

IB English B
Extended Essay

Title: An Exploration of The Roles Of Women
in Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue*

Research Question: To what extent do the roles of women portray the image of dystopia in
the novel *Native Tongue* by Suzette Haden Elgin?

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INTRODUCTION

Dystopia is a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lives. (Sargent, L. T. (1994)). It is mostly imaginary where it explores societies that appear to be ordinary, however it is where people are mostly unhappy, afraid, and in dangerous situations. Dystopian novels reflect how too much controlling, inequality and the freedom loss affects the world, and how it creates the negative side and any possibilities of the human society. Dystopia is a reflection of social, political and global issues that do not fixed and it shows the danger of manipulation and the power of systematic control. It is viewed as how creating a hopeless society, ruining any chance or identity left, also showing us how the future would look like if all of these unfair systems kept going until there is no coming back.

The novel *Native Tongue* by Suzette Haden Elgin takes place in the late 22nd century. The novel presents a dystopian universe where gender, power and different languages expose the dark side of the society. In this universe, women and their abilities, actions and roles are strictly controlled. Women are not given their legal rights, not allowed to vote, work, earn money or have any properties for themselves. They are only used for house work and giving birth to children. However, women hold a unique talent in their hands where they create a language named Láadan, which is a secret language to express emotions and experiences, which man fail to find out. Whisper by whisper, from household to household the language spreads over the parallel society of women across to the world and beyond, amongst the stars. *Native Tongue*

shows the vision of how gender roles affect the society and creates the dystopia, also the perspective it is viewed.

Theoretical perspectives help frame the dystopia of Elgin. For Academician Lyman Tower Sargent dystopia is a society worse than what is real, expressing systematic control and inequality. The concept of "critical feminist dystopia" proposed by Raffaella Baccolini is also important: in such works, oppression is prevalent, but within the dystopian world, there remains a small "motivation for utopian resistance." In "Native Tongue," this motivation exists in language. The novel can be read from the perspective inspired by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which explains that that language is a rebuild of our insight and what we view as real. As "the world's male languages" limit what women can express, the Láadan language allows them to name aspects of their lives that were previously unnamed.

This essay will explore the dystopian society and how the roles of women reflect it, envisioned by Suzette Haden Elgin. The question that will be answered by this essay is "How do the roles of women in Native Tongue reflect and add to the dystopian society?". In this essay, the power of language and females, the reflection of the roles women have, and the control of woman and how it shapes their lives will be explained and shown, how it reflects on the dystopia.

METHODOLOGY

This essay conveys a qualitative literary analysis, approaches the book Native Tongue written by Haden Suzette Elgin by focusing on women and how their roles reflect the dystopian elements and society. Using the book as a primary text and through close reading, quotes and passages are framed by terms such as women, feminism, dystopian theory, and criticism, also

addressing legal control, restrictions and social conditioning, which are relevant to the research question.

Selected passages from the primary text and analyzing them through secondary scholarly findings deepens the research and analysis, focusing on evidence, literary and thematic reading. The analysis includes scholarly definitions for different terms, such as dystopia, phrased by Lyman Tower Sargent and Rafaella Bo understand the literary devices used and framed themes in a academic way. Secondary sources used are based on credibility and pertinence to the roles of women, dystopian societies and linguistic controlling, also academically suitable for both the primary text and themes included.

2. CONTROL OF WOMEN AND DYSTOPIA

2.1 LEGAL CONTROL OF WOMEN

In the novel *Native Tongue*, Suzette Haden Elgin creates a society where women are controlled by men through legal, social, and linguistic ways, putting women into roles that are limited. In the late 22nd century, women are legally under the control of men, have no rights to earn money or vote, and live without any freedom. Being under men's legal property means no political opinions, no economic independence, no social lives, and no control over their own lives. This system and restrictions leave them vulnerable and defenseless. These normalized rules are accepted by the society, which means women's roles are connected to what men do: submission to the heads of the society. With no legal rights and freedom, women are trapped in men's approval. By keeping up with the system and the weak roles of women, Suzette Haden Elgin shows that systematic and controlled societies limit the power and chances women should be given and acquiesce to the unfair changes in the society.

Socially, women only have the roles of domesticity, giving birth, and subservience. Women's intellectuality, creativity, and skills are not seen and are ignored. Marriage is not about having a partner or a lover for purposes, but mostly about giving birth to children and doing housework. Women's talent for interstellar communication, which is an indispensable talent for linguist families, is also ignored even by the men of the linguist families, where men take the place of authority of being the one visible, and women work in the background and are not given the credit for their essential contributions. The society knows that women are a big part of success, and benefits are given, and they need women for the future. On the other hand, they do not recognize women for their successes and talents. This highlights the systematic control of the society and how women are left out while men are on the front all the time, showing the creation of dystopia.

Moreover, the novel shows how men justify their domination using "science" and pseudo-rational arguments. They claim women are inherently weaker, emotional, and unable to cope with intellectual labor, explaining them as something to "protect" from responsibility—effectively masking patriarchy as benevolence. This dystopian control is adapted not only through laws but also through the acceptance of inequality by the society, supported by the rhetorical words, questions, or sentences.

