



RESEARCH ARTICLE



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DYSTOPIAN DISJUNCTURE IN SAROJINI SAHOO'S TRANSLATED SHORT FICTION: A QUESTArchi Sharma^{1*}, Dr. Tushar Nair²^{1*} (Research Scholar, Career Point University)² (Professor, Career Point University)[doi: https://doi.org/10.33329/ioell.63.56](https://doi.org/10.33329/ioell.63.56)**ABSTRACT**

Critical theories aim at extracting essence of texts through different models. Sarojini Sahoo is a feminist writer but reading her works only for the depiction of women is an unworthy restriction. Five short stories chosen from her anthology of English translations have varied symptoms of a dystopian society for which a common signal is the isolation people adopt or are forced into. This disjuncture is so ingrained in routines that rarely it is remarked upon; instead people remain ambivalent about its authenticity. These stories have Kafkasque suffocation running throughout the text. While it may seem to be centered around feminine issues, it is equally applicable to men and any society.

Keywords: *Dystopia, Oriya, Sarojini Sahoo, Short Story, Translation*

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"If I am a feminist that is because I am a woman. I think 'femininity' is the proper word to replace 'feminism,' because the latter has lost its significance and identity due to its extensive involvement with radical politics."(Nawale)

Sarojini Sahoo is a self-celebrated feminist discovering new dimensions in her oeuvre. While her perspective of feminism may render the vantage capability of some compartmentalized, it allows the reader to broaden their scope of reading her texts. Her fiction also reaches the crevices of human life

which is saturated and suffocated with its own anomalies. This darker force which is usually covered up and carried forward and by extension; ignored is amalgamated with other and becomes routine. Routines are seldom questioned by individuals, no matter how depressing. If an individual ever reckons his/her tendencies to be unfit, these doubts are further repressed by their surroundings. Sahoo has eight Oriya novels and ten short story anthologies to her credit. Selective English translations of stories are also available on her blog *Scent of OwnInk*. All of her



works are highly penetrative towards this routine and human psyche. Her short fiction has embodied this scalpel which shreds the accepted abnormal in human lives. Her feminism has produced various shades of how females internalize their struggles. The conditioning and the inner-most duels must not be captured for study, else it might be a threat to the equilibrium maintained by the society.

This equilibrium must be a sham if the turbulence underneath is visible to all worthy. This seemingly peaceful, rarely challenged status quo conjoins the feminism with the dystopian undertones in her fiction. As a bonus, it extracts the elements which are responsible for the sad state of many characters who are splendidly well off from outside and grasping for a hold in a quicksand in their minds.

What is dystopia after all? Its inception can be traced to the Greek word Utopia (ou-topos) meaning "nowhere"; used by Thomas More to describe a place (with no geographical boundaries) of his ideals of social harmony and human achievements; a pun through the similar word eu-topos meaning "good place". ("Utopia") Dystopia's negative connotation is evident from this etymology. Does it also signify that dystopia exists:

1. Already?
2. In near/very near future?
3. Only to devise fear and awareness in readers?

Dystopia has developed as a genre because it has assimilated renditions of a wide arch of other human expressions which are based on the last two possibilities. Works which have been tagged dystopian such as Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1920), George Orwell's *1984* (1949), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Anthony Burgess' *Clockwork Orange* (1962) being the most famous among them, depict whole societies restructured to bring maximum happiness per capita and minimize anarchy evolving from the variables of "free will". They refer to a future which arrives after a cataclysmic event.

"In dystopian fiction, humans interpret reality through their emotional life and the experiential knowledge to which gives it

shape and utility. Scholarship tends to interpret dystopian fiction in terms of how citizens are contained and constrained by the manipulations of the superstructure. Little inquiry has been made in terms of how ordinary people participate in the system of oppression, implying that characters are always and invariably blindly passive to the whim of the system." (Hemmingsen 9)

Dystopian works are usually placed in future to maintain the slight barrier of hypothesis. The horrendous advances and devices of control are usually achieved through hyperbolic scientific progress, therefore, science-fiction is a sub-genre for dystopia as well as fantasy. The elements that construe a dystopian society can be discovered in individual responses also. System does not have to be a visible machinery. It is constructed by individuals and their narcissistic and sadistic approaches. Later this individuality suffers and is transformed into lemmings. Suppression of emotions becomes a tool for ensuring compliance with the rules.

