



Examining Colonial Expansionism, Patriarchal Violence and Eco-Spiritual Subversion in Ursula K. Le Guin's Science Fiction

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Abstract

Ursula K. Le Guin's dystopian science fiction describes a shockingly recurring pattern of patriarchal, colonial quests in post-apocalyptic worlds, seeking domination over nature and women. This paper analyses her texts *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) and *Always Coming Home* (1985), delineating the crisis of industrial modernity and the spectre of aggressive masculinity constructed on the system of hierarchical privilege and an oppressive nature/culture dualism. At the same time, they are informed by an eco-feminist subversive consciousness in multiple manifestations which resists the destructiveness of the archetypal "heroic" quest and suggests alternative healing possibilities in their collective narratives. For example, in her influential novella, *The Word for World is Forest*, the native, colonized inhabitants of an alien world practice sleep-dreaming as a ritualized eco-spiritual belief to harmonically connect with other natives and with their forest eco-system. Their mostly endemic non-violent culture has replaced physical aggression with ritualized singing. The eco-feminist characteristic of Kesh culture in *Always Coming Home* is situated in its all-pervasive religious/ and spiritual symbol, the "heyiya-if" i.e. two spirals moving and growing inward, suggesting ecological connection as well as the possibility of change. This communally practiced nature based spirituality of the native inhabitants in these novels, will be read in conjunction with the evolution of what is known as "dark, green religion" by the conservationist Bron Taylor, and which offers a much needed worldview of ecological interdependence, diverging with our anthropocentric planetary approach.

Keywords: Ecology, Colonial, Eco-feminist, Spirituality, Patriarchy, Anthropocentric, Subversion.

Introduction

It is widely understood that an anthropocentric worldview of modern industrial societies is at the heart of our ecological crisis. This anthropocentric orientation is the outcome of Western philosophical and religious traditions which situates humankind at the centre of the universe. Modern science and technology have continued to threaten the ecological balance with the unimpeded exploitation of natural resources at the cost of our environment. According to George S. Sessions (1974), only a "massive reordering of modern industrial societies based upon a new humanistic- ecological conception of the man-nature relationship" (p. 71) will be instrumental in solving our ecological crisis today. In her speculative, science and fantasy fiction, the American visionary writer Ursula K. Le Guin has attempted to explore this crisis

of industrial modernity. In the speculative alternative societies and cultures of her novels and short fiction, she addresses the climate destabilization, environmental degradation and capitalist exploitation which plague our contemporary societies. She also supports an ecofeminist dialogue in her fiction which underscores a basic connection between the subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature.

Indeed, the conceptual connections between the manipulation and domination of women and nature has opened up the possibility for a new field; viz. eco-feminism. According to the anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner (1974), women were universally undervalued because they were seen as closer to nature, while men were seen as being connected to the “superior” realm of culture. Like Margaret Atwood, Ursula Le Guin exposes this oppressive, dualistic ideology and contends that toxic masculinity and patriarchal domination are inextricably linked to the devaluation of nature and ecology. In her novella, *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) she critiques the patriarchal logic of the anthropocene and the frontier heroic quest of the American colonizer. The frontier legacy constructed on the idea of relentless expansionism has been pivotal in the task of nation building. However, while the prototypical American male hero expanded towards the “Wild West” it led to the disruption and extermination of the life, history and culture of the Native Americans. It is also a conscious process of identity formation which glorifies white, supremacist, masculinity.

The novella starts with one of its major character Captain Davidson’s internal monologues projecting this hegemonic aggressive masculinity, claiming “And it’s Man that wins, every time. That old Conquistador. (Guin, 1972, p. 15) Set in an alternative dystopian universe which is twenty seven light years from earth, the science fiction delineates the exploits of the colonizing Terrans (humans) from Earth who have gathered in New Tahiti, which closely symbolizes the New World (Mundus Novus) referred to the Americas since the 16th century. New Tahiti or Athshe is a paradisiacal land with four continents and their indigenous inhabitants are small in size, and covered in green fur. The Terrans have colonized New Tahiti for extracting its primary natural resource, wood. Having plundered and depleted earth of its forests, they are now engaged in destroying the ecosystem of other planets to sustain their colonial greed. As the Commander of Smith Camp, Davidson carries the hallmark of the toxic colonizer who has internalized racism and misogyny. The logging camp is part of a colony which uses slave labour of the local natives, known as creechies and send lumber to a now barren earth, “a desert of cement.” (Guin, 1972, p.14) The exploitation of local labour for destroying their forest habitats is thus doubly traumatic. At the same time, women from Earth are sent to this male dominated colony as sexual partners and for purposes of procreation. This patriarchal quest to dominate nature and women is elaborately mused in his terms:

