Worlds Apart: Myth, Science and Fiction in Sukanya Datta's Short Stories

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> The Indianness of science fiction in this country is not dependent on its geographical origin but rather on the cultural and social ambience which gives it soul. – Bal Phondke (xviii)

How does a country's 'cultural and social ambience' contour its Science Fiction (SF)?

The act of producing, distributing and consuming English-language SF in India – a nation caught between the globalised forces of techno-scientific capitalism and the indigenous modes of religio-cultural assertion – precipitates a distinct precariousness. The spectre of writing SF – a genre not only considered niche vis-à-vis the India's market, but also pulp in terms of its narrative conventions – that too in a former colonial language (English) haunts cultural production. The imbrication of SF within India is mediated by language politics, genre conventions, market forces and social mores among other things. This paper exploits such interstitial nuances and ascertains how India's anglophone SF adopts a new generative grammar with characteristic élan; the paper advances three strains of how SF deploys diverging modalities of hybridisation (what can be termed as 'mythic SF'), binary opposition (as in 'counter SF') and dialectics (as in 'alternative SF').

Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint find in *The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction* that "genres are best thought of as ongoing processes of negotiation rather than fixed entities that pre-exist their naming" and SF is no exception (1). SF catalyses the mutation within (and of) India's popular imagination and is quintessentially located in the times in which it is forged and consumed. The efforts to 'define' SF have had a long history: Theodore Sturgeon, for example, argues that SF is "built around human beings, with a human problem, and a human solution, which would not have happened at all without its *scientific* content" ("Science Fiction Definitions", emphasis added). Paul Kincaid, however, acknowledges the drawbacks of essentialising endeavours in "On the Origins": "the more comprehensively a definition seeks to encompass science fiction, the more unsatisfactory it seems to those of us who know the genre" (411).

Kincaid's assertion becomes even more relevant for India, where the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of science (and hence, of scientific *and* science fictional discourses) not only find themselves infused with the

mythic, but also folklore, *itihasa*, etc. The mythic and the scientific, myth and history, truth and fiction are not hermetically sealed epistemic frameworks – at least not in India and its SF. The notions of myth, science and fiction intertwine within India's SF, perhaps owing to the nation's distinct engagement with history and non-linear time. Shail Mayaram believes that "history and myth are not exclusive modes of representation" in India (qtd. in Ashis Nandy, 45). E. Dawson Varughese corroborates this by citing R. Malhotra, for whom "accounts of past are not made through *either* myth or history exclusively" but by itihasa (loosely translated as myth or narrative), "which may not always be the opposite of truth" (30). If itihasa disrupts the dichotomy between 'history' and 'myth', then Indian SF subverts 'science' and 'fiction'. Jayant Narlikar, for example, refers to the 'Invasion of Indra' in "The Ice Age Cometh" (1993), and Mainak Dhar's *Vimana* (2012) transposes the ancient astronaut hypothesis on Hindu gods.

This paper is conscious of how the projection of itihasa and its varying epistemologies can shape the SF to come, a protean, mutating-being from a time-yet-to-come. Aware of the unique nature of Indian SF, this paper advances three concomitant 'SF strains' which intermesh within (and via) select texts: one, a reaffirmation of indigenous scientific literacies, an ostensibly bipartisan thrust that promulgates an 'alternative SF' which not only exists outside a centre/margins binary but whose epistemology seeks to move past binaries; two, an overt challenge to the ontology of *western* SF, a 'counter SF' that resists the normativity imposed by any central (usually western) tradition; and three, the conscious interpolation of the mythical into the scientific and the science fictional, which leads to a 'mythical SF'. Consequently, this paper reads three (contemporary) SF short stories composed by Sukanya Datta in English: "A Little Learning" (2012), "When the Tide Turns" (2008) and "Gem of a Story" (2012) interweave the mythic, scientific, science fictional and indigenous scientific literacies within their ambit. Moreover, Datta is a serving scientist with the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research and studying her SF – especially one that fuses myth, folklore, history and science – is a logical ingress into the materiality of this fusion.