The Handmaid's Tale (1985) by Margaret Atwood is a classic in the genre for a dystopia reserved solely for womenfolk. Feminism has risen to rage against this oppression of various shades. This refers to the first possibility; that women have already confronted and surrendered to the deprivation of some of their rights by being pronounced fairer sex or weaker sex. Their dystopia is the red-tape of the female existence. Similar innumerable observations are available about the opacity and lax responses of the system. They are accepted as part of the culture and their inflated versions aid in portraying a dystopian society. Specifically for India, these include caste and religious biases, language politics, body shaming, financial status and corruption besides gender inequality. Sahoo's stories have suffocating environment which is eerily similar to routines but an uneasiness prevails despite no discernible factor contributing to it.

"Sarojini talks about pregnancy, rape, girl child, stalkers and about the social set up we all are trapped in; about the mindset we can't get rid off." (Karol)



Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* have indirect indications of dystopian ex-communication. The society, the peers, all somehow become maleficent tools for the struggling protagonist who is either naive or indifferent and adamant about it. Therefore, it can be concluded that dystopian elements can take various forms and are unapproachable. Sahoo's first anthology of English translation of her Oriya stories was published in 2006. Five stories from this collection have distinct symptoms of dystopian disjuncture which are continuously overpowering the intentions of the characters and suppressing any kind of rebellion. The main characters of three stories are females named Suparna and another is Arundhati and the other exceptional one has a male doctor Anurag. Her fiction isn't dystopian per se, it is realistic but thoroughly captures the dystopian symptoms of reality embedded in emotional withdrawal.

The story titled *Rape* alters the measure of the manifestation of rape in a woman's life. Suparna isn't raped as it is perceived by definition, yet her delusive domestic bliss is shattered. It isn't clear whether she dreams of being raped by the pediatrician or it was some fantasy.

"Well well, I did it with Dr. Tripathy. I don't know how, but we were somehow thrown together, and we flitted from place to place looking for a lonely nook where we could be alone. But everywhere there was somebody or the other. Eventually of course it happened.'

'What happened?'

'He fucked me.'"

She is only a machine who works day and night for her nucleus family. There is no leisure for herself.

"Although she would have loved to read for a while, she was totally worn out. I'm dog tired, she said, I can barely keep my eyes open."

One instance of sharing her dream with her husband Jayant backfires terribly, that his touch becomes a question, a trick and his response a strike. Marriage as an institution allows for all kinds of intimacies between two human beings. How it is celebrated by society and how it morphs into an

illusion to be maintained. She learns the harsh lesson of not speaking out her mind even to her husband. After all, her sexuality is pawned through marriage. Even her dream self must remember that. First sign of a dystopia is the compulsion to keep ones thoughts to oneself. This is applicable to a routine marriage too.

"As she lay down she felt his hand around her waist. Oh God, no she thought, stiffening. Not tonight. Didn't he see how tired she was? She gently pushed his long hand away. But the hand crawled back again. This time she repulsed it firmly. "So you met your Dr. Tripathy today, eh?" Jayant said with a snort of laughter. "And your dream came true, did it huh?""

Had the roles been reversed, the husband having a sexual dream about some other woman and narrating to his wife, the response couldn't be anticipated, but in the story, the vengeance and the emotional violence adopted by him is the epitome of male hegemony.

"It was like a stinging slap? Did Jayant mean what he said? Or was it just a sick joke? Whatever it was it did not lessen the sense of humiliation that began to overwhelm her. Being raped couldn't have been any worse."

The rape is of familial dedication, a betrayal of the camaraderie Suparna believed she shared with Jayant. It may not have occurred in the dream by some acquaintance but it happens in her haven of a home.

Island as a narrative points to many gaps as a society people bear with panache. The boundaries of living standards determine characters. A family may need the company of other families for proper social learnings. Arundhati is brought to a township from her village by her husband Aditya. Her first home is in the workers' colony separated by a wall from the "officer's colony". Her aloofness is due to the downtrodden community of the neighborhood which belongs to staff and workers. The same aloofness becomes her shelter when they move to a large abandoned guest-house in the upper-class colony i.e. Officer's; this side of the wall. Absurdly enough, she cares to be away from lower designation people and



only on the edge of the high-class too. Her house is separated from the whole colony and the spaciousness seems to be the clinching point. She opts for a gap to run through, she needs to belong to both sides and none simultaneously.

“At one side people had cut a breach in somebody’s fence and opened a pathway towards the officers’ colony. Arundhati used that pathway everyday.”

While the reasons for leaving the first house are sufficiently integrated with the social construct, the conduct and suspicions of the officers’ wives are equally demeaning to her.

“As they had come to the other side of the wall after promotion, they were not accepted by the other officers already living there. Arundhati couldn’t fit into their neat pecking order.”

