

Reading Dystopia in Sukriti Tripathi's *The Underwater Giants and Other Stories*

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Abstract

The *Underwater Giants and Other Stories* by Sukriti Tripathi is a powerful debut collection that delves into the intricate relationship between human beings, nature, and technology. Through a series of thought-provoking and imaginative short stories, the collection brings to light the alarming consequences of humanity's unbridled desire for power and control. Tripathi crafts a compelling narrative landscape where nature is not merely a backdrop but an active, often silenced, victim of human ambition. Her stories serve as cautionary tales, warning against the environmental degradation and moral decay that result from the marginalization of the natural world. By weaving dystopian elements into each tale, the author pushes readers to question the ethical boundaries of scientific advancement and technological misuse. The thematic core of the collection lies in its urgent call to reevaluate humanity's relationship with the planet and the far-reaching implications of our choices. Tripathi's storytelling is marked by a subtle blend of realism and speculative fiction, allowing readers to confront uncomfortable truths about ecological imbalance and the future of human existence. *The Underwater Giants and Other Stories* is not just a literary work—it is a timely reflection on our present and a forewarning of what may lie ahead if we continue to disregard the delicate equilibrium of the natural world.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, Dystopia, Children's Literature, Sukriti Tripathi*

Introduction

Sukriti Tripathi's *The Underwater Giants and Other Stories* is a seminal text highlighting the effects of the reckless devastation of the weave of nature in the hands of human beings. The present discussion offers an analysis of the human-nature relationship leading to some dystopian consequences. An innovative portrayal of creatures and characters in the stories offers a creative and attractive appeal and proves the collection's contemporaneity. *The Underwater Giants and Other Stories* is dedicated to the awareness and alertness towards the

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natural world around us, and reminds us of our responsibilities for its preservation. ‘Nature’ is the recurring theme in the collection, and the entire storyline revolves around it.

It begins with the story, ‘Monster of the Dark’, where an unnamed brave captain of a ship comes across a strange man, who has killed a sacred animal from the underwater. When the man was kept in a hell-like condition by the underwater creatures, they found him completely remorseless. It reflects the cruelty of human beings towards the natural world. The story reads:

No. They were a disguised group of devils. They came here as inciters. They brought destruction and misfortune. They messed up everything here. Our village never witnessed traffic, road blocks, honking noises, garbage flowing in our holy river, and plastics thrown away casually on the streets, blocking of drainage, and death of birds that lived with tranquillity in our farms. (Underwater Giants,67)

The ‘Monster of the Dark’, shows how an innocent old man reacts to the sudden roadblocks, automobiles, garbage, noises, and crowd in his small village on the hills. It is all due to the careless tours of the outsiders. The modern activities were quite new to him, and therefore, he planned to create a fake monster in order to scare the outsiders away so the villagers could live peacefully conventionally and pragmatically.

In ‘The Gloomy Island’, Sukriti speaks of a disturbing incident where a mysterious island keeps every ship or boat that passes nearby. The island symbolises hell with a never-ending fire and considers every human being a prisoner of nature. The humans trapped there appear hopeless and clueless. They could neither survive nor run off. The story also symbolises that exploiting nature and insensitiveness may lead humans to a certain emptiness. The author states in the story, “...The sense of repetitiveness for the creatures here was helping them in survival which is undoubtedly the consequence of emptiness and absurdity. The mysterious island captured the humans who were once blinded with greed, high ambition or pride.” (Underwater Giants,80)

Similarly, in the short story ‘The Darkness’, we find the dark consequences of the future planet when there is just one plant left and is being kept in a museum as a mere attraction. The reason behind this is global warming. The sun's rays of destructive tendency killed plants and humans both impartially. The plots of almost all the chapters in The Underwater Giants and Other Stories revolve around issues such as global warming, deforestation, exploitation, and human cruelty. Unity, affection, and sensitivity are the basic requirements for humans in order to build a healthy and happy future for themselves.

