



CRISIS WITH EXTRA-TERRESTRIALS IN JAYANT NARLIKAR'S THE MESSAGE FROM ARISTARCHUS AND VIRUS

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ABSTRACT:

In The Message from Aristarchus (TMFA) and Virus (VRS), Jayant Narlikar stresses the reality that human knowledge has limits and human knowledge does not know everything in the cosmos. In his SF, the attitude towards ET is ambivalent and ETs are powerful, intelligent, mysterious, and technologically advanced, both SF warns that the human race has to prepare to face future cultural shocks. In both SF, fantasy operates as preventive and like that of H.G. Wells and Arthur C. Clarke, Narlikar's approach to reality is that for human survival and welfare, human society has to inculcate and nurture constructive human values.

KEY WORDS: Extraterrestrials, Virus, Fantasy, Reality

In South Asian SF, Jayant Narlikar¹ has carved a *niche* for himself by creating SF, The Message From Aristarchus which relates to space exploration; No Return of Vaman focuses on robots, and Virus, deals with digital invasion by an alien. In Indian context, the interaction between Jayant Narlikar and Laxman Londhe provides an impetus to the conceptual nature of SF:

Laxman Londhe: So, Dr. Narlikar, lasting qualities of science fiction would probably depend upon not science content on it, but the fictional content of it or the way science is affecting human life.

Jayant Narlikar: I would put, the best way is the last one science affecting human life. I think that is the one which is going to survive, not pure part of it, but the interaction between science and human life, human society. I think that is the theme aspect in my opinion.

Narlikar emphasizes not only on science fiction, but also upon interrelation between science and human life, human society. For him, SF speculates about the repercussion of science on society, and delineates with unfamiliar besides familiar. For the expression of unfamiliar, unusual and strange experiences such as an encounter with ETs, we need an altogether different mode. That is where the fantasy mode comes significantly into play. Thomas D. Claeson links the nuances among fantasy, realism and SF:

Fantasy – other side of realism, of which SF is the latest expression – has existed side by side with what has come to be called the mainstream – the “realistic”, the representational – throughout – literature and certainly throughout the history of modern fiction (23).

Alien encounter is a fascinating idea which operates in varied plots in H. G. Wells' The War of World, Arthur C. Clarke's Childhood End, 2001: Space Odyssey, Samuel Delany's The Einstein Intersection, Fred Hoyle's The Black Cloud, Ossian's Ride, John Elliot's A for Andromeda, Andromeda Breakthrough. The purport of my endeavor here is to explore the nature of the encounter with ETs in Jayant Narlikar's The Message from Aristarchus (hereafter, TMFA) and Virus (VRS). My argument is that inhabitants of



distant planets, not in the solar system, are relatively progressed than the homeosapiens, and human beings have to prepare socially, politically, economically and technologically to face the invasion by ETs for the survival of the human race.

TMFA delineates with an encounter with ETs on Panchak in the planetary system of the star, Aristrachus. The scientists on the Earth had opted for a system that would be capable of “sending and receiving messages at light speed, a system powerful and sensitive enough to reach out to stars within, say, fifty light year” (11). The idea of Cyclops was adopted by the United States, and the new President took Cyclops from the scientific establishment and handed over to the military. Cyclopsville campus consisted of transients, regular and random.

The principal occupants of Cyclopsville were large radio dishes, about a thousand of them. It is viewed from above the whole thing resembled one gigantic eye staring – looking for something peculiar or unusual. Not surprisingly, its creators had called it ‘Cyclops’ after the one-eyed monster of Greek mythology. They had designed it with a specific purpose: to answer some specific fundamental questions:

Is there life elsewhere in the universe, beyond the narrow confines of the Earth? Are there intelligent beings that have progressed ever beyond us humans? If so, where are they? How can we reach out to them? (10-11) The innate curiosity was to explore the nature of the cosmos.

John Pringle was successful in communicating with ET when he directed the disc of Cyclops towards a star with Aristrachus gk5....a giant star of spectral class K named after Aristarchus, the visionary astronomers from ancient Greece.