He could tame any of them, if it was worth the effort. It wasn’t though. Get enough humans here, build machines and robots, make farms and cities, and nobody would need the creechies any more. And a good thing too. For this world, New Tahiti, was literally made for men. Cleaned up and cleaned out, the dark forests cut down for open fields of grain, the primeval murk and savagery and ignorance wiped out, it would be a paradise, a real Eden. A better world than worn-out Earth. And it would be his world. For that’s what Don Davidson was, way down deep inside him: a world-tamer. (p. 12)

Davidson’s brutally sexist attitude fantasizing about “a shipload of women” (Guin, 1972, p. 9) is compounded by his endemic racist corruption which treats the native populations, the Athsheans as less than humans. His exploitation of them as slave labour is officially endorsed

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by the policies of colonizing Terrans and is a stark reminder of the transatlantic slave trade of the Europeans. Davidson's innate contempt for them is also driven by the conceptual dualism of civilized-culture-colonizer/ savage-nature-colonized and justifies his violence against the local population. His endorsement of hunting wild species like red antlers for recreation is also driven by human vs. nature hierarchized binary. As he explicitly puts it: "When I say Earth, Kees, I mean people. Men. You worry about deer and fibrewood, fine, that's your thing. But I like to see things in perspective, from the top down, and the top, so far, is humans. We're here now; and so, this world's going to go our way." (Guin, 1972, p. 14) The synchronized violence and abuse of nature and the natives is typically exacerbated by his physical assault of the Athshean women. One of the events which propel the action of the story is his rape of Thele, the wife of an Athshean named Selver. Following her death, Selver attacks Davidson, which is the first act of violence by the otherwise peaceful natives against the trauma of continuous Terran assault.

The Athsheans learn to revolt against the systematic exploitation of nature and the nature-culture binary which the Terran anthropocentrism espouse. Unlike the Terran understanding of industrial modernity which is alienated from nature, for the Athsheans, the dense, dark forest is integral to their planet and life. Their ecological co-existence embraces the wilderness, within and without. As the novel's title implies, the ecological consciousness of the Athsheans identifies their forest as their world. Guin underscores the alternative spiritual tradition of the Athsheans as akin to the pagan traditions celebrating the divine feminine. They had initially replaced physical aggression with ritualized singing, which subverts the violence of the conquering yumens/ humans. Their culture also practices sleep-dreaming as a ritualized eco-spiritual belief, to harmonically connect with their indigenous ecosystem. Unlike the disjunction between imagination, dreaming and reality in the Terran worldview, the "dream-time" of the Athsheans co-exists with their "world-time", seamlessly connecting the conscious and the subconscious mind. Their ecological belonging connects the wilderness and the subconscious with their material, animal bodies. As Jay Griffiths (2006) claims, what the wild gave "was a sensual knowledge, an emotional one-carnal knowledge- a feral way of knowing." (p. 83) In the novel, an old man of the town Cadast, Coro Mena dreams of Selver as a god. When he is pressed by strange fears, he is consciously able to move into the dream world where he sees men as deadly giants uprooting their forests. Selver himself, plans on rioting against the Terrans after dreaming for a long time. Most of the native inhabitants can hold their dream in their hands, weave, shape, direct and follow the same. They can walk the road their dream leads them to. (Guin, 1972, p. 43) The narrator extensively notes Selver's healing and dreaming rhythmically in a lodge at Cadast:

He still slept much, but for the first time in many months he had begun to dream waking again, regularly, not once or twice in a day and night but in the true pulse and rhythm of dreaming which should rise and fall ten to fourteen times in the diurnal cycle. Bad as his dreams were, all terror and shame, yet he welcomed them. He had feared that he was cut off from his roots, that he had gone too far into the dead land of action ever to find his way back to the springs of reality. (p. 49)

Like pagan mythic culture, the characters weave and negotiate their dreams with an inclusive spiritual wisdom.

