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Encountering Natural Degradation in Some Select Anti-Utopian Narratives

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While there has been an emphasis on the study of the man-nature-culture ‘triad’ in ecofeminism and ecocriticism, it has to be acknowledged that the issue of the degradation of Nature and the attempts to conquer over the same and the subsequent conflict between “ego-consciousness” over “eco-consciousness” has its own unique dystopian undertones. Dystopian and anti-utopian texts often ponder over this issue—they tend to depict not only the issue of authoritarian governments, as is often thought to be the case, but also comment on this confrontation between man, Nature and the implications for both. This can be readily seen in avowedly dystopian texts like William Golding’s *The Lord of the Flies* (1954) to the film *Waterworld* (1995); the latter shows a post-apocalyptic future where the entire globe is flooded due to the melting of polar ice-caps, presumably due to the emission of fossil fuels. This has led to humans devising novel, new ways to adapt to the changing geological situations. This paper would like to point this anti-utopian structure of environmental degradation with recourse to select films and texts since 1950s and show how issues of environmental change vis-à-vis human encounter and the depiction of the same in literature is also a forte of dystopian sub-genre of fiction.

Keywords: Apocalyptic, Ecofeminism, Ecocriticism, Environmental, Dystopian.

It has to be acknowledged that while utopian texts are often marked by a depiction of palatable states and trajectories of existence, dystopian narratives, on the other hand are often marked by their anti-pastoral and post-lapsarian nature (Rabkin 3). In Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005), the seemingly utopian, pastoral setting serves as a rude irony for what is to come—the children raised in the expensive boarding schools in such a setting are indeed “clones” who would be used as potential organs donors. True, in Ishiguro’s novel, there are indeed no traces of environmental degradation, no scientists working on the possible advancement of eugenics can be seen and the most technologically ‘advanced’ item to arrive is an automobile (Shaddox 449). Though human dignity and the essential propensity of the human soul to revolt are issues in this novel, no mass-scale nuclear fallout or the rampant wipeout of the human race by a killer virus as depicted in the film *Aeon Flux* (2005) is noted. Though this overtly pastoral setting takes the reader into its embrace in the initial parts of the narrative, the second portion of the childrens’ lives in the “Cottages” is somewhat a bleak reminder to the lives that people lead in a society wherein degradation of Nature might be an issue paving way to the fact that what these “clones” see in the second portion is but a ‘mirror’ image of what is to come.

However, throughout the entire oeuvre of dystopian fictions, it is often noticed that environmental degradation runs as an undercurrent thematically. In George Orwell’s classic *1984* (1949), the low quality of life of the inhabitants of AirStrip One that roughly corresponds to London is an issue that is harped by the renegade protagonist Winston Smith. The overall degradation and the tone of decay in the moral as well as the metaphysical realms is noticeable in the passage below:

When they met in the church tower the gaps in their fragmentary conversation were filled up. It was a blazing afternoon. The air in the little square chamber above the bells was *hot*

and stagnant, and smelt overpoweringly of pigeon dung. They sat talking for hours on the dusty, twig-littered floor... (113; emphases added)

In Tomaso Campanella's utopian text *The City of the Sun* (1602), the solarians are healthy and one of the prime reasons attested to this is the pure air and the salubrious climate they dwell in. However, the film *Waterworld* (1995) depicts a futuristic earth wherein polar sheets have melted and human civilization has been nearly destroyed.¹ Following this, humans have been compelled to devise novel ways to adapt to the changing geological circumstances. In William Golding's debut novel *The Lord of the Flies* (1954), that is considered dystopian because of the overt use of violence in it², a group of British lads crash unwittingly into a tropical island during wartime evacuation with nuclear fallout as its backdrop. At first, they revel in the atmosphere that is free from strict parental control, but then a more pressing reality haunts them—that of the simple need to survive. Following this, a smoke signal is made to aid rescue. The group of boys are quickly demarcated along strict lines; the "littuns" and the "biguns." Even when the boys have just landed, there are signs of environmental degradation and a sense of waste in the physical and the metaphysical realms:

The shore was fledged with palm trees. These stood or leaned or reclined against the light and their green feathers were a hundred feet up in the air. The ground was a bank beneath them covered with coarse grass, torn everywhere by the upheavals of fallen trees, scattered with *decaying coconuts and palm saplings*. Behind this was the darkness of the forest proper and the open space of the scar. (4; emphases added)

The horrifying killing of a sow and of other boys in the group is a rude reminder that the early, innocuous activity of merely surviving in the island has been taken over by a game of power. Initially, by electing leaders amongst them, the boys try to elect a loosely democratic form of government, but the game of power between Ralph the 'leader' and Jack the 'hunter' leads to the loss of both the pristine quality of the landscape as well as the innocence within.