One can begin with a story set in the present, one that manifests alternative strains of/in Indian SF. "A Little Learning" advances a localised (tribal) proto-scientific knowledge that emerges parallel to its western counterpart. It is set in Linu-livu, a tiny island located off India's coast, in the aftermath of the deadly 2004 tsunami: the tribal inhabitants of the island have been relocated. Dr Aditya Sarkar leads a scientific delegation to Linu-livu in order to conduct tests and study the island: a metaphor for the imposition of western scientific epistemology and normativity on 'native' lands. The scientists find a surprising ally in Bur-el: a "villager elder with no village", who becomes the soi-disant "embodiment of

the spirit of the Island" (48). One night, Bur-el tells the assembled scientists a tale of how the 'Devil's Own' had "walked unfettered [on the island] – using a fragrant lure – summoning wayfarers and sailors and holding captive all who came too near" (41). The demon trapped innocents by a scent which paralysed them – and then feasted on them. However, "this was long before Bur-el's tribe colonized the island. When they did, the Lord had already vanquished the Devil's Own in form a snake" (41). The form of a snake, usually associated with Biblical evil, becomes a force of good within this context: for Bur-el, the 'Lord' had taken a serpent form to battle the forces of darkness a long time ago.

The *clou* of the narrative (and of Linu-livu) is a sacred shrine: "all over these temples trailed the *Linnia* vine – a species endemic and limited to Linu-livu, and from which the Island derived its name. The vine bore masses of tiny cream-coloured flowers with a lingering sweet fragrance" (42-43). As these scientists run tests on the soil, flora and fauna of the island, they are aided by a good-natured, Bur-el, who, however, vehemently prohibits going to the sacred shrine after dark, and warns them against picking the flowers. Driven by curiosity, a scientist (Michael) goes to the shrine at night, and Bur-el catches him disassociating the 'Devil's Own' (the flowers) from the 'Lord' (referring to the dodder). A snake bites Bur-el, and he dies despite an anti-snake-venom dose being administered.

Days later, as the shocked group of scientists prepare to depart the island, one of them (Pratim) proposes "they go to the main temple and give thanks to Bur-el" (73). Unsure of what to do and still reeling the impact of the loss of Bur-el, the scientists decide to visit the temple one last time, even though it had gotten dark. At the shrine, they find "the dodder was absolutely encrusted with the genetically engineered purple fungal spore that had been introduced as a biopesticide" and smell "a perfume so intoxicating that they forgot to talk" (75). The Linnia flowers are in full bloom at night, and unbeknownst to them, release deadly neurotoxins that kill the scientists on the spot. This scent also attracts snakes, increasing the probability of being bitten. The scientists stand rooted to the spot as the fragrance from the flowers paralyses them: they sway and crash to the ground, becoming fodder in the food-chain.

Only two scientists survive: one was chain-smoking and the other had a blocked nose. Dr Sarkar and Anjan, the two lucky survivors, rush back to the campsite and request emergency evacuation. The island is placed under quarantine: the fragrant Linnia are actually the 'Devil's Own' and the lord turns out to be a dodder which bonds with the deadly flowers and countermands their lethal nature by suppressing the inherent neurotoxins. The dodder, which had prevented the flowers from becoming lethal, was weakened by the biopesticide

introduced by the 'outsiders'; this also explains why visiting the shrine after sunset was forbidden since this particular flower bloomed only at night. This not only subverts the hierarchy of the pleasant, sweet-smelling flower and the ugly-looking parasitic dodder, but also heralds a 'tribal' scientific literacy characterised by customs (such as visiting the snake temple only during that day, that too after washing oneself) which are seen as ancient ways of containment. Such a literacy mythologises the dodder and Linnia relationship as the Lord and Devil's Own: proto-science translates into folk and myth.

Vandana Singh believes that "Indigenous ways of knowing are worthy of scientific respect" especially since it is not a coincidence that "traditional indigenous territories constitute 22 percent of the world's land surface, and contain 80% of the world's biodiversity" (email). Singh echoes Grace Dillon's assessment that "Native/Indigenous/Aboriginal sustainable practices constitute a science despite their lack of resemblance to taxonomic western systems of thought"; Dillon finds that "Indigenous scientific literacies represent practices used by Indigenous peoples over thousands of years to reenergize the natural environment while improving the interconnected relationships…" (7). As the "urban matron" at a kitty party exclaims in "A Little Learning": "Imagine! These backward tribesmen, with little formal schooling, knew that a tsunami was about to strike...what else is a Water Dragon?" (50) While Datta later refutes such claims by attributing Bur-el's prescience to a "generalized prediction" passed down generations, the story establishes how such claims "summed up what most of the nation thought" (50).

