

Ecological Utopian Vision And Environmentalism In Speculative Fiction: A Comparative Study Of The Left Hand Of Darkness, Dune Trilogy, Mars Trilogy And The Dark Swan Series

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of intensifying environmental concerns, Speculative fiction, as a genre, emerges as the captivating lens for exploring ecological issues. This research paper investigates the interplay between utopian ideals and environmentalism in four seminal works of speculative fiction by Ursula K. Le Guin, Frank Herbert, Kim Stanley Robinson and Richelle Mead in The Left Hand of Darkness, Dune Trilogy, Mars Trilogy, and the Dark Swan series respectively. Through a comparative framework, the study reveals the harmonious coexistence between human societies and their environments within their imaginative landscapes. It focuses on delving into ecological utopianism, harmony and environmental conservation. It explores the unique adaptation of the Gethenians, the intricate ecological strategies of the Fremen, the large scale terraforming efforts on Mars and the fundamentals of nature and gentry's correlation. The research aims to draw parallels to contemporary environmental discourse, providing insights that bridge literature with real-world.

Key Words: *speculative fiction, utopia, environmentalism, ecological utopianism, sustainability, environmental conservation, nature connectedness.*

Introduction

Eco-criticism often highlights the interconnectedness of humans and the environment, emphasizing the importance of harmonious and ethical relationships with nature. The intersection of science fiction and eco-criticism involves examining how science fiction addresses and reflects environmental concerns. The comparative framework delves into the study of imaginative realms of Ursula K. Le Guin, Frank Herbert, Kim Stanley Robinson and Richelle Mead through their works: The Left Hand of Darkness, Dune Trilogy, Mars Trilogy and Dark Swan series respectively. The literary works selected for this study provide a multifaceted exploration of the intersection between utopian aspirations and environmentalism.

Ecological Utopian Vision

Ursula K. Le Guin, Frank Herbert, Kim Stanley Robinson and Richelle Mead envisioned a new utopian landscape in their works. They envisioned an ideal society where there is perfect harmony, prosperity and fulfilment. Ursula K. Le Guin in her novel The Left Hand of Darkness uses an imaginary utopia to explore gender relationship, environmental harmony and resilience to endure extremely cold climatic condition. YaoJianBin rightly says that “the utopian story usually sets on a isolated, unknown and mysterious land which is far from secular world” (60)

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The *Left Hand of Darkness* takes place in an imaginary planet called Gethen. The inhabitants of Gethen have no gender; they are otherwise called as androgyny in nature. Genly Ai, the protagonist, is sent to Gethen to make it as a member of Ekumen, an interstellar organisation. Le Guin depicts Gethen as the utopian frontier and it serves as a model of the impact of industrial revolution with scientific innovation and technological advancement. Though the inhabitants of Gethen suffer from severe cold, they make use of their scientific knowledge and develop slow running cars and radio broadcasting. Because of harsh weather in Gethen, the Gethenians never do extra work such as building big factories or developing new technologies, in order to save their energy. Genly states that “the mechanical-industry Age of Invention in this country last at least three thousand years.”(LHD 29). The inhabitants of Gethen live in the boarding house building which Genly Ai says that “house the greatest part of the urban population of Karhide... Island contains 20 to 200 private rooms, meals are communal, some runas hotels others as cooperative communes, others combine these types” (LHD 10).

The children in Gethen are raised by the public rather than their parents. Parents need not take the responsibility of upbringing their own children. Karhine, one of the nations in Gethen rules out slavery or personal bondage. There is no war in Gethen. Genly Ai eventually states that

“Tibe evidently was going to press Karhide’s claim to that region, precisely the kind of action which, on any other world at this stage of civilization would lead to war. But on Gethen nothing leads to war. Quarrels, murders, feuds, forays, vendettas, assassinations, tortures and abominations, all these were in their repertory of human accomplishments; but they did not go to war.” (LHD 48)

Frank Herbert’s *Dune* is set on the desert planet Arrakis, the only source of the spice mélange. The spice has immense value and is a critical resource for interstellar travel and commerce. The intense focus on resource extraction and the power dynamics associated with controlling this resource can be seen as an exploration of human impact on environments for economic gain. The ecological theme of "terraforming" the desert planet Arrakis is central to the narrative. The transformation of Arrakis and the challenges it poses to its indigenous ecosystem and inhabitants reflect human intervention and the potential consequences of altering environments for human purposes.