2.2 LINGUISTIC CONTROL

Linguistic control is also another key to why women are under men's control and how men have the advantage. As Elgin writes in her novel, "The only song a woman knows is the song she learns at birth—a sorrowing song, with the words all wrong, in the manly tongues of Earth." (Elgin, 1984, p. 45). This metaphor of the "sorrowing song" represents women's relation to language as misaligned, since the words are "all wrong." The dominant codes are called "the

manly tongues of Earth," which represents the language as male-centered, emphasizing men's power in society, and also showing how men also have the advantage in this aspect. The language does not allow women's experiences, emotions, and perspectives to be fully explained. This intertwines with the Sapir-Whorf-style idea that linguistic control shapes different perspectives and the society.

Furthermore, Elgin emphasizes the limits of communication imposed on women when she notes, "The things a woman wants to say, the tales she longs to tell... they take all day in the tongues of Earth, and half of the night as well." The hyperbolic length of time highlights how women cannot express themselves with the language since it is very indirect for them. What they experience is unexplainable; it is not possible for them to explain their own truths, showing how social structure does not allow self-expression and freedom of speaking and explaining. This way, language also becomes a part of oppression and a continuous way for men to try to hide women's help, contribution, and point of view.

Language, social expectations, and law all coming together reflect how men systematically control women, and that is why dystopian society is shaping itself. Oppression in *the Native Tongue* is not always by violence but by systems that appear normal and are normalized by the society and also by hidden elements. Women are a huge part of the society and the world itself, and for the society to live and function, they are deprived of their freedom and self-determination. These two factors indicate the tension of dystopia, where women are both central to keeping the society living and deliberately excluded to keep classified strength and name their own values. Elgin's description on songs, language and stories shows their power is underrated and prevented in both politics and social life. Their rights and voices are silenced, showing the system and structure of the oppression.

Additionally, as Elgin writes about forming a new language for unrestrained communication, language is also a symbol of resistance and a source of freedom. Láadan is created secretly, which allows women to create new words for their emotions and to express themselves. This language allows them to talk without being understood by men and also create words outside the “manly tongues” to express their emotions and experiences. Women begin to reframe their understanding of self and a community as they speak this language to one another. They begin to rethink their personalities, experiences, and relations with society. The language Láadan expresses the “utopian impulse” Baccolini defines in feminist dystopias. The language is symbolized as a powerful way to claim strength and faith.

3. WOMEN’S ROLES AS A REFLECTION OF A DYSTOPIAN SOCIETY

3.1 LEGAL REGRESSION AND SOCIAL CONDITIONING

In *Native Tongue*, Elgin utilizes the controlled roles of women and their restrictions to highlight the dystopian system of this world. The way they are treated, silenced, or limited reveals the lack of freedom and control of society. In this novel, the idea of dependence on men and the weakness of women caused by society is repeated. The 20th century’s feminism and the roles of women in this society’s intersection are reviewed, and this idea reflects that dystopia is not always far away or unimaginable.

Through the use of virtual language such as the phrase “sorrowing song,” Elgin indicates that the male-centered system has been adapted to, which reinforces the idea that language shapes consciousness, and this idea is related to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Also, the creation of Láadan forms more than resistance; it shakes the ground male dominance is built on.

Reproduction of oppression and resistance is emphasized by Elgin's description of dystopia and how it affects family structures and the daily lives of women rather than political crises. This idea intertwines with Baccolini's words; this novel acts as a critical feminist dystopia. While it describes normative and gender control, it preserves a fragile utopian impulse in the form of the new language and shifting identities.

The reflection of dystopia through women's roles becomes clearer, shown by the way society defines their purpose. In the novel, women and their lives revolve around housework, childbirth, and marriage. They are told to serve, not to show independency or express their feelings. A woman's value is measured by the way she does housework, her ability to take care of children, and her being silent while acknowledging everything going on around them. This social system reduces women to tools used for daily life, emphasizing Elgin's line that "Women are valued to the degree that they serve the needs of men." (Elgin, 1984, p. 89). This statement reflects the thoughts of society about women and determining their roles. It reveals a world where women's value is conditional and where identity is replaced by utility. This idea reflects shaping individuality with functionality in a dystopian society. A woman's worth is measured by how she does housework, her ability to take care of children, and her being silent.

Native Tongue suggests how centering women's roles shows inequality, which is exposed by language, certain laws, and the social life of dystopian societies. Dystopia does not only emerge from chaos, sadness, or incidents but also from silent ways. The novel is explained by both feminist perspectives and a commentary on social systems created with oppression or inequality.