"A Little Learning" foregrounds that Bur-el and his tribe had knowledge that was orally passed down across generations but somehow failed to see the complete picture. Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay's concept of the mythologerm comes into play here; mythologerm is "the site of a struggle between closed scientific tradition—which can be defined in national, racial, cultural, and even gendered terms—and the historicity of scientific knowledge as a continuous entanglement across time among nations and peoples to which no single culture or tradition can lay claim" (438). It debates how a (tribal/indigenous) people's history, myth, and folk have elements of not just the paranormal and mythological, but even more importantly, of alternative science, which is more along the lines of traditional/indigenous scientific literacy and not wholly indebted to western techno-capitalist science. This challenging the legitimacy of (western) science reminds one of how Suparno Banerjee read Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*, which subverted "Western normativity by empowering a native secret cult with their practice of counter science, but it also subverts the established Brahmanical elite knowledge" (*Other Tomorrows* 60).

Datta's portrayal of Bur-el proceeds in a similar fashion: his predictions come true, and his prophecies emerge as being rooted in scientific fact. For example, he had protested against going to the shrine at night, and his tales about the lord (dodder) 'subduing' the devil's own (Linnia) by forming an internal association had come true in physical, metaphorical, and botanical senses. Moreover, the subaltern/tribal wisdom he espouses becomes a conscious subversion of 'western' science and 'established Brahmanical' knowledge (even though, unlike Ghosh's Mangala, his knowledge is incomplete). The reaffirmation of indigenous scientific literacies echoes an 'alternative SF', which is shaped by a dialectical progression, and avoids derivation from any one mythological arche *in toto* (as in mythic SF); it also eschews reifying binary opposites by consciously arguing without a framework of west/east, male/female, white/black (as in counter SF), thereby advancing a mode that goes beyond a simple opposition between two poles.

Datta's next story, "When the Tide Turns", jumps to the future. The earth is dying, and the end of time seems near: when faced with acute food shortages and impending extinction, chloroplasts are genetically engineered in albinos, enabling them to draw nourishment directly from sunlight. This cure, however, does not work on those with melanin in their skins, and the millennia-old discrimination is subverted as only the albinos, organised under the unified command of Dr Pinctada, survive the apocalypse.

"When the Tide Turns" begins with a diatribe against a world in which those who appear (or *are*) different are relegated to the margins of society. It is the year 2206; Rukun, a lonely albino child, is kidnapped by a covert group of activists who are able to predict the end of the world and have been preparing for it. The story then jumps a few years: Rukun is now Dr Sinha, and the planet reels under an existential crisis as food security becomes a distant dream. In this future, the planet has been divided into two hemispheres, northern and southern (a direct reference to the global north and global south), and agriculture ministers on both sides realise that all food grain reserves would last only three more months (142). The reader is taken on a short tour of history: "agricultural returns have been falling drastically over the last five or six years", and the condition is such that "the shortfall would kill fifteen percent of the world's population" (142). The food shortages and scarcity of natural resources reminds one of *Interstellar* (2014), except this time, humanity seeks the aid of genetic engineering rather than space exploration to combat extinction.

The story then lists how "late in the twentieth century and in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, sweeping agricultural reforms had taken place. Biotechnology had been the engine powering the movement" (142-43). However, "with inorganic fertilisers and artificial nutrients, agriculturists had

whipped the land to produce more and more, ignoring the silent signals that the inherent fertility was close to being snuffed out" (143). The technology was overused to such an extent that humanity dug its own grave and the lack of sustainable development created an uncertain future: "Intensive agriculture, mechanized farm equipment and the total disregard for natural biological webs and chains that defined ecosystems, in the brutal rush to produce more, had killed the land" (143). This is not only an indictment of humanity's over-reliance on science and technology but also on the unsustainable, greed-driven human consumptions patterns that precipitate catastrophes, ecological, or otherwise.

Dr Galling, the agriculture minister of the northern hemisphere, tries to find a way out of this doomsday scenario; his sole driving impulse is to put food on the table of the people he is meant to serve, but even he is powerless in the face of this 'natural' calamity about to hit the earth. Initially hopeful, Galling believes that scientists would come up with another technological transformation that would reorient the way humanity approaches its lifestyle and how it consumes resources. He contacts Dr Margaret Pinctada and flies to meet her at a remote location (146) – however, once there, he is told that the tables have been turned. For millennia the albinos had been discriminated against due to the low levels of melanin in their skin, but now it is precisely this dearth that would enable them to enter to future by going green, quite literally: "the albinos are preadapted to accept the express the chloroplast" (149). The 'normally-pigmented', who constituted the norm, would soon go extinct due to their bodily rejection of the grafted chloroplasts – not that the albino council did not try to save them (149).