The dystopian elements in *The Underwater Giants and Other Stories* help in maintaining the interest of the readers as well as a sense of urgency to preserve nature for a better future. In ‘The Darkness’, the writer draws an image of somewhere around the year 2060 where the sun's rays dry the humans to death, due to which the working hours are 8:00 pm to 6:00 am. People sleep in the morning and work at night. There's no electricity, and people have their matchboxes in their pockets permanently. This is an exact contrast to what we usually think about our future technology. Sukriti Tripathi states, “Readers, you must have expectations about an increased level of technology, flying vehicles, dancing robots, portable air-conditioned smart houses, and whatnot on your fingertips. However, the future here seems to be in absolute contrast...” (*The Underwater Giants*,52)

Similarly, in ‘Artificiality’, we see how the future world bans art and creativity because of artificial intelligence, and eventually humans become too lazy to think about being creative. To read from ‘Artificiality’, “a few years back, artificial intelligence took over humans’ creativity.” (*The Underwater Giants*,42). Here, everything is mechanised. Even in the schools and colleges, there are blended teachers, half humans, and the others robots. A small number of people who wished to attempt writing or painting have been punished.

Sometimes, dystopian fiction plays an important role in developing a kind of fear in readers’ minds about a destructive future. In *The Underwater Giants and Other Stories*, the dystopian elements help in spreading awareness for conserving the natural world by portraying fearful consequences of excessive use of technology and AI. To read from the short story, ‘Artificiality’, “You must be reading this story comfortably sometime in the past but in the future, creativity is officially prohibited...” (*The Underwater Giants*,41)

Such statements lead the readers to feel that he should be grateful for the world he is sitting comfortably in, at present, but in the future, things may get worse if humans continue relying on AI or machines more and more.

The Underwater Giants and Other Stories further offers an Existence of life underwater. A world of unusual creatures living underwater are considered as sacred species. Perhaps, the depth of the water symbolises the deep mysteries that the universe holds. Humans seem to be know-it-alls, but in reality, the magic and mystics of the universe cannot be predicted. “Sea life wasn’t simple. The land has mysteries too but the sea is deeper and so is its magic. Countless

undiscovered mysteries and secrets are hidden around us...” (The Underwater Giants and Other Stories. 23)

The author offers a whole world of underwater where the proud, shining animals appear to be the leaders and the giant humans as their followers. They obey them, respect them, and cook delicious food for them. With simpler observation, we find that they treat them as their elders of the family. Everything is ironically contradictory to the world we live in. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, we could have just explored just a little part of the entire oceanic world and its species which makes it clear that there could be an entire world of mysteries present in the depths of the water. To cite data from NOAA, we find:

Scientists estimate there may be between 700,000 and 1 million species in the ocean (mostly animals and excluding most microorganisms, of which there are millions). Roughly two-thirds of these species, possibly more, have yet to be discovered or officially described, with almost 2,000 new species accepted by the scientific community each year...But the ocean will never be fully explored. Earth is constantly changing, and it's important to understand these changes given the importance of the ocean in our everyday lives. (NOAA).

The representation of technology and science has been highlighted in the collection quite sincerely. When we talk of the exploitation of nature and the destruction of the future, the reason behind this is undoubtedly the reckless and untamed use of technology. Short story ‘Artificiality’ tries to assert that because of artificial intelligence, no one believes in the artists of the future. The writer used technology to draw the plot of the stories that perfectly reflects the influence of technology in the future world. The major elements of dystopian fiction, such as survival, lack of individuality, lack of freedom, or destruction of the environment, are carefully highlighted in The Underwater Giants and Other Stories. The image of machine birds in the story, ‘Artificiality’, speaks volumes, “The weather was soothing and the machine birds were chirping as usual...” (The Underwater Giants 41)

The opening of the story ‘Artificiality’ announces the theme of technology itself. The technology and gadgets describe casual use of artificial machines and plastic plants instead of real animals or trees. This artificiality or fakeness symbolises the excessive use of technology. The creative minds are all surrounded by machines and people becoming lazier, and artists being captured. To cite from the short story ‘Artificiality’, we find, “...emotions of art trapped inside a human mind which is forced to think about machines.” (The Underwater Giants,46)

Sukriti Tripathi tries to show that in the future, there may be days when even if a few humans slightly think of attempting art, people would mock them or call them old-school due to the highest technology around them. In *The Underwater Giants and Other Stories*, readers would find the use of scientific jargon in an appropriate manner without being senselessly exaggerated.

