



SUJATHA RANGARAJAN'S TAMIL SCIENCE FICTION: AN ANALYSIS

Dr. A. Kayalvizhi

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Salem Sowdeswari College, Salem,

Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract:

Sujatha Rangarajan holds the prominent position among the modern and post-modern Tamil Science Fiction writers. Sujatha's writing career spans for around four decades and his literary contribution is multifarious that he wrote novels, short stories, plays and non-fiction as well. Many of his books are based on science. Being a shrewd scientist, he was well aware of the ill effects of nuclear wars. He foresaw the dangers of nuclear wars and their aftermaths and expressed his concerns about future world in some of his short stories. It is certainly praiseworthy that people progress tremendously in the sphere of science and technology. But in this process of intellectual evolution, unfortunately they often tend to forsake humanistic qualities. One of Sujatha's short story shows his worry about the decline of human values. In another story, the writer records his anxiety about the dangers in the systemized future. Hence Sujatha established himself as the outstanding Tamil Science Fiction writer by having handled with different themes in the scientific sphere. In fact Sujatha's contribution is widely regarded as a milestone in Tamil Science Fiction.

Keywords: Science Fiction, Indian Science Fiction, Bengali Science Fiction, Tamil Science Fiction.

Science Fiction is, as defined by Isaac Asimov, the branch of literature which deals with the reaction of human beings to changes in science and technology. It is a genre of the twentieth and the twenty first centuries. The reception it receives in recent times proves against the belief that sci-fi is a freak and flippant literature. In fact science fiction also deals with the human issues in unfamiliar milieu and forebodes future dangers. It may be a result of ignorance of contemporary writers if they exclude science in their writings as the present world is controlled by science and technology.

Indian Science Fiction was born in 1897 with the publication of the Bengali science fiction *Agosh* by Jagadish Chandra Bose, a story about scientific method of pacifying storms in ocean. The Marathi science fictions *Tareche Hasya*, published in 1911 by S.B. Ranade and *Srinivasa Rao*, in 1908 by Madhav Nath are also considered as the early Indian science fiction stories. As far as Tamil literature is concerned, *Engumillai (Nowhere)*, published in 1909 by J.R. Rankaraju, is the first Tamil sci-fi.

In the arena of modern and post-modern Tamil Science Fiction, Sujatha Rangarajan holds the prominent position. Rangarajan, who wrote under the pseudonym Sujatha (his wife's name), was an engineer as well as a versatile writer. He studied B.Sc. Physics in St. Joseph's College, Trichy and also did his Engineering in MIT (Madras Institute of Technology), Chennai. In both the institutions, he was the classmate of the former President of India late Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam. He worked in the Civil Aviation Department of Government of India and then in Bharat Electronics Ltd, Bangalore. He was also one of the designers of the Electronic Voting Machine used by Indian Election Commission.

Sujatha's writing career spans for around four decades and his literary contribution is multifarious that he wrote novels, short stories, plays and non-fiction as well. That most of his works are translated into English proves his eminence. Many of his books are based on science. He also

worked as screenplay writer in a number of Tamil movies and the blockbuster movie “Endhiran” (Robot) was his last as he died in 2008 before its completion. The theme for this movie was taken from his famous science fiction *En Iniya Iyandhira* in which a robot dog Jeano develops feelings.

En Iniya Iyandhira (My Dear Robot), written in the late 1980s, is set in the year 2021. In this novel, Sujatha envisions future India which is ruled by a dictator. The governance is so methodically done by robots. Even the natural processes such as births and deaths of people are scheduled by the government. In this story, the writer used high tech computer technology terms. Jeano, a robot, plays an important role. It develops feelings and starts thinking. Furthermore, having high intelligence, it even starts instructing Nila, a human. This novel, serialized on television, received a warm welcome and that made Sujatha write its sequel *Meendum Jeano* (Jeano Again). These two science fictions are generally acknowledged as his masterpieces.

Sujatha’s *Sorgha Theevu* (Paradise Island), published in early 1970s, is a story about a computer scientist Iyngar who is kidnapped to an island called Sorgha Theevu. It is a dystopia full of emotionless people who are under the control of a supercomputer and drug. Iyngar is taken there in order to rectify the problems in the supercomputer. People of the island are completely devoid of even basic feelings like love and affection and without thinking ability owing to the control of supercomputer. A few of them, aware of their deplorable condition, plan to defy the head of the island Satya. With the assistance of Iyngar, they rise in rebellion and put an end to the regime. The story narrated grippingly till the end shows the great brilliance of the writer.

His *Pesum Bommaigal* (Speaking Dolls), written in 1991, is a novel that discusses memory downloading technique. It is about immortalizing a person by preserving memories and downloading them into a younger body. There are references of the technological factors like voice processing and AI (Artificial Intelligence) in this novel. With the intelligent detective Ganesh and his humorous sidekick Vasanth, the story is a perfect blend of science and mystery.

Sujatha has not only written sci-fi novels, but also sci-fi short stories. Right from early 1960s, he wrote sci-fi short stories for various magazines. His *Vingana Sirukadhaigal*, a collection of science fiction short stories written by him over four decades, bears testimony for his excellent short story craftsmanship and scientific knowledge.

In spite of being an intellectual science fiction writer, he had the attribute of humor too. Most of his stories are fun to read. He handled some of his sci-fi with a comical touch. His character Ragavanium, an eccentric scientist, and his different amateur inventions exhibit funny face of science. Improper inventions usually tend to create problems; but sometimes the other way around. For instance, the short story *Ragavanium 277* is a comic thriller that shows the imperfect composition of an atom bomb sparing the world from destruction.