This trace of environmental degradation is sharply in contrast with the overtly overpopulated and polluted earth in the middle of the twenty-second century in the film *Elysium* (2013). During the said era, earth is shown to be overpopulated, with little food or resources to hang to. To escape this, the ultra-rich have escaped to an opulent space station fittingly called "Elysium" in the film. Elysium offers facilities to a level unimagined before. Dreaded diseases like cancer are cured by "med-bays" installed in every home. Protagonists like Max De Costa are left to die after they meet their fate in terrible radiation chambers in factories that gives them less than five days to live. The only option available to them is to enter Elysium forcefully that has its own dangers of being deported back to earth. However, Max befriends a computer hacker Spider who offers unauthorized, though much needed rides to Elysium after implanting fake citizenship labels into the D.N.A. of the intruders. This enables them to get a course of treatment in "med bays" that is unavailable on overpopulated earth in the middle of the twenty second century. Max steals the much needed "reboot" program of the system core from John Caryle, a citizen of Elysium and uses it to restart the system core of this utopian settlement that realizes this task and enrolls all as its official citizenry.

Similarly, in Harry Harrison's anti-utopian novel *Make Room! Make Room!* (1966), a futuristic New York City has been shown that is teeming with a record thirty-five million people. The novel was made into a film called *Soylent Green* after the food that commoners are forced to eat in such a dystopia marked by overpopulation. Crimes are the order of the day and as many as five to seven murders are reported every day. Foodstuffs like meat and poultry are guarded by heavily armed sentinel. The police is shown to be a helpless handmaid of the mafia and social breakdown is the new reality. Commenting on the use of overpopulation as a threat to the already dwindling natural resources, Terry Anderson in his *The Sixties* pointed out that the population of the planet had already reached three billion in 1963, compelling many to ask if the planet with its fast depleting resources could support so many people, coupled with the question that what that would mean for the United States of America (in Ireland 144).

To come to motion pictures, the *Terminator* Series (1984-2009) depict humanity desperately struggling against an intelligent military cyberspace software called the "Skynet." A nuclear fallout has devastated most of the planet's natural resources as depicted in the last film of the series called

Terminator Salvation. Around three billion lives are lost by the nuclear war called “Judgment Day” by the survivors. Led by the character John Connor, humanity fights back against the machines. Similarly, this issue of natural degradation is the heart of the matter in the *Matrix* series. The future is shown to be a struggle against a computer simulated dream world called “The Matrix” and the last city left on earth named Zion. Humanity has deliberately created black clouds to block sunshine that the machines controlled by the Matrix used. In retaliation, the machines used the heat of the human body to continue their existence. A computer programmer for a respectable company named Mr. Anderson alias “Neo” is approached by an enigmatic man called Morpheus to meet him. Neo has been led to believe by the Matrix that the year he is living in is 1999 A.D., but the reality is that it is 2199 A.D. Machines that were created in the beginning of the twenty-first century have turned against humans. When Neo meets Morpheus, the latter gives him a vision of a terrifying landscape that is a veritable nuclear wasteland. Neo has been led to believe that all is well, but Morpheus tells him that he is on a list of the sentinels who are computer programs themselves who know that Neo will be freed from the Matrix after knowing the truth.

In a similar vein, in the dystopian film *Total Recall* (2012), earth in near future is totally devastated and rendered inhabitable due to the large-scale use of chemical warfare and weapons of mass destruction. As such, only two territories remain fit for humans to dwell—the “UFB” or The United Federation of Britain formed out of the erstwhile United Kingdom and parts of Western Europe and the continent of Australia called “The Colony”.¹ The only means of transportation is the “gravity elevator” or train that passes through the earth’s core and uses the gravity of the planet, enabling anyone to reach enormous distances in just seventeen minutes. The “Resistance” seeks to change the low quality of life in the Colony and is at loggerheads with the UFB.

This issue of large-scale devastation is also the theme of the recent novel *The Last Human* (2014) authored by Ink Peiper. The novel shows a terrifyingly crumbling United States and a lone character who is trying to make sense of the non-sense all around him. The narrative shows the rise of biological warfare, terrorism and the scramble for Central Asia by USA and Russia. The protagonist Clay² struggles to escape and traverses considerable portions of the United States of America to keep subversive forces at bay. Clay must save himself and thus avoid death and dissolution. The novel was influenced by Peiper’s reading of Existential philosophy and incorporates largely philosophical concepts. Current problems faced by the world today are graphically captured in words, viz., the issue of mass flooding presumably due to the melting of the polar ice-caps and the rise terrorism. The character Clay recounts his passing of days in a world surrounded by natural degradation and morbidity:

It’s morbidly depressing to be alone. It feels as if all life drains from you even though, theoretically, I am a fairly healthy individual. I eat my fruits and veggies. I eat my meats...well I eat fish at least. The fruits aren’t ripe either. The vegetables are whatever I can scavenge and are rarely in the pristine condition I always hope to find them in. [...] I am in Florida now, the sunshine state. It has none any more. All I ever see are clouds and ash. (2; *Amazon.com*)

Similarly, in the film *Waterworld*(1995), we have an enigmatic character called the “mariner” who wanders on a post-apocalyptic earth with a huge, mechanized boat and meets a woman and her daughter who should, along others find the mythical “dryland” in order to survive. Set in an unspecified time in distant future (c. 2500 A.D.), the burning of fossil fuels in the past have melted the polar ice-caps completely, submerging every continent on earth, save the top of the Mount Everest called “dryland” in the film. In order to survive in changing geological circumstances, characters like the mariner have developed webbed feet and gills. He arrives in an atoll to exchange “dirt”, top soil that can be used to grow plants. The atoll, in turn provides the necessary items needed to survive. However, the atoll is soon raided by “Smokers”, pirates headed by the “Deacon” who wants the little girl Enola who has a map tattooed on her back. It is taken to be the way to the mythical dryland by some. When the girl’s mother Helen asks where the mariner has collected his large assortments of belongings and especially the “dirt”, he dives underwater to show her remains of cities long flooded and the soil underneath, dried and sold as a precious commodity. Currency has almost disappeared and humans live in rags in fashion of the Stone Age, bartering things in the process. Dead bodies are not burnt or cast into sea, but are heaped in brine

ponds on atolls that may be used as a place for growing crops using the dead, organic matter. The mariner, along with a character called Gregor at last land on dryland that is teeming with animal life and vegetation. However, the mariner refuses to settle on land and goes out to the large oceans as they call him persistently after his mutation.

A dystopian vision is a futuristic projection of present tendencies that are frightening and warrant change to settle for more palatable trajectories of existence. As such, it is an oppositional spirit (Booker 3) than a (sub)-genre per se. Environmental degradation and the unprecedented rise in population since the beginning of the industrial revolution has led many social critics to question the viability of human existence in future. Thus, there has been a resurgence of eco-consciousness versus ego-consciousness and the tendency to settle for the former in efforts by ecocritics and ecofeminists who see the degradation and erosion of the planet as a serious concern that shares trajectories with other forms of exploitation.

End Notes

1. The troubled relationship between the fictional U.F.B. and the Colony where workers primarily dwell has echoes of colonial Australia primarily being used as a penal colony by the British.
2. The name Clay was also used by the acclaimed Afro-American dramatist Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) in his play *Dutchman* (1964); the play may be considered anti-utopian on account of the element of surveillance and the use of violence. Dystopian narratives, as in this novel often resort to shock tactics to bring home the need to change current modes of living and explore alternatives levels of existence. The primary theoretical frameworks that can be used for the analysis of a utopian/dystopian fiction, the Russian Formalist technique of “de-familiarization” may be used as a starting point and also the “alienation effect” of the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht (Booker 4; *Dystopian Literature*). The formalists, who were a series of critics in Russia during the 1920s and 30s tended to see literature as a special kind of language, an order that is made “special” by what they called the mode of “defamiliarization”: that is by employing various narrative as well as other structural devices, literature makes everyday reality seem strange, and thus evokes, as Coleridge had famously proclaimed, “the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects;...”(Enright 196) and our renewal in the capacity to see once again into the old and the familiar afresh. Thus Roman Jakobson probably also had the same technique in mind when he had said that the object of study in a literary work is its *literariness*. As Jan Mukorovsky, a member of the Prague Linguistic Circle had pointed out, this “literariness” is reinforced by “the maximum of foregrounding of utterance”; this foregrounding of utterance is something that is received by disrupting the pre-conceived norms of ordinary linguistic discourse (Abrams 103). Certain recurrent words, phrases, narratological techniques (as in Joyce’s *Dubliners* or *Ulysses*) may shock the reader out of the comfort zone in which s/he is sitting in, and may make one look deep into the subtext of a literary work. This technique is somewhat similar to the *Verfremdungseffekt* or the “alienation effect” of Brecht, though he used it for the analysis of his epic theatre. Brecht was of the notion that an epic theatre would include elements that would instead alienate the actors in a stage, so that any ‘catharsis’ of emotions would not be produced. If this were not to happen, then the audience would not be in a position to objectively comment the milieu in which the play is set in, nor would they be able to see the characters in their true hue. *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2006) describes alienation effect within the Formalist tradition as the one that emphasized the deformation of reality, ‘making strange’ or ‘defamiliarization’ (*ostranenie*) that was central to all art, and that the “habitual nature of every day experience makes perception stale and automatic...”(Childs 93).

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