On the other hand, the archetypal heroic journey designed by patriarchy is perceived to be a struggling descent into the wilderness, where the ego emerges as victor through domination of the unconscious. The dream-time and the states of mind in our unconscious are held to be distinct and separate from "reality". For the male hero in the traditional

phallogocentric myth, the unknown wilderness is also the site of fear, which has to be conquered through masculine aggression. Elaine Showalter (1981) writes; “in the American literary tradition the wilderness has been an exclusively masculine domain.” (p.180) While male consciousness is “within the circle of the dominant structure” (Showalter, 1981, p. 200), is accessible and structured by language, the wild becomes the “projection of the unconscious” (Showalter, 1981, p. 200) and always imaginary. For French feminist critics like Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, the wild zone subversively embodies the theoretical ground for women’s difference. It is their “dark continent” where everything that is repressed dwells. The Athsheans in the novel too celebrate this alternative, authentic zone outside the “cramped confines of patriarchal space.” (Showalter, 1981, p. 201) Guided by their desire for ecological companionship with their forest ecosystem and the maternal fluidity of their warm, shallow seas, they showcase subversive healing possibilities challenging the legacy of patriarchal violence.

The ecospirituality which is embraced by the Athsheans breaks down the binaries of nature/culture. Instead, they are informed by a spirituality of cultural and social submersion in nature. The Kesh society in Ursula K. Le Guin’s novel *Always Coming Home* (1985) is similarly inspired by their cultural symbiosis with nature where their social and religious organizations embrace their environment. (Otto, 2012, p. 25) The novel is an anthropological account of the imaginative Kesh community existing in a future Northern California. The account details their dance patterns, musical instruments, maps, playing and word games, medical practices and the alphabet system.

The Kesh community constructs their life around an ecofeminist care ethic of mutual respect. There is no sense of ownership within relationships which is organized around their ecosystem. There is no hierarchy of power and rivalry among the different houses of the Kesh community. The children of the matrilineal and exogamous community belong to the house of their mother. (Guin, 1985, p. 43) The ecological coexistence of the Kesh people is extensively described within its Serpentine Codex narrative where the earth people of their Five Houses of Earth “include the earth itself, rocks and dirt and geological formations, the moon, all springs, streams, and lakes of fresh water, all human beings currently alive, game animals, domestic animals, individual animals, domestic and ground-dwelling birds, and all plants that are gathered, planted, or used by human beings.” (Guin, 1985, p. 43-44) According to the first person narrative of Stone Telling, the people of the valley engaged in tapestry weaving, pottery, subsistent agriculture, cattle grazing and viticulture. Dancing known as “wakwa” is an important ritual and is translated to signify “rite, mystery, ceremony, celebration.” (Guin, 1985, p. 45) Their dance choreography also contains their most important gestural element, the “heyiya-if”, which is “two spirals centered upon the same (empty) space” (Guin, 1985, p. 45) suggesting ecological connection as well as the possibility of change. It is an organizational device found in their scriptural and graphic forms, town planning, design of musical instruments and decoration. As an idea which entirely occupied the Kesh culture, it was also their subject of meditation and extensive metaphor. (Guin, 1985, p. 45) Like the Athsheans in *The Word for World is Forest*, singing is an intrinsic component of the eco-spiritual consciousness of the Kesh community. During elemental festivities like “dance the water”, the songs invoke “streams and pools in the great heat of summer.” (Guin, 1985, p. 22) According to the primary narrative of Stone Telling, their trance singings are seasonal celebrations believing in the sacredness of nature. They invoke nature to bring rain to a parched earth and the heat of sun during foggy winters. This is consistent with most pagan traditions which are nature-religions respecting the earth as sacred.