Ragavanium’s mediocrity sometimes creates hilarious havoc too. *Water Car Vivagaram* (Water Car Matter) is a story about Ragavanium’s invention of a car run by water. The mere description of the appearance of the car is well enough to make the readers laugh. Though, Ragavanium is expert in making water car, his forgetfulness results in not connecting the brake rod. And the outcome is as assumed! In another comic story *Sultan Nee Engeirukirai?* (Where are you Sultan?), Ragavanium makes a monkey Sultan highly intellectual by supplying electrovibration to its brain. But unfortunately the mischievous monkey makes a mess and the poor scientist is penalized for public nuisance.

Another interesting invention of Ragavanium is an automatic story telling computer. In the short story *Computere Oru Kadhai Sollu* (Computer, Tell A Story), the scientist displays a computer named Thambu with creative capability. It is able to produce poetry, short story, article, etc. According to the commands given, the computer genius combines certain elements like historical background and 50% glamour for story formation. Yet due to some technical issues, this incompetent invention leaves a thriller story unfinished without unraveling the mystery.

Like most of the sci-fi writers, Sujatha too tried his pen in time travel stories. *Kala Endhiram* (Time Machine) is a short story that presents positive as well as negative aspects of time travel. The protagonist Atma, who travels from the year 2024, goes many centuries back and meets an ancient king. Suspected as a spy, he is sentenced to death; yet he manages to escape with the help of time machine. Then in another age, he happens to meet Tholkapiar, an ancient Tamil poet and he is immensely pleased about it. Finally he enters the year 1976 (the story written year) and loses his time machine due to bus pickpocket; and so he gets stuck there unable to move forward to his own time.

Likewise *Yayati* is a story about a miraculous medicine that could modify a person's age and appearance accordingly. But here too occurs an unforeseen accident that the 60 year old man, who wishes to become 25 year old, wrongly takes the medicine twice a day instead of taking once in two days as advised by doctor. And the crude consequence is that he turns one year old baby.

As a responsible writer, Sujatha utilized his writing expertise not only for entertaining but also for educating. Being a shrewd scientist, he was well aware of the ill effects of nuclear wars. He foresaw the dangers of nuclear wars and their aftermaths and expressed his concerns about future world in some of his short stories. *Sooriyan (Sun)* is one of such stories in which Sujatha predicts the wretched state of future generations. People live underground in order to save themselves from the poisonous air caused by nuclear war. Lack of trees result in shortage of paper produce and so using paper for artistic creativity like writing poems is considered illegal. Water scarcity is also experienced by them that only 200 liters of water is allotted per month for a family. For the children who are born underground, Sun is an unseen mystery that could be perceived only with the eyes of imagination.

Jillu is another short story about the cruel consequences of atomic war. As a result of the war against Pakistan and China, the majority of Indians got killed and the rest are evacuated to a safe place. Jillu, a pet dog of a little boy, is denied entry in the helicopter; and so the boy too remains with his dog, unaware of the peril awaited, leaving his parents in utter agony.

It is certainly praiseworthy that people progress tremendously in the sphere of science and technology. But in this process of intellectual evolution, unfortunately they often tend to forsake humanistic qualities. *Vanathil Oru Mouna Tharagai (A Silent Damsel on Sky)* shows Sujatha's worry about the decline of human values. In this story, Dhruva, an eminent scientist who is considered to be the pride of the nation, is proposed by the government to travel to space in order to mend a satellite. As a young and courageous citizen, he agrees to undertake the task in spite of risk, believing that his country is sure to save him if there occurs any danger. But after executing his mission on space, he encounters an unanticipated problem. While he awaits rescue hopefully, the government authority refuses to send another rocket to save him just on the grounds of expenditure.

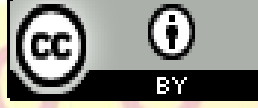
Another story *Rule Number 17* discusses the dangers in systemization. Rules and regulations are supposed to be formed only for the sake of people. But in course of time, system seizes power and people are caught in the cruel clutches of conventions and victimized in the name of procedures and principles. In this story, the writer records his anxiety about a systemized future in which people are forced to get permission from government even for personal affairs like marriage. The protagonist Vasudevan, in order to get immediate marriage permit, bribed some money; but he was cheated with a duplicate permit. When it is found, he is convicted for his unauthorized marriage that his marriage gets cancelled and his baby is killed. This story may be a precaution from the writer that humans are not to be sacrificed by virtue of preservation of system.

Man may boast about computer as his proudest production. This genius machine, in spite of serving as a slave of man and enabling him to lead a sophisticated life, annoys him sometimes with its extraordinary intelligence. Sujatha's *Adimai (Slave)* deals with this concept. The protagonist Atma buys a computer system that is capable of executing all the household chores. Having sensors all over the house, the talking computer receives orders from the family members and fulfills them immediately. Though the system is quite useful in many aspects, Atma gets irritated by its overdosage of politeness, extreme respect and readily response. And it is intolerable for him when the computer becomes a close companion of his wife and describes her beauty. When he realizes that his wife enjoys the computer's company more than his, he presumes the machine as his rival and out of jealousy he decides to destroy it. It is a proof for the fact that man cannot accept being excelled even by his own creation.

Hence Sujatha established himself as the outstanding Tamil Science Fiction writer by having handled with different themes in the scientific sphere. The astonishing trait of this writer is that most of his predictions about scientific inventions turned true. For instance, in the stories written four decades back, there are references about computer play centers, touch phones, underground trains etc. It is an evidence for the ingenious imagination and intelligence of the writer. In fact Sujatha's contribution is widely regarded as a milestone in Tamil Science Fiction.

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