Pinctada explains that "the trait was inherent in us [albinos] even when the technology did not exist. Now the technology has been refined and we have been engineered – transformed into chloroplast-containing humans" (150). As a shocked, depressed Dr Galling leaves, aware that his world is about to end, the dusk of 'man' transforms into a new dawn for humanity. Clearly, the story both subverts dominant paradigms (those with melanin discriminate against those without it, or even against those who have a different skin tone/colour), and seeks the creation of an 'equal society'. Adopting the mythologerm again: it manifests how the struggle between a closed (western/northern *and* eastern/southern? or *both* northern/southern?) scientific tradition(s) and 'the historicity of scientific knowledge as a continuous entanglement across time among nations and peoples' as represented by the albino council that exists outside this north/south binary. Reminiscent of proletarian internationalism, this council unites albinos across the hemispheres and erects a new paradigm of (the discriminated) albinos versus the rest of humanity: albinos of the world have united, and they have nothing to lose but their chains.

While it may be argued that Datta creates a new binary between albinos and those with 'normally-pigmented' skin, the rejection of western normativity is evident since Pinctada uses science to save the human race – or at least those she could. This claim to the mantle of science not only challenges western/male/white/pigmented normativity but also becomes a metaphor that highlights colourism, racism, ableism, and the edifice of unfettered development. "When the Tide Turns" runs counter to the normative epistemology of western systems, cultures and SF (and of the techno-scientific, patriarchal world order); it generates a 'counter SF', a conscious political intervention that brings to fore tussles between the centre and the margins, and turns the periphery into a new centre (which, however, Datta again destabilises in her future works).

If "A Little Learning" advances a localised (tribal) proto-scientific knowledge and "When the Tide Turns" questions the basis of western/male/central science (and normativity), then "Gem of a Story" derives its roots from a mythic past and exhibits an indigenous scientific literacy that is essentially Brahmanical in nature (to borrow terminology from Suparno Banerjee's *Other Tomorrows*). As Prof. Hans Kinder, a German professor in the story reminds the readers: "All myths have a kernel of truth in them…beliefs that have transcended time; folklore as you call them, are rooted in facts – maybe facts which have got a little blurred around the edges; but facts nonetheless" ("Gem" 209).

Structurally, "Gem of a Story" comprises two streams: the first is about *Mahabharata*'s Ashwatthama, who fought for the Kauravas in the ancient epic. The story interprets his firing of a celestial weapon that would have destroyed the planet; this *brahmastra* "would have annihilated the Earth…sounds like a nuclear warhead, doesn't it?" ("Gem of a Story" 213). Ashwatthama knew how to fire the weapon but not how to abort it; when asked to take the weapon back, a vengeful Ashwatthama, in order to end the Pandav lineage, redirected the weapon to kill Arjun's grandchild in-utero instead. This resulted in his downfall – he was cursed by Krishna and the gem, which gave him powers, was "wrested from his forehead as punishment for an unforgivable sin" (212). The second stream locates the mysterious phenomenon of the Himalayan yeti and syamantak gem as emanating from the Dwapar Yuga, and hints that Ashwatthama could be the yeti of our time, long lost in the mists of time. After all, "*all ancient civilizations have stories about immortals. About them who can never die. Celestial beings. Demi-gods, some of them*" ("Gem of a Story", emphasis original, 201).

The protagonist of the story is Tunir Chatterjee, a gemologist who seeks the syamantak gem of the *Vishnu Purana* with his inquisitive friend Hans Kinder. "Prof. Hans Kinder had first come to India as a backpacker when was

still in his teens and had fallen in love with the country" ("Gem" 202). The two had become friends at a trekking camp; years later, when Kinder is injured during an expedition, Tunir gives him shelter. As the two talk more about what led Kinder to India again, the German professor convinces Tunir to accompany him to the mythical monastery of Thamo-La deep in the mountains.

The story is a case study for the interpolation of the mythical into the science fictional and urban legends, thereby generating a mythical SF that finds its way into the narratives about (and of) our today. In an interview, Datta says, "we have such a rich tradition of mythology…flying horses and chariots, weapons that can rain fire... Five thousand years' worth of folklore, there for the picking and reinvention" (email). However, the organicity of the narrative she creates is contingent upon semantic elements usually associated with SF. For example, Datta remarks about the setting, "everyone knows this area is mineral rich, so I brought in elements from the *Mahabharata*. Syamantak gem that rains tonnes of gold, and added bio-indicator species as a marker for gold deposits" (email). Led by a search for Aurum flowers, which are a bio-indicator for gold deposits (premised on scientific know-how), Kinder and Tunir embark on a quest to seek the stone but end up dead – there is a thin line between zealous exploration and a greed-driven monetisation of the natural and mythic world(s).