John intended to disclose his communication with ET to Peter Lorry but in vain because of the fatal accident on the road towards Tuscon. Alok, ET from Panchak unraveled the truth related to the tape, lost by John. He was found as a child in the farm near Karad, on the Bombay– Bangalore highway and adopted by Sudhakar and Malini. After sensing the calamity on Panchak, Alok was sent in a special space capsule to the Earth.

He was passionately interested in space communication and as the consequence the project on communication with ET was approved for him, but the military had directed him to complete it in sixty days. Fred informed him about John Pringle, a scientist, who slipped out one night with an astronomical data tape in his car to hand it over to Sir Peter Lorry. Dr. Clive provided him the 1980s tape to know its content. It was the last night of Alok at Cyclops. He was deeply absorbed in looking at the pictures and number appearing on the screen in front, making occasional notes on a pad. Alok’s notes were in a strange script he looked quite home with it:

There were some formulae whose numbers and symbols were alien but there structure seemed familiar (146).

He recalled that the space craft carrying Taru, his father, Maru, his mother and he met with the fatal accident because of the collision with an asteroid in the solar belt. Their radio system failed and so ETs could not convey the message of the disaster to the Mission Control on Panchak. Taru, his father, stored the relevant data about their mission in Alok’s brain. Alok was housed in the space capsule and that parachute would ensure his soft landing on the Earth. The capsule burnt out as it entered the atmosphere after parachuting him down:

The balloon like object had the information about us recorded on a meter plague (152).



Alok unfolded that “our technology now faces a challenge to guarantee our survivals” (150). The star, Talman (Aristarchus to human beings) was blown up slowly as a red giant star and so it was becoming more and more difficult for his people to live on Panchak. Most of their colonies had gone underground to live under artificially maintained conditions. The ETs were above the humans on the ladder of evolution. Their brains had “a greater capacity for storing, receiving and processing information” and biologically they were same as human beings “with same basic structure” (149). Alok clarified the purpose of ETs for interstellar communication and space odyssey: Talman had three planets, ours is the outermost. He two inner ones have now been gobbled up by the giant star. Event though it will take several hundred, a thousand years for Panchak to fall prey, the living condition sill soon becomes impossible to maintain through on efforts. So our technology has been geared to finding other suitable locations in the universe. (150).

Besides searching for alternative abode, the core objective was to “establish a friendly dialogue” with people on the Earth and send findings back to Panchak. Only one hour left and so he needed those notes which contained “Information about the Earth, its environment, its human and other living creatures, of the progress science and technology have made here. It also contains my own view that my people will find shelter here in their moment of distress. This is the message I am planning to send: a message they have been waiting for all those years” (153).

The intention of the ETs in TMFA was constructive. They were quite, intellectual and non- violent. They had eliminated violence, infection and disease, from their planet. With their experience and knowledge they intended to make “the Earth a much more pleasant planet to live on (154).”

Sir Peter Lorry firmly trusted in the benevolent attitude of ETs, and brushed aside Sandra’s assumption of ETs colonial tendency:

But I have a greater faith in the maturity and resilience of us humans. We too have advanced since those colonial days. We have a world society today rather than isolated pockets of the past. We have a better perception of the gifts and dangers of science and technology ... So I am optimistic that when the Panchak people arrive, we will be better equipped to receive them than the natives were when the colonisers arrived (155).

He had taken the calculated risk of communication with Panchak people informing them about the Earth, the place as an alternative abode.

As in *Childhood End*, in *TMFA*, ETs are intelligent and powerful. In it, ETs arrive to stop men from turning their planet into radioactive land. The Overlords, the superior ETs united Earth into one world. Under their rule, the Earth has become a technological utopia. The Overlord’s mission was constructive to save the human race from its destructive use of science to restore harmony and peace on the Earth. In *TMFA*, the future of ETs is speculated, pertaining the drastic changes in the star system in the cosmos. In retrospective, both *CE* and *TMFA* speculate the encounter of human beings with the technologically advanced ETs.