“Though Arundhati suffered the humiliation, she could not bring herself to say the people on the other side of the Berlin wall were not thieves. She could not tell Mrs Mishra she had lived there for five years and that her record was clean. She could not tell her she had often seen her Personnel Officer neighbor’s wife and her maid stealing vegetables from the garden.”

Why can an educated woman like Arundhati not revoke the rights she gave to her upper-class neighbors? Her history of having lived somewhere cannot taint her character, but why cannot she voice her complaint? Instead she starts avoiding the very people she longed to be around earlier.

“Her desire to slip away from all social custom and convention like a puff of air or a fistful of water—was that a sign of complexes or of unsociability?”

“She had told Aditya, “our house is an island. We shall mix with the officers’ colony if we like. If not with them, then with the senior staff. If we so like, we can also associate with the people from the other side of the Berlin wall.””

The reason behind this disassociation with every faction is her independence from the social beehives. She cannot be a sycophant to the MD and his wife like all other occupants. They are the top-most of the hierarchy.

“It was as if everything was turned by remote control, and the remote control was in the hands of one person, none other than the MD. People competed with each other to curry favor with him.”

His wife is the matron of all and finally instills the fear of being watched regularly in Arundhati. Consequently, Arundhati begins to scold her children and husband to act accordingly as if they are under microscope.

“Mrs MD asked Arundhati as she gave her a lift in her jeep, “I suppose you are being visited by your father.” “How did you know?” asked Arundhati. “Mrs Mishra was telling me.””

The ladies ostracize her for withholding her adulation towards the MD family. A person must bear the consequences of mingling or otherwise. Again, Arundhati is caught in the web of pleasantries and fake concerns. It is not Aditya who has brought her to such place, it is her own insecurities regarding falling into a line. Unlike her, he pays his dues regularly, for instance when he attends the funeral of MD’s mother and she knows but does not care to pay attendance. Later on, she is scalded with shame. Her wish to have sovereignty over her own house is banished by the constant awareness beyond the walls.

“She had desired such a solitary island. But then she wondered if there existed any such island on this earth where another man had not set foot.”

End of Fascination has a broken rhythm in the narration. It is told by an omniscient narrator pinpointing the consciousness of a growing teenage girl while she questions the values of family, society and the rights which enable culprits to go Scot-free. While it has overtones of feminism like previous two stories, the dystopian command line is glaringly visible. Indian culture has assimilated it so it does not seem out of context mostly. The lack of free will for women is an overt device but how system also fails to identify anti-social entities is another mirror which foretells a ruinous future for anybody. They roam free and stronger towards more conspicuous crimes with the assurance of acquittal by any means. There is absolutely no event which registers either Suparna’s voice or her mother’s. She only reigns in



household matters, that too until her father must be consulted, even if it is for a minor curiosity regarding a post office savings account. She belongs to a financially stable family and yet aware of the fact that inflow of money is a necessity for continuous comfort. "She had already understood that whether it was smiles or wealth, it was always money which led to it."

Her attempt through her mother to have meager five rupees at one go from her father is thwarted. She is delivered a diktat. "Don't do those things...Father will be angry. Don't we have enough that you like to save? Father doesn't approve of such things."

There are two major male characters affecting her young senses. One is her father who is authoritative, a local leader and ambitious. Another is a "Paanwala" (betel vendor) Siburu Rout. He is a mischievous, leering trouble-maker of their locality. Her father is a center-stage figure in every event. The festivities of "devi-visarjan" (goddess-idol-immersion in water after nine days of worship) are troubling times for the people of adjoining neighborhoods. The contention is due to a century old absurd rivalry of who gets to do the *visarjan* first. They try to outshine each other at every rejoicing with loud music, liquor, vulgar dancing etc. Siburu Rout is the malingerer who wishes to respond with violence in this competition. There is absolutely no joy left in the entire nine days for Suparna. There are new clothes which don't look new, no way to attend the procession. When men like Siburu Rout constitute the surroundings, a female cannot look forward to any get-together.

Siburu Rout is the symbol of vulgarity abundant in society. He is the male who molests girls and women by his mere glance. "One felt as if the man went on stripping the beautiful woman every moment he was there. At four, when it was time for the girls of the school to walk back home, the man would cough hesitantly to attract attention, whistle sometimes; and when one saw his obscene grinning teeth, one would recoil in disgust." Suparna has already determined to shun this man and what he represents. "A feeling of exhilaration swept through Suparna, when she heard that Siburu Rout had been

arrested. As if a week of malarial fever had just been over. She felt cheerful. He was a rogue, an unsavory character, Suparna told herself."