The novel also introduces advanced technologies, such as the still suits used for water conservation. The technological solutions depicted in *Dune* can be analyzed in the context of how they address or exacerbate environmental issues, reflecting the ongoing dialogue about technological interventions in the Anthropocene.

Kim Stanley Robinson depicts Mars as a utopian frontier. Mars serves as a canvas for scientific innovation and technological advancement. According to Karine Basset “The experience of the past, which is, after all, a present experience, itself contributes to the creation of the future; our effort to bring about ‘again’ the appearance of an old experience actually leads to a new experience.” (22) The trilogy explores the transformative potential of cutting-edge technologies in terraforming, ecological engineering and sustainable living. The scientific community on Mars engages in ground-breaking research creating a utopian vision of a world where humanity’s intellect and creativity are harnessed for the betterment of society. Yanarella identifies critical utopia as narratives that “dwells on the continuing dialectics of solidarity and difference, order and chaos, the qualitatively better and imperfections within the ambiguous utopia or heterotopia of the future, but without trying decisively to resolve those tensions.” (8)

The open landscape of Mars allows for a sense of individual freedom and autonomy. Colonists have the opportunity to define their own destinies and contribute to the shaping of Martian society. The vast, unexplored territories of Mars offer individuals the chance to escape the constraints and hierarchies of Earth, fostering a sense of utopian frontier freedom. Jameson reveals that “Utopians not only offer to conceive of such alternate systems; Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of social totality.” (4)

In contrast to the futuristic utopian visions of the said novels, Richelle Mead's Dark Swan series present an outlook into the era that preceded reformation and industrialization, to a time space of nature connectedness. Mead takes her readers to the medieval age and juxtaposes it with the modern developments. In the fictitious universe of Dark Swan, gentry, an intellectual species of innate connectivity to earth and its vibrant life forms, degrade into an incapacitated human life form. It is incapacitation in terms of lifespan, resilience and psychic affinity to nature. Their iconic venture into corporeal science, severs their transcended connectivity evolving the gentry into the human beings. Fearing the gentry's ascendancy due to their innate divine power, the humans who co-existed with them on earth, banish them with their overbearing technology. The gentry then decide to take refuge in another parallel realm, which Mead calls as the 'other world'.

Mead's Dark Swan series explores the innateness of nature in gentry and humans. She brings out this innateness of nature as an ethereal connectivity that thrives all life forms. At the same time, she brings to light the distorted way of living with technology that abates the lifeforce of humans in an evolutionary point of view. The impact of the advanced science and technology leads the humans in the Dark Swan series to lose their innate power in contrast to the gentry, their ancestors. Thus, Mead emphasises the fact that too much of scientific advancement deprives the humans of their nature connectedness.

Utopia with Flaws

The Left Hand of Darkness serves as a model to envision the future in a prosperous way at the same time it also reveals the challenges faced by the inhabitants of the planets. Ursula in her novel, The Left of Darkness shows the flaws and challenges faced by the inhabitants of Karhide, suppressed under constitutional monarchy. The other part of Gethen, named as Orgoreyn stands as example of bureaucracy. The Orgoreyn is been criticised as a centralized government where no one is allowed inside without a proper paper work. Susan Storing Benfield notes that "Le Guin provides a vivid picture of those aspects of human nature that create hierarchies and bureaucracies even in the absence of formal government" (qtd. in Melina 128)

The use of genetic manipulation and bioengineering in the Dune trilogy, particularly in the creation of the KwisatzHaderach, raises ethical questions about tampering with the natural order. This theme resonates with discussions in the Anthropocene about the ethical implications of genetic engineering and bioengineering, as humans increasingly have the ability to alter the fundamental building blocks of life.

