous the Blended Threat sends out spam and nasty messages to people of Kat’s contact list (such as Sicko, a friend), the offended people stop talking to her when they meet her in real life. The barbs unknowingly sent through her online persona cut so deep that even Kat’s real life presence cannot heal them.

This happened due to an AI going rogue – perhaps another point Kaul is making. The story centres around Mellifluous, a mutation by Mani on Srini’s anti-virus software. As Mellifluous says itself: “I was an anti-virus program, programmed to self-destruct in case I myself turned virulent, but I didn’t, and so I have” (96). It is almost as if the writer is forcing the reader to think in a direction where AI, normally assumed to assist us, gains sentience and chooses not to assist us. How we respond to such a contingency, and how it changes our social relationships, are questions we need to think about.

This story also raises questions about how parents regulate teenagers’ lives in India. From what one is expected to wear, to with whom one is meant to socialise with, and then too in what

location and capacity, all depends on the wishes of the parents. This parental pressure is not limited to social life alone, but extends to the sphere of professional choices. Mani wants to study rock poetry and wants to become a rockstar. However, his scientist dad has other plans for him. Post a through mapping of Mani's brain, his father realises Mani's best chance in succeeding lies in the study of rocks (Geology) and not rock poetry, and thus he is expected to study precisely that. Mani himself has no say in this – this is why he snaps, and mutates anti-virus software into a Blended Threat that takes over the world and subjects each person on this planet to hear Mani's own angst-ridden song of protest against this closed, tyrannical supervision of the Indian youth by their image-conscious parents.

It is logical to infer that these three YA SF short-stories share traits with SF stories meant for adult audiences – the tangible politics and progressive aesthetics are more than visible. Like most SF meant for adults, these three stories also aim at social indictment and reconstruction. YA SF stories, even those pertaining to intensely personal issues have a political outlook, for the creation of an alternate world – projected into the future from the present – exists to critique the lacunae of and in the present. Also, a common sutra binding all three stories is how technology *per se* is not good or evil – it is how it is wielded that makes it good or bad. The AI of “Almaru” (kathputli) is evil not because it is innately so but because its command lies in evil hands (the Stalin-esque PM) – this AI has to overthrow the dark powers of human greed to be able to become good. The surveillance of “The Coward” is another technology that is used for the wrong purposes. It is combated by using the same technology to hide the proof of Ariba's crime. “Catatonic” has an anti-virus being turned into a virus, but only as a token symbol of protest against the repressive world order.

All in all, these stories seem to point out that not only is technology a value-neutral category and depends on the person using it, but that newer technologies contain their own foil within themselves. In this constructive criticism, SF emerges a truly revolutionary genre, and YA SF short stories provide an ideal delivery mechanism to resist oppressive powers structures and combat hegemony. These dominant structures of suppression and control may exist in an alternate setting, but their operationalisation leaves an indelible impression on the minds of the reader, thereby making him or her question contemporary practises, institutions and issues with an aim of critiquing them. In this, YA SF, a so called escapist genre, does more good than harm, especially by attuning young minds to progressivism, and sensitising them to the structures of discrimination, oppression and coercion present around them. What more could YA literature aim for?

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