The Kinder-Tunir relationship enunciates the subtle linkages between exploration, knowledge and power within the realm of the unknown (developing world), and can be read with John Rieder's assessment that SF "exposes something that colonialism imposes" (15). The hybridisation within the story creates a distinct syntax that is imbricated in its socio-political and economic realities. In the introduction to *Walking the Clouds,* Grace Dillon acknowledges how 'native' writers of SF must negotiate an ancient tradition that "weds sf theory and Native intellectualism, Indigenous scientific literacy, and western techno-cultural science…" (2). While Dillon refers to native American writers, Indian SF writers face a similar predicament. Datta showcases how western techno-cultural science fuses with indigenous scientific literacies but also mythologies that support them. This particular strain of mythic SF can again be explored via Chattopadhyay's "mythologerm", a critical intervention that "derives from a mythic presentation of the long history of human civilizations in which knowledge constantly appears and disappears, is refined and transformed as science, and in some cases inaugurates a future" (Chattopadhyay, "On the Mythologerm" 437-438). "Gem of a Story" represents a kind of SF that is caught between mythology and indigenous scientific literacy, one in which long-forgotten knowledge is sought, and becomes approachable. For example, after taking a holy dip in Manas Sarovar, Tunir wondered why it was forbidden to bathe in the adjacent Rakshas Taal, "although by all accounts there was a

connection between the two waters" (202-203). Kinder and Tunir later rationalise that it might be so because the ancients had known about radioactivity since there was Uranium in those waters. These strands of knowledge were lost in time, and a quest to reclaim this forgotten, often distorted knowledge drives the plot forward. The story also enumerates how 'knowledge constantly appears and disappears' and 'is refined and transformed as science'. Apart from Ashwatthama as the yeti, the 'immortal spirit of the mountain' (at least for Kinder), the story brings to light indigenous scientific literacies that operate at the cusp of itihasa and myth: the references to nuclear warheads, radioactivity, etc. are examples.

The three stories discussed generate their own modalities of engagement with the SF's semantics and evolve micro-processes that mutate the basic syntax of the genre (if there is one). The stories advance varied interpretations of the power dynamics between the diverging conceptions of science, whether Western, Brahmanical, or tribal/aboriginal. "Gem of a Story" operates between myth and technology; it foregrounds Brahmanical science where mythology becomes the *arche* of the (much) less technologically advanced present; thereby, it creates a mythic SF whose primary operation can be surmised as that of hybridisation between the scientific, historical, mythic and itihasa. "When the Tide Turns" uses commonly accepted SF tropes (such as dystopia, genetic engineering, etc.) and produces a counter SF that challenges the normativity imposed by dominant discourses; its basic character can be said to be of providing resistance to a central discourse via its vantage point of/from the margins. "A Little Learning", with its comprehension of the dodder-Linnia relationship, posits a tribal/aboriginal scientific literacy as being complementary to western science (though not being counter to it); thus, it generates an alternative SF whose being is, arguably, driven by dialectical progression and social reformation.

Moreover, the mythic, counter, and alternative strains of SF exist in a warp and weft of interconnected thematic tissues, and cannot be regarded as insulated pigeonholes. While primarily exhibiting a mythic strain, "Gem of Story" also harbours counter (e.g., how the ancients were aware of the Uranium-laced waters of Rakshas Taal, a knowledge that renders this position to be of primary nature) and alternative (e.g., the behaviour of the villagers of Thamo-La) claims. "When the Tide Turns", despite being 'counter SF', also hints at the mythic (e.g., reference to *Gita*) and the alternative (e.g., the studied equidistance of Dr Pinctada's from both northern and southern hemispheres) discourses. "A Little Learning", while primarily an example of the alternative strain, also contains features of the mythic (e.g., the tsunami as a water dragon) and counter (e.g., references to the golden past) agendas. The three strains, as earlier pointed, intermesh and fuse, which gives Indian SF a unique character.

To return to the question this paper began with: how does the socio-cultural permeate India's SF? By activating counter, alternative and mythic strains, India's SF responds to its ambience just as much as it shapes it. While being contoured by the epistemological frameworks, generic conventions and narrative modes of science, itihasa and fiction, India's SF is imbricated in its mythology, history and folklore to such an extent that it becomes a whole new subset of global SF. Simultaneously, India's SF also manifests and negotiates with different kinds of scientific traditions – both indigenous (whether Brahminical or tribal) and external (Western). The future looks to the past, the *yugas* beckon – but not in a manner of their own choosing.

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