While Mars is depicted as a utopian frontier, Robinson doesn't shy away from exploring the flaws and challenges within this vision. "The Mars trilogy argues that a reliance on technological fixes as an answer to societal conflict is inadequate." (Pak 182) The trilogy critically examines the unintended consequences of terraforming and the sociopolitical conflicts that arise among the colonists. The tensions and conflicts within the different factions highlight the complexity of realizing utopian ideals, even in the seemingly pristine frontier of Mars.

Though Mead asserts the universal kinship of mankind and nature in her Dark Swan series, she also calls attention to the practical handicappers of a society separated from technology. The fictitious utopia of gentry that scorn modern advancements of mankind as 'monstrosity and abomination', flaunts medieval era's harbingers of technology in their intricate garments, elaborated architecture and metal fabrication of gold, silver and bronze. Gentry's favourable reception to the human protagonist's modern technological solution to gentry's irrigation problem and their reverence to modern medicine that assists the survival of the protagonist's twin children born prematurely, reflect the need of certain modernity that doesn't compromise on human's correspondance with nature.

The Human-Nature Relationship

The first incident of harmonious relationship with nature and man in Left Hand of Darkness is witnessed when Genly Ai first comes to Gethen. He identifies that the Gethenian's are mostly vegetarians. He finds that the lamdcape and climate of Gethen plays a vital role in Gethenian's vegetarian diet. Curtin argues that,

“The injunction to care...should be understood to include the injunction to eliminate suffering whenever possible” and notes that “in the case of killing animals for human consumption where there is choice, this practice inflicts pain that is completely unnecessary and avoidable.” (76)

The Gethan has simple and limited choice of food because of farming difficulties. As a result of the harsh winter conditions, farming becomes a challenging task, with much of the land rendered unsuitable for cultivation. But still the Gethenians are vegetarians. “there are no large meat-animals on Winter, and no mammalian products, milk, butter or cheese; the only high-protein, high carbohydrate foods are the various kinds of eggs, fish, nuts and the Hainish grains” (LHD 10). Genly states that the vegetarian diet of the inhabitants are due to the lack of large meat animals. They eat egg and fish only when necessary.

The harmonious relationship between mankind and nature can be witnessed when Genly Ai and Estraven travel through the snow mountains to reach Karhide. The inhabitants of Karhide learn to live in harmony with nature in spite of its harsh climatic condition. They use rough stones as a source for building and they also use foray guns. They lead their life in a more traditional way following the path of their ancestors.

Herbert delves into the cultural and ethical dimensions of human-environment relationships in *Dune*. The Fremen, indigenous to Arrakis, have a deep connection to their environment and practice sustainable survival techniques. The *Dune* trilogy offers a narrative lens through which to explore the consequences of interfering with ecological interconnectedness. The societies in the *Dune* trilogy must adapt to the changing environment of Arrakis. This adaptation, driven by the need for survival and control over resources, mirrors the adaptive strategies that human societies must consider in the face of environmental changes in the Anthropocene. It prompts exploration of how societies respond to and cope with the challenges of a rapidly transforming world.

Robinson personifies Mars, giving the planet a character of its own. The changing colours of Mars—red, green, and blue—symbolize the evolving relationship between humans and the environment. Mars becomes an active participant in the narrative, influencing and responding to human actions. The characters in the trilogy develop deep connections to the Martian landscape. Some, like Saxifrage "Sax" Russell, grapple with the ethical dimensions of terraforming, while others, like Ann Clayborne, advocate for a harmonious coexistence with the native environment. These character's perspectives shape the narrative's exploration of the human-nature relationship. On the other hand, it is visible in Hiroko and Sax's terraforming vision. Sax calls it “the Great Unexplainable”. The scientific world is named as white, while the natural world is green.