Fantasy in *TMFA* warns that the apocalyptic situation may arise on the Earth and the problem of the survival of human beings will creep up. Narlikar’s vision of reality is that ETs are intelligent and powerful, and to sustain the future cultural shock of an encounter with ETs, the inhabitants of the Earth has to nurture the values as understanding, cooperation and unity.



CE, TMFA and VRS have the motif of alien encounter with variation. Unlike in 2001: Space Odyssey, ETs in VRS are active in malfunctioning the digital system on the Earth. The fantastic hypothesis in VRS is that powerful telescope on the Earth searches the inhabitation of ET in the cosmos. On the basis of this hypothesis, Narlikar creates the world of fantasy which speculates about the invasion of the technologically advanced ETs, causing the malfunction of digital system on the Earth. In the beginning of the narration, the President of India, dedicated to the nation, the telephone complex, VIRAT3, containing 50 telescopes, each with 50 meter radius. The pivotal motive of Gopalswami Subramaniam, the Director of VIRAT, was to receive radio messages from the planet orbiting around the Bernard which was approximately at the distance of six light years from the Earth. Narayan Vinayak Jagtap, the Astrophysicist, the member of Science Advisory Council of the Prime Minister observed in the few months that computer started operating strongly, for instance, to dial telephone call on different numbers, to charge hotel bill incorrectly. Digital operations were involved in the storing of the government data, myriad informative data, and the details of war strategy.

A virus, which disordered a computer operation, was a small computer programme. The doubt was creeping in mind whether any international organization was instrumental in the terrorist attack by sending viruses. The virus had also caused havoc in the computers of defense forces. Jamshet Wadia, a technician in the complex observed that D-14 was pointing at different direction disregarding the command of the central computer, and communicated it to Gopalswami but he ignored it treating as routine malfunction. After some months it recurred and other dishes also followed the direction of D-14. When a virus entered in Anglo Australian Observatory it caused disturbances in the observations. But it interfered the working of VLA4, and D-8 of VLA started functioning disorderly. Each nation thought that it was isolated incident or at worst in a series of attacks by some hackers motivated by extremist tendencies. The phenomenon was universal, so far as the Earth was concerned.

As the consequence the meeting of eight scientists, Narayan Jagtap, Gopalswami Subrahmaniam (India), Roger Miley, Willaim Chang (USA), Jerry Nicoloson, Berland Bishop (Australia), Hans Schneider (European Economic Community), Michael Lemmer (Republic South Africa), was held in AAO to discuss about the problem, and search out a solution to avert the apocalyptic situation. They were able to establish the following facts:

- A. Bernard's star does have a planet.
- B. The Planet beams radio signals towards the Earth whenever it is facing it, i.e. whenever it is in front of the star as seen from the Earth.
- C. The signals carry a computer programme.
- D. The programme carries a virus in steps, with each fresh step more damaging than the last.(179)

They logically concluded:

We believe that the planet of Bernard's star hosts a living colony, which is well advanced even above us on the technology ladder. It is able to pick up terrestrial radio signals being transmitted from one part of the Earth to another... and use that information to assess our present status as intelligent beings. They have also assessed the viability of this planet as a host of life. (180)

ET's probes of neighboring stars might have shown them the Earth as the suitable planet to inhabit and they might be interested in colonizing the Earth. The virus was getting more and more powerful. Two steps were needed a) to create a zone of avoidance



around Barnard's star by the astronomers, b) to shut down all the computers on the Earth. So Gopalswami had decided to close VIRAT from night and Regar Miley also followed the precaution for VLA. Shankar Sarda in his review in Lalit has aptly pointed out that the Virus envisages differences, greed among scientists, bureaucratic tendencies, political fervor in New Delhi, diplomatic approaches of the Prime Minister and the power holders, and the constructive output because of mutual love and understanding.