Siburu Rout was one of those who conspires to create ruckus during the immersion by two contender groups. Suparna is engrossed with the man even though outwardly she finds him despicable. He deserves to be punished for his occupation with women. Suparna does not realize that her father is the figure in the garb of protector who is in league with Siburu Rout for the disturbance during immersion. Her father is the male who allows the anti-social elements to prevail over the justice system as he aids in his release. "This man should have been in prison now, she thought. But here he was, firmly seated in their drawing room. Father sat beside him, explaining something. Father noticed her suddenly and said, "Child, will you get a cup of tea for Siburu Babu.""

She wonders about the relationship between two men, does not comprehend that it is of political ambition. Her apprehensions hold no weight to her father. She can wonder who is the bigger culprit and how her protector is providing shelter to her fears. A girl who lives in comfort must live in dread and contempt too as her father elevates a molester to a respectable "babu" status.

Another Suparna of *Existence* is unaware of how sundered she is from her environment and this sundering is from her own self ultimately. She is unable to recognize her own emotions and their roots. Sociability as a trait defines human civilization. The earliest sites of Mohanjo Daro and Hadappa had places designed for meetings, discussions and jovial retreats. Suparna is the future of Arundhati, who has desired an island and she finally gets it at the cost of her sociability. She creates her own dystopia. An alleged suicide by a teenager who might have frequented her home with other boys his age registers as an event in alternate reality. She does not have the gumption to either inquire about the departed or pay her last respects. People seem to vacillate between the two extremes of disconnect and infiltration of homes. Privacy and familiarity do



not go together. Suparna's morning begins with a curious view from her bathroom window.

"Only ten or fifteen meters away from her backyard, on the slope of the road towards New Incline, stood a yellow truck of the coal company. In the middle of the road five or six men in police uniform sat on the chairs. There was little to be curious about."

This absent curiosity may just be a veil for her suspicions and her desire to stay away from any controversy. The less details, the better. Her husband Aniruddha also sparingly notices the unfolding of events. They both act nonchalant until it is confirmed that a boy who lived in the same street died under the truck early into the night. "Although it had happened only ten or fifteen meters away, neither Aniruddha nor Suparna found it necessary to go over and find out what had happened."

An untimely, unlikely death has occurred and both of them go about their business completely unperturbed. They both might be equally affected but admitting it to their own selves or each other may reverse the process of self-sufficiency which enables them to live in their cocoons.

"Suparna had prepared the breakfast with her usual love and care. She slipped a small shopping list for fish, lime and coffee into Aniruddha's shirt pocket. Then she noticed a yellow rose from the window of her bedroom and went out to her garden, in a joyful mood."

Estrangement from the society to such an extent penetrates the mind and dulls the senses too. The full potential of emotions and their natural progression is devastating and time consuming. A shell for every mind effectively blocks the nuisance from both ends. Suparna has followed this trend and reached a mental island.

"After Aniruddha left for office, Suparna opened the courtyard door, briefly, in between her cooking every time she heard women jabbering outside, but she could not ask anything of anyone. She did not know most of the women, she hardly spoke once or twice a year to the few others she knew. Suparna had stayed in this colony for over three year, but except for four

families on her side of the street and another four families staying across the street, she knew no one else living in the rest of the thirty-two houses."

She cannot inquire and cannot rest. The frequent opening of doors and windows to stay apprised of the situation indicates towards her struggle to stay above the ongoing debacle. Observe from afar in a restive state. After all onlookers leave and the place is cleaned, she dares to inspect the scene.

"However she crossed the gate and came to the road to see if there was a crowd before any particular house." To identify the house of the dead boy, she has to search for clues of crowd, mourners, vehicles etc. instead of simply asking; but unsurprisingly she finds no cluster in sight. Only a bunch of teenage boys on a heap of sand sit staring vacantly. She recognizes them by face and instantly misses one face among them. These boys are a motif for her own self. She returns and begins reading a book of short stories. How she wavers between her routine and her troubled mind's calls. She goes strolling with her husband but the deserted streets are as intolerable as the emptiness of their home.

"She wondered how after the suicide, the boy had suddenly become intimately acquainted with her, on a single day, though he had not existed for her and Aniruddha when he was alive."

After the place of accident is swept clean, she cannot find the space where she had placed the truck, the police, the whole crew. She feels as if it was a figment of her imagination. This notion disturbs her and she cannot calm her mind that a death is not something to be taken so lightly, be it of a young human or her empathy. So she wonders if the day's events are worth her unhappy state.

"Even this mark of the boy had disappeared. Suparna could not understand why she was so very unhappy about it."

The search for one's own credibility in the matters of human relationships can be a daunting and arduous task, but it is the culmination of the exercise for autonomy from peers and their opinions.