“The white world inside the green, the opposite of Hiroko's green world inside the white. And they [Hiroko and Sax] had opposite feelings about them. Looking from the green side, when Hiroko confronted something mysterious, she loved it and it made her happy—it was viriditas, a holy power. Looking from the white side, when Sax confronted something mysterious, it was the Great Unexplainable, dangerous and awful. He was 132 interested in the true, while Hiroko was interested in the real. Or perhaps it was the other way around—those words were tricky. Better to say she loved the green world and he the white.” (GM 15)

The trilogy explores the impact of human intervention on indigenous Martian life. The unintended consequences of terraforming, such as the emergence of native species, highlight the intricate web of relationships within ecosystems and the potential for unforeseen ecological effects. Different Martian landscapes symbolize various stages of the human-nature relationship. From the arid, untouched plains to the lush, terraformed valleys, each environment reflects the evolving attitudes and actions of the colonists, offering a visual narrative of the changing world. The Martian landscape plays a crucial role in shaping the identities of the characters. For some, the vast, open spaces symbolize freedom and opportunity, while for others, the Martian environment becomes an integral part of their personal and cultural identity.

It also explores cycles of destruction and regeneration in the human-nature relationship. Environmental disasters, such as the destruction of terraforming equipment, are followed by efforts at regeneration and restoration, illustrating the resilience of both human and natural systems. The narrative draws parallels between the environmental challenges on Mars and real-world issues of climate change on Earth. By extrapolating these challenges to an extra-terrestrial setting, Robinson prompts readers to reflect on the global interconnectedness of environmental issues. The trilogy encourages contemplation on the responsibility of humans to preserve and protect the natural world for future generations. It also prompts readers to reflect on the ethical, cultural, and philosophical dimensions of humanity's interaction with the natural world, both on Mars and on Earth.

Gentry, the ancestors of humanity, who possess an innate affiliation to nature, in Mead's *Dark Swan* universe, are the fictitious representation of the forebearers of human society, who had great correspondence with nature. In their longevity and resilience, they mirror Mead's gentry, as in their evolution to humans, they represent the modern human society. With two chronology of human race introduced as gentry and the fictitious humans, it enables an exploration into the past and present in close proximity. Drawing parallels to the fiction, causative agents for decreasing life expectancy in human race are explored, in connection to the nature man disconnectedness and the self-destroying technologically proliferating modern society.

Man's intentional harming of his own species and the world that sustains them, is explored in context to future extinction of mankind in the hands of the man himself is put through critical analysis. An appreciation of uniquely diverse vegetation and its appeal to different people, is explored in context to the need to embrace human diversity. Nature connectedness being central to the series, healing ability of nature in context to its harmony with human life is accentuated.

Lessons for Earth

The *Left Hand of Darkness* emphasises on the importance of embracing diversity and challenging traditional gender norms. The androgyny nature of the Gethenians encourages a reconsideration of rigid gender role. It also perches the importance of environmental stewardship by describing how Gethen's endured the harsh climatic condition. The adaptability and sustainable practice insist on developing harmonious and responsible relationship with nature.

Mars trilogy underscores the importance of responsible environmental stewardship. The consequences of terraforming on Mars serve as a cautionary tale, urging humanity to consider the ecological impact of its actions and adopt sustainable practices to address environmental challenges on Earth. Various ideological perspectives and their consequences are presented in the trilogy. Lessons for Earth include the need for a critical examination of political, social, and environmental ideologies to ensure that they contribute to positive and sustainable outcomes.

Mead's *Dark Swan* underscores the innateness of human's connectivity to nature and the significance of the human nature togetherness. It implores the technological element of modern living and assessment of its impact on themselves in contrast to the self-healing spiritual correlation of mankind and nature.

Conclusion

This research offers a profound examination of humanity's relationship with the environment and the pursuit of utopian ideals, by decoding the intricate narratives and the dynamics of richly developed characters in select novels. The novels are purposed to coax their readers to reflect on the ecological and socio-political relationships of mankind in correspondence to the world that sustains humanity. By exploring the embedded themes of utopian vision, environmentalism, sustainability and nature connectedness within the novels, this research paper underscores the said works' enduring relevance and potential to inspire real-world action in the face of pressing environmental concerns.

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