Narlikar in VRS intensifies the awareness about reality by creating the world of fantasy, the invasion of viruses from the alien planet and warns human society. The President of the United Nations General Assembly announced:

And finally, we need not to be complacent. The inhabitants of the planet of Barnard's star have played the mischief with us. We suffered a lot because of their interference. But ever though we have now wiped the slate clean, the possibility remains that the mischief could be repeated. Indeed, the viral invasion may well be a precursor to a conventional physical invasion. This may depend on how advanced technologically 'They' are. Our best defense of any such invasion would come from a united front. So let us forget our differences and build an our common desire to retain, preserve and control our heritage. (198) The viral invasion is indicative of the possibility of the physical invasion of aliens. The remedy is to unite the human race, keeping aside conflicts, and to retain human culture and human civilization.

Jayant Narlikar's VRS and H. G. Wells, *The War of the World*, Clake's 2001: *Space Odyssey* concern with the invasion of ETs on the Earth. In WOW, the Martians treat human beings as though they were an obsolete race. The Martians cause heavy destruction and finally drive human beings to the brink of defeat. Wells and Narlikar hint at the Commonwealth of mankind; the urgency of uniting together, keeping aside our difference, to avoid a catastrophe for the better means and the elevation of human society.

The motif of alien encounter continues in 2001: SO, and as in 2001: SO, WOW, ETs is intelligent and powerful in VRS, but unlike ETs in WOW, they are invisible in 2001: SO and VRS. In 2001 : SO, the presence of intelligent ETs is overwhelming, yet not visible, and has mysterious appeal. Narlikar and Clake, both have to assert that human knowledge has limit and it does not comprehend everything in vast cosmos. Like H.G. Wells and Arthur C. Clarke, Narlikar speculates that ETs are intelligent and powerful; poses a threat to human existence on the Earth and human endeavor.

In VRS, fantasy's approach to reality reveals that it is an illusion that a man is only advanced being in the cosmos. Inhabitants, advanced than human beings, exist in space. The calamity of the invasion from the technologically progressed ET cannot be averted and so human beings have to prepare to face colonial aggression by aliens and stress the necessity to retain values as love for the nation, co-operation, unity, tolerance and understanding. This stance is alertness and a remedy for it too.

Jayant Narlikar poses an ambivalent view about ETs who are intelligent, powerful and though they are benevolent or malevolent, the human race has to prepare for the future cultural shocks in the garb of an alternative abode for ETs. In both SF, TMFA, VRS fantasy functions as a preventive and alerts human race about an encounter with ETs. Narlikar's speculative vision of reality is that human society has to nourish the constructive values tolerance and constitute global policy for the survival and welfare of human society in the wake of an encounter with ETs.



NOTES

1. Jayant Narlikar, Astrophysicist and the former Director, Inter-University Center for Astronomy and Astrophysics, Pune, Maharashtra, collaborated with Fred Hoyle in investigating the nature of black hole and worked out Fred-Narlikar Theory. He is bi-lingual SF writer and pens in Marathi and English. His translated SF in English is *The Message from Aristarchus* (1992), *No Return of Vaman* (1999) and *Virus* (2003). Fred Hoyle's *Black Cloud* (2003) features a sentiment a lien in the form of a cloud that visits the solar system, which causes a massive disturbance in human beings. Jayant Narlikar's SF and Fred Hoyle's SF embody the motif of alien encounter with different hues.
2. The idea of Cyclops, a gigantic radio telescope system, dedicated to the Search for Extra-terrestrial Intelligence (SETI) was proposed by Bernard Oliver, a scientist in the Hewlett Packard Company, in the year 1971.
3. VIRAT means 'enormous' in Sanskrit, stands for the Very Large Indian Radio Telescope. It is the giant telescope having 50 dishes, each with 50 meters diameter. A set of commands given by a human being on a computer keyboard would make this gigantic contraption turn and point to the desired direction.
4. VLA, Very Large Array, telescope system in USA. It has 27 dishes meant for space communication, in VRS.

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