Smoke in the anthology is the only short story which features a male protagonist. He is the



embodiment of the failure of the system on both fronts: public and personal. There is no fulfillment of life in any sphere. Despite being in the honorable vocation of medicine, he cannot be liberated from paying the price of his minor participation in the system. His caste connotations are also clear when he considers himself beneath a brahmin girl. "Nikita was a Brahmin and he was a Harijan. But he himself did not know if he had any love for the girl." He dare not feel love for the girl but he does attempt to believe in a poor man who is losing his brother to a false case filed to save the real Marijuana dealers. He is a dichotomy in terms of status and identity. He strives for anonymity, be it his profession, the case he gets embroiled in as a witness or even his personal life. A name Paritosh Majumdar is repeatedly mentioned as his mostly absent friend. A friend he longs to be with, to be away from the mundane routine. This Majumdar can be his alter ego, who is spontaneous, frank and honest about confronting life. There are undertones of same-sex relationship too.

"It had been a long time since he visited the Bar; since Paritosh Majumdar left for kolkata."

"When will that Paritosh Majumdar return from Kolkata?"

"It has been a long time since Paritosh Majumdar went to Kolkata; when will he return?"

"Paritosh Majumdar had once smiled very mysteriously, and asked, "how is it going?" (about Nikita)

"But when he returned he saw the motorcycle of Paritosh Majumdar in front of his house. As if a surge of delight ran through his spine. Paritosh has, then, returned from Kolkata? Paritosh did not ask him anything about the matter. They just kick started the motorcycle and vanished."

Anurag likes to live in a no-man's land. He minimizes emotions to suit his daily needs. His patients, female patients and the irrational symptoms they harbor are enough for his daily diet of amusement and irritation.

"Anurag had to face these beautiful women; when asked about their problem, one would say sweet pain

in the bosom, and another would complain of lack of sound sleep at night. Pain, after all, is pain; but what is this sweet pain? No such pain is known in medical terminology! Mostly Anurag would refer such patients to Dr. Purohit. But when in mood, he would joke with them and prescribe some gelusil antacid tablets. Each day was the same; jugglery with names of same medicines, like playing with coins on a carom board."

The city is under the influence of marijuana and its dealers. A young man is accused of being a dealer, a consumer and a murderer. He is treated by Anurag during the incident. The court hearing is scheduled after an year and Anurag is asked by the lawyer to lie about the youth being in intoxicated state during the treatment. On one hand, this case brings a change in Anurag's routine and his inner drive against the wheel of prevarication. He stubbornly refuses to cooperate with the lawyer in his legal antics. The system has no sympathy for either Anurag or the falsely accused youth.

The marijuana and its effect are a device for portraying the corruption of the system. The drug is mere tool to conceal the perennial arm-twisting by the powerful. Anurag's statement irrevocably changes in the witness box as he is under the influence too. This scene is a dramatic trick to lull the reader into believing that there is a smoke of marijuana in the court room too as it has already engulfed the city. Anurag's belief in the youth's innocence was cemented by his elder brother's plea. He is being ordered by his superior in the matter. He tries to defend his position but ultimately surrenders.

"It seemed to Anurag that the entire place around him had been suffused with smoke; smoke of sweet fragrance. Suddenly he felt that he recognized the fragrance. As if, he had somewhere some familiarity with this fragrance. But where did so much smoke come from? Not of incense, but of a different fragrance. "What is the name of this fragrance, My Lord?" he wanted to ask aloud; but no body replied." Smoke was spreading everywhere around. Where is the lawyer; where is the accused; where is the judge amid this smoke? Where are you, Paritosh? Words this time emanated from his throat with much



difficulty: "I can't recall anything, my lord. So many people come to the hospital. Can one remember a matter of a year ago?"

If there was a smoke in the room, it would have affected everyone. This fragrance was nothing but his inability to cope with the constant hammering by people. The urge to communicate minimum and only on his terms paralyzes his senses. The result does not matter but that his disenchantment and detachment must continue unaltered.

The means to usher in the dystopia can be numerous, but the fundamental flaws of that world morph the masses into brainless and speechless herd. The individual draws himself in and connections with the outer world are avoided. These stories portray the different hues of self imposed sociable restrictions. Dystopia can flourish through a machinery but the conformity is achieved only through submission of individual will. It is excruciatingly worrisome that these stories resemble reality too perfectly. The classics of the genre might feature a futuristic setting but realism is a requisite for the text's colligation. These stories are based in present but the duality is evident. Dystopia is ingrained in the society and always threatening to overtake the reality based on perspectives.

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