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The ecospiritual co-existence envisioned by the Kesh is contrasted with the masculine hierarchically arranged warrior group, known as Condor or Dayao. The Condor re-emerges as a militarily aggressive group from the remnants of what the Kesh calls the "City of Man." (Guin, 1985, 153) Armed with gunstocks and big horses, they aspire to colonially expand their rule over the ecologically conscious Kesh valley and its natural world. The first person narrative of Stone Telling, or North Owl, the daughter of a woman (Willow) of the Kesh valley, and Terter Abhao, a Condor traces the masculine culture of the colonizers aspiring to build bridges, roads and restore the "Great Weapons" (Guin, 1985, p. 350) of the past. As North Owl leaves the valley and joins her father, she explores the hierarchized patriarchal configuration of the social, linguistic and religious structures of Condor. For example, her given name "Ayatyu" means "born over the others" The monotheistic religion of the Condors is a patriarchal one, where one male supreme is worshipped. She also notes; "Women were not allowed into the sacred parts of their heyimas, which they called *daharda*; we could come no nearer than the vestibule in front of the *daharda* to listen to the singing inside on certain great festivals. Women have no part in the intellectual life of the Dayao; they are kept in, but left out." (Guin, 1985, p. 200) Like the colonizing Terrans/ yumens in Guin's earlier novella, women and animals are held to be abject and insignificant by the masculine society.

Yet, as the critic Eric C. Otto points out, the patriarchy that we find operating in the anthropological account is not a biologically determined institution. Rather it is a "socio-cultural construct driven by belief and expectation" (Otto, 2012, p. 28) which makes it more malleable. Both the masculine qualities of Condor and the femininity of Kesh culture are the product of its religious, social and linguistic structures. The journey of North Owl from her matriarchal Kesh community to live with the Condors and then finally returning to Kesh thus can be seen as Guin's way of opening up the possibility of transformation and embracing fluidity in our gendered categories. Stone telling's narrative emphasizes the need for "always coming home", for an alternative heroine's journey in our culture which is about healing and reclaiming the feminine within us. This journey would also embrace our ecological conscience which realises the interconnected nature of life on earth.

The ecological interdependence of the Kesh community and the Athsheans has been reflected in several pagan and animistic religions. According to the American researcher and conservationist Bron Taylor, this conviction about the essential kinship between human beings and the natural world has always been with us. He terms this as "dark, green spirituality" or "dark, green religion" (Taylor, 2010) which constructs nature as sacred and sentient. It is continually represented through artistic forms and some religious rituals. Unlike traditional predominant religions which are concerned about transcending the world, the spirituality associated with "dark, green religions" are concerned with our connections to earth and being dependent upon its living systems. Our contemporary understanding of nature religion derives from the watershed descriptions of anthropologist E. B. Taylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871), James G. Frazer's *The Worship of Nature* (1926) and Max Muller's *Natural Religion* (1888) which discusses the essence of nature worship and earth religions. As Bron Taylor (2010) notes, Abrahamic religious traditions had negative views of pagan and polytheistic nature religions, forcing them to decline. Misperceptions about nature religions intensified with the Western culture's privileging of reason as opposed to emotions. It led to the tendency to construct nature religions and its practitioners as "primitive", "savage" and sometimes even dangerous. (Taylor, 2010, p. 5) It is this nature/ culture dualism in Western metaphysics which is fundamentally addressed in Guin's *Always Coming Home* and *The Word for World is Forest*. According to Taylor (2010), one of the ways in which positive planetary change can be achieved is to rescue nature religions and nature related beliefs from its negative representations of primitivism. Indeed, the practice of "dark, green religions"

with its stress on ecological interdependence and biocentric belief systems is a much needed liberatory alternative in our geologic epoch.

Conclusion

Guin's speculative fiction articulates the human cost of the environmental crisis which has reached its tipping point today. Her novels emphatically critique Western culture's masculinist and colonialist conquest of indigenous societies leading to the over-exploitation of natural resources and the irrecoverable damage to native life systems. For example, Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* emphasizes the unfortunate effects of soil erosion, deforestation, desertification of sustainable land, loss of biodiversity and consequent habitat degradation of the Athsheans. The "destructive and terrible weapons" (Guin, 1985, p. 342) of the Condors in *Always Coming Home* ravages trees and land, while biofuel production for the machines is at the cost of entire autumnal harvests. Thus, these narrative spaces negotiate ethical questions about our adverse relationship with the environment, and the critical consequences of our contemporary way of life. They also examine the intertwining of patriarchal and environmental violence in our capitalist societies. While her fictional landscapes register spatial stories of ecological change and natural degradation, they are also suffused with vigilant hope and explore the possibilities of futuristic societies emerging in the aftermath of the anthropocene. In their alternative narrative spaces of care and conservation, they offer empathetic ideals that can transform our ecosystems and lead to sustainable development.

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Bio-note

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