In the short story 'The Darkness', the entire scenario of the future seems to be reversed when the writer shows another possible consequence of excessive global warming and modernity, where in the future, technology would move towards its downfall, and people would be living without electricity and mobile phones. Everything related to machines and technology may come to an end in the future due to their overuse and overdependence. In the very first story, we can witness a reference to biotechnology. The old man tells the captain how he worked in a laboratory as an assistant to one of the famous scientists. The scientist used to keep half-dead animals in jars in order to perform his experiments later. Though the experiments are not really mentioned, they are clearly anything related to animal biotechnology where the aim may be to increase growth rate, analyzing certain kinds of hormones, giving nutrients to animals or using them for biomedical purposes and many more.

The Underwater Giants and Other Stories offers the tropes of Emptiness, purposelessness and the downfall of humans, ironically. It asserts that the downfall of humans is definite if they exploit and challenge nature. A sense of emptiness or hollowness is also visible in humans as described in *The Underwater Giants and Other Stories*. In the story 'The Gloomy Island', a group of people is shown trapped on an island. They seemed to be relying on monotony and repetitiveness for survival. To cite from the story, "this monotony is a helping hand to hold on to our existence..." (*The Underwater Giants*, 77)

The monotony and repetitiveness helped them have a little purpose for their existence when they were trapped on a threatening island for years. The idea of purposelessness and emptiness would have come from the modern and postmodern writings after both world wars. Literature in the twentieth century, right from T.S. Eliot's 'The Hollow Men' and 'The Waste Land' to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, offer the meta concept of hollowness, which is still prevailing unchanged.

History makes it clear that after the destruction, the emptiness naturally comes to humans, and they lose themselves in purposeless, repetitive activities for the sake of living. The collection,

The Underwater Giants and Other Stories, clearly aims to reflect such deep philosophy about the possibilities of humans' downfall due to a number of reasons.

In *The Underwater Giants and Other Stories*, the man who killed the water animal or the group of men trapped on the island indirectly created hell for themselves by exploiting nature with zero repentance. *The Underwater Giants and Other Stories*, thus, articulates a deeper message which makes it evident that remorselessness and lack of sensitivity would certainly lead humans to their own tragedy. The man, after killing the animal, could never free himself from the prison of the underwater world because he had no remorse. Soul represents the warmth of life, and the absence of it signifies the cold corpse. Therefore, here hollowness simply symbolises the absence of soul where the materialistic humans aren't sensitive enough for every creature around them. The writer tries to speak out about how important it is to have a perfect harmony of sense and sensitivity towards the environment we live in.

Traces of Ecocriticism are clearly seen in *The Underwater Giants and Other Stories*. As ecocriticism refers to a certain relationship or connection between human beings and the natural world. In other words, the portrayal of the complexity of human beings and their survival, linked with nature, *The Underwater Giants and Other Stories* offers sufficient scope for ecocriticism. The man-nature relationship has been clearly portrayed by the author, and the central message to the readers is that the entire human health and happiness is dependent on the plants. The internal tranquillity is only possible when a human is free from the guilt of exploiting or killing anything in their surroundings. The following statement from the short story, 'Darkness' is a testimony to it, To cite from the short story 'Darkness', we find "if a single plant helped a boy in his treatment together with medicines, then, having a hundred plants would cure thousands of people..." (*The Underwater Giants* , 54) . Here, a plant has been kept in a museum, and a boy, who was really sick, goes to visit the museum regularly, and he feels better around the plant. Thus, the collection stresses the requirement to plant more and more trees in order to have a healthy, peaceful life.