3.2 LANGUAGE, FAMILY STRUCTURE, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTROL

Elgin also writes about the psychological effects of pressure and oppression, separated in both genders of the dystopia. Accepting their roles as they are restricted to do so, the women in *Native Tongue* also accept their roles physically. Questioning authority is seen as dangerous, even sinful. These events finally form a population of women who no longer want to keep up with the incidents, inequality, and enforcement; they want to stand up and internalize these rules. The dystopian manipulation in this novel also highlights the psychologically controlled, restricted women as they are forced to accept their roles. This connects with what Raffaella Baccolini describes as “normalized control” in feminist dystopias. They are taught from a young age that obeying the society's rules, not questioning any rules, and keeping silent is a must to not get in danger and to not question authority. As Elgin writes, “They did not think of themselves as prisoners; they thought of themselves as safe,” (Elgin, 1984, p. 112) explaining the dystopia, convincing women and the population that the rules and mechanisms applied to society protect them when they are capturing them inside a bubble where they can not escape. This is an example of Baccolini's phrases about feminist dystopian literature.

The novel *Native Tongue* also reflects dystopia through the conflict between women's importance and their invisibility. This reflects dystopia in a way that explains that controlling and limiting are very important for the society. They are an essential part of the society since they are the ones that can comprehend and translate the languages of humans and aliens. However, they receive no appreciation or power. Their successes are treated as natural extensions of them being females having patience or intuition and not signs of intelligence or winning. This shows the real-life scenarios where women are not congratulated for their actions and are being left behind; however, in Elgin's novel, it becomes institutionalized. The linguist families depend on women's labor while maintaining a strict belief that denies their

achievements. This conflict reflects how dystopias show us the real world where people use others' knowledge while leaving them out of the society, controlling them.

In the novel, language plays a huge role as a reflection of dystopia. Elgin uses it as both a symbol and an oppression. The society's language does not have enough words for women to express their emotions and thoughts, which leads to them being silenced. It is said in the novel that; "The things a woman wants to say, the tales she longs to tell... they take all day in the tongues of Earth, and half of the night as well." This quote captures how language shows the structure of power it is designed by and for men, leaving women without the chance to show their reality, what they are going through. In this sense, language is a reflection of the world: who can speak and explain and who can not. Women not being able to speak their thoughts and express their feelings reinforces the dystopian society, and without any freedom and ability to speak, the society will remain suffering.

Furthermore, Elgin's use of the family structure mirrors dystopian control. Families are not places of love and safety but units of discipline and surveillance. The household becomes not a home filled with love but only a place for women to be controlled by the men's authority. Fathers and husbands act as both protectors and jailers, controlling every part of women's lives. In this domestic dystopia, women and what they do are restricted and limited and also controlled. The home, which should represent comfort, becomes another part of limitation. With this feature of the book, where the society is dystopian, Elgin relates this to how dystopia does not always have to be seen, but it can also occur in ordinary places such as a household, where the society does not know about what is going on on the inside.

Elgin also emphasizes that the roles of women in *Native Tongue* serve as the realest reflection of the dystopian society. Dystopia in this novel is not about dark, unimaginable society or politics, but about people, communication, and relationships. These characters are trapped

away from freedom; speak up or show any inaction in real life. *In Native Tongue*, women are controlled by men in every aspect, and they are not seen as important for their important roles and efforts for the society. Women are seen as being behind men; even the language used is called “manly tongue,” which shows a broken society with no equal rights, and these experiences define dystopia.

This novel also reflects the psychological changes and affects of dystopia. The language of Láadan spreads to households, hospitals, churches, and different social areas, and boys and girls are taught this language slowly as years pass by and to different generations. This highlights that language is an important part of our lives, and as new ideas and ways to change society start to appear, power can shift from one to another as the society dominated by men slowly change their perspectives and transform to the revealed language, Láadan.

4. CONCLUSION

Native Tongue by Suzette Haden Elgin is about women who are trapped in a dystopian society, where they do not have freedom or the right to speak. Feminism is expressed through women’s roles being oppressed and voices being silenced through linguistic means, and in the novel women’s roles do not portray the dystopian condition; they generate and stabilize it.

Elgin shows that patriarchy is inherited and embraced by using metaphors such as “sorrowing song” , which reinforces the fact that language shapes consciousness. Thus, the invention of Láadan distorts the foundations of thought that are essential for male authority to become more than just a symbolic resistance. Moreover, by building the structure of the novel as intergenerational, Elgin emphasizes that oppression and resistance are passed down through

generations, which makes dystopia emerge as something that is rooted in family structures rather than political crises.

Furthermore, the collocation of technological advancement next to moral regression is reinforced by the science fiction framework of the novel. The ability of humans to communicate with alien species contradicts humanity's rejection of confirmation of women's subjectivity. This condition offers that knowledge is legitimized selectively. In this context, Elgin redefines the concept of dystopia not as a visible cruelty, but as a condition maintained by normalization, bureaucratic arrangement, and controlled discourse.

Finally, the book *Native Tongue* by Suzette Elgin implies that when a society is in control of determining who defines meaning, then they also assign who is going to exist entirely as a subject. Elgin shows that dystopia is born from structured inequality ingrained in language, law, and daily family life but not from chaos by centralizing the roles of women that are restricted. Therefore, the novel functions both as a feminist speculation of what might happen in the future and as a criticism of ideological systems which create the illusion that oppression is normal.

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