The Underwater Giants and Other Stories offers a world of imaginary new characters. The characters in the collection aren't just a mere portrayal of ordinary humans or animals, and make the plot of *The Underwater Giants and Other Stories* exciting to read. The innovative characters, carefully created to entertain and attract readers, are a strong result of the excellent imagination skills of the writer. Initially, we see an innocent, divine, white creature that mourns

the death of its offspring. This incident proves that the animal was calm, emotional, yet graceful. In some ways, the animal may be compared with a whale due to its similar qualities. Then, we came across the giant humans who obeyed the animals that lived with them. The writer tries to make a comparison with our world while satirising contemporary society, where animals are bullied and killed harshly. Next, we see different types of colourful fish in water with special divine powers, and the author states that “everything seemed mysterious yet heavenly...” (The Underwater Giants and Other Stories 20). Then comes a fish, yellow as a fresh sun with a special power to connect with the souls. Another kind of fish, which was described as a beautiful, elegant rose, had the power of compelling brains to have visions that aren’t even true. Thus, through the characters of water, the author tries to explore the mysteries of the ocean and the possible variety of life existing there.

The intervention of technology in human life shows the presence of humanoids and robots. The Underwater Giants and Other Stories has a number of robots and humanoids in an understated manner, despite being science fiction. The images of high technology and robots are quite decent and entertaining.

In ‘A Journey to Pinto’, Sukriti Tripathi shows how some of the expelled, angry scientists decided to experiment on their own bodies and convert themselves into humanoids. This reflects the misuse of technology for gaining satisfaction, revenge, and power. The advancement and capability of technology are clearly visible in the chapter, and the message is to spread awareness about it. In this context, the following statement of Ravindra Pratap Singh, holds true, “the conscious part of the human cerebral structure understands the consequences and finality of the utility, and the uses offered by the technology towards comforting glories and glamour of life through deteriorating health of heart and mind.”(Singh, 22)

In ‘Artificiality’, everything, including plants, birds, police officers, or school teachers, has been completely mechanised. This symbolises, as the title of the story also suggests, the fakeness due to overusing technology. To refer to the short story ‘Artificiality’, we find, “two of the robot cops entered the room in which we sat all these hours, and arrested them with invisible handcuffs around their wrists...” (The Underwater Giants 48)

We have been interfacing many stories and visual texts with dystopian elements to date, yet The Underwater Giants and Other Stories can be considered a unique attempt because of its

simplicity and naturality in narrating such grave concerns without providing unnecessary images of high technology. Thus, robots as characters in a book always give an interesting twist to the plot.

Readers may find positive characters who are brave and confident. Such characterisation brings *The Underwater Giants and Other Stories* to an optimistic point where the readers can learn so much from the characters while getting entertained simultaneously through reading. The brave captain of the ship, whom everybody admired, or the brave teenage boy, Mayank, who courageously went into the dark forest and grabbed the culprit by his arm. The captain of the ship, even at the time of the dramatic, hazardous storm, remained calm when everyone on the ship panicked. He was confident because of the struggles he had been facing since he chose the ocean. It is visible in the statement, “I won’t let any disaster destroy my ship...” (*The Underwater Giants and Other Stories* 15)

In the short story ‘Artificiality’, we find a teenage girl, hopeful and talented, who decides to continue writing despite being surrounded by a robotic government and where any form of art has been completely banned. She had been given lectures and punishment by the government, but by the end of the story, she decided to continue writing with a firm hope that perhaps her words may become the strength for someone like her in the future. The knowledgeable professor in ‘A Journey to Pinto’ removes the stereotype or barrier of one fixed field of interest and proves that a person can be good at multiple things instead of getting stuck in a single profession. He was a professor of literature, but his passion for astronomy brought him fame and consideration in his society.

There is another group of characters in *The Underwater Giants and Other Stories* who appear to be suffering due to their own activities in the past. Certain characters are created here to balance out the plot and demand of the storyline. The writer felt it necessary to highlight the different kinds of humans who are suffering after exploiting nature or misusing their strengths. While coming across this group of characters, the writer tried to build a sense of fear in readers about the unhappy consequences of exploiting nature.

Such characters may include the man from the very first story, where the captain investigates his condition and how he had been punished for killing a scared animal of water. He was a runaway prisoner of the underwater giants, and his punishment wasn’t over, as he couldn’t feel

remorse after killing a little animal. The central message to readers here is to be sensitive towards the creatures around us.

Another example can be noticed in ‘The Gloomy Island’ where several people had been trapped on an island for ages. They could neither go nor live happily. Every day spent on the island felt like killing themselves day by day. The eternal punishment is similar to that of hell. Here, the men trapped had committed punishable activities in the past and were punished on the island based on those activities. Such characters become important to point out the other side of the world, the worse conditions or results, and to develop a sense of fear and disturbance in the minds of the readers for a better outcome from the reading experience. This shows that the harmony in different types of characters is important for any fiction work.

Thus, *The Underwater Giants and Other Stories* offers elements of science, gothic, and children’s fiction. The mention of the terms of technology and robots, emphasis on preservation of the natural world, and protection of animals, makes it a complete science fiction, but the writer, in order to make the collection entertaining and pleasant at the same time, added a gothic setting, suspense, and adolescent features. *The Underwater Giants and Other Stories*, therefore, appears to be a suitable reading experience for almost all age groups. The author feels comfortable calling it a children’s fiction because she desired to keep everything simple and effective. The dark forest in the hills or the old mansion’s grotesque imagery, all together, make the collection quite fascinating for its readers.

The strong images in *The Underwater Giants and Other Stories* play an important role in effective narration, and it undoubtedly follows the basic rule of any fiction work, which is: showing instead of telling. The description of white foamy waves of the sea, visible due to lightning in the dark sky, stands out as an excellent example. In the short story, ‘Artificiality’, the images of a chaotic future with chirping machine birds, plastic plants, robot cops carrying invisible handcuffs, or the detailing of the philosophical painting by the boy, everything is expressed through images, and the readers can visualise exactly the same picture. The style and vocabulary of *The Underwater Giants and Other Stories* keep a sync between thought and style. While using words such as ‘dark’, ‘gloomy’, ‘artificial’, ‘humanoids’, ‘monotony’ or ‘trapped’, the writer tries to reflect the psyche of humans and the picture of the future of our planet due to humans’ insensitive attitude towards the natural world. *The Underwater Giants and Other Stories* reminds one of the allegorical patterns of O.P. Vijayan’s style, although not in that

intensive appeal. “The Saga of Dharmapuri, with its visible apocalypse of etiquette and decency in public mannerisms, connotes its leanings towards the postmodernist announcement of the collapsing of the grand traditions, making even taboos work as allegory in elite discourse.” (Singh, ‘Reading Taboos as Allegory in OV Vijayan’s The Saga of Dharmapuri’, 139) Readers may also find a little fragmented style of narration in one of the stories.

In the text of ‘The six days’, the narrator suddenly talks of her past life while sitting in the airport. A reader would find it later that she slept and dreamt about what exactly happened in those six days, a few years ago. However, all the other stories follow the simpler format of narration. We find most of the stories with open endings. Usually, open-ended stories in such works help the reader to think about the central message for a longer period of time. However, perhaps the writer leaves the stories open-ended because she wishes readers to lead from there and understand their responsibilities towards nature, as it’s their duty to take the action from there.

Conclusion

The stories in *The Underwater Giants and Other Stories* help us understand the basic human requirements and responsibilities of people of almost all ages across the globe. The humans, younger or older, always have a fixed side where they are fascinated by adventure, bravery, technology, gadgets, mysteries, unusual creatures, etc.. Sukriti Tripathi has elaborated upon it with a perfect blend of thematic trajectories a propos of vocabulary, tone, narrative style, endings, imagery, and much more. The interesting plot, such as exploration of mysteries in the depths of the sea and introducing unique and creative aquatic creatures that might be living with different norms and culture of their own, altogether brings a sense of pleasure throughout the book. Suitable for every age group of readers, the collection reminds us of certain duties that we have towards our surroundings. The vocabulary, word choice, narrative style and overall meaning is simple to interpret. However, the meaning and interpretation completely depends on the readers and perhaps this is the reason why the writer ends almost every story open and this the point where a reader’s task begins. The repetitive use of the terms related to science, technology, and robots signals our future helplessness. Such issues have been highlighted by Sukriti Tripathi with the help of an entertaining, light-hearted storyline with an

optimistic, hopeful set of characters. As a reader, one may learn some of the most common yet unpopular concerns of contemporary society.

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