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Bodies, Biomes, and the End of Worlds: Gendered Orders in Sci-Fi Ecocatastrophe

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of bodies, biomes, and the end of Worlds focusing on gendered orders in science fiction literature, focusing on how environmental collapse mirrors the fragmentation of identities. Drawing from a selection of influential science fiction works, the study investigates how ecological degradation serves not only as a narrative backdrop but also as a critical framework for exploring societal power dynamics, particularly those rooted in gender. In these speculative worlds, the destruction of nature often mirrors the collapse of social orders, as marginalized groups, particularly women, queer, and non-binary individuals, face not only ecological degradation but also hegemonic gender identities. The article posits that science fiction does not merely represent but also problematize the confluence of ecological destruction and gender-based inequality, providing a scope to examine the future of both human identity and the environment. Through the gendered orders, there is a possibility that offers a rich context for reimagining gender relations and social dynamics in the face of ecological crises while also questioning the sustainability of existing power structures in an increasingly unstable world. By analyzing significant works such as *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K. Le Guin, *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler and *The Ministry for the Future* by Kim Stanley Robinson, the study emphasizes how science fiction offers a powerful space for reimagining gender relations in the face of environmental collapse, suggesting that ecological breakdown might not only dismantle existing systems but also pave the way for alternative, more sustainable future.

Keywords: *Bodies, biomes, ecocatastrophe, identities, science fiction, power dynamics, gender, speculative fiction*

Introduction

Science fiction has emerged as a crucial platform for examining the consequences of ecological collapse on both the natural world and human society, as concerns over climate change, resource depletion, and environmental degradation swell globally. The institutional frameworks that impact human life and the vulnerability of ecosystems have been more prominent in science fiction literature in recent decades. This field has allowed us to explore the speculative worlds that humans have constructed, which will help us envision a future in which there is a perfect opportunity for people to gain a deeper comprehension of climate change and their relationship to the ecosystem. One of the strongest links between environmental catastrophes and gendered power structures is used by this genre to highlight ecological challenges. The devastation of ecosystems in these fictional contexts frequently reflects the ways in which environmental collapse may exacerbate many facets of identity fragmentation, especially those related to gender. The latest occurrence that has happened throughout the world which has created a big influence on human inhabitation, even leading to migration has demonstrated that environmental degradation is not something that will produce the same effect on all

parts of society as equal. The rise of climate fiction as a literary subgenre within science fiction is significant because it emphasizes the need for readers to pay closer attention to the social, political, and cultural ramifications of climate change as well as the consequences of inaction in addressing environmental collapse. Human rights violations, political instability, forced migration, and other consequences are all very likely. The study focusses on a few science fiction books, such as those by Kim Stanley Robinson, Margaret Atwood, Octavia Butler, and Ursula K. Le Guin, that deal directly with these topics. These authors analyse how societal institutions that place a superiority on power, control, and exploitation, are frequently portrayed as the direct cause of environmental collapse through the use of speculative worlds. In addition, these works provide glimmers of resistance, resiliency, and imagined futures in which environmental and gendered inequities are challenged and overturned.

By analyzing ecofeminist ideas along with the treatment of gender roles, identity, and environmental collapse in these works, this research will demonstrate how science fiction can serve as a critical tool for examining the intersections of ecology and gender. Ecofeminism is an idea that integrates feminism and political ecology. Ecofeminist thinkers draw on the concept of relationships between humans and the natural world (MacGregor, 2006). As climate change and environmental crises continue to challenge the stability of our world, these work of ecocritical or ecofeminist lens ask vital questions about the sustainability of current systems of power and the potential for alternative, more equitable futures. Through speculative storytelling, science fiction encourages us to consider how the future might unfold if we fail to address the systemic inequities and ecological collapse that threaten our planet and its inhabitants. Through a close reading of these works, this study will illuminate how science fiction critiques the way environmental and gendered hierarchies function in our world, offering readers not only a reflection of the dangers of neglecting both ecological sustainability and social equity, but also a vision of alternative futures in which these crises are confronted and transformed.

This study contributes to a larger conversation regarding the role that science fiction might play in shaping cultural and political understandings of the relationship between environment and gender. Such works, in the light of an age characterized by environmental collapse and the increasing acknowledgment of the urgency of gender justice, serve as effective instruments in the imaginative process of envisioning a collective future, one where the welfare of the planet and the dignity of all its inhabitants are foregrounded.

Literature Review

Fictional stories, that too in a speculative lens are valuable to climate change narratives, as they have the potential to transform the conventional narratives. Science fiction novels that examine the relationship between gender and climate change frequently explore themes that are influenced by gendered power dynamics in society's responses to climate change, how environmental issues may reshape traditional gender roles, and how different genders might experience, contribute to, or adapt to climate crises in different ways through speculative settings. Traditional gender roles may be questioned or altered as the climate catastrophe worsens. Science fiction books may show cultures in which redefining what it is to be a man, woman, or nonbinary person is necessary to survive in a

transformed world. These books can be used to examine how social institutions change in reaction to environmental changes, challenging conventional wisdom regarding power, work, and family. As cooperation and survival become more important than traditional roles in post-apocalyptic environments, gender fluidity or new gender identities may arise.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, the main focus of female subjugation is environmental devastation. In the plot, the world is in a crisis due to declining birth rates. Republic of Gilead, a new theocratic government is formed and a caste system is established to control the limited reproductive resources. Elite men whose spouses are infertile are allocated to have children with handmaids. One of these Handmaids is the main character Offred, who is deprived of her own name, identity, family, and ability to procreate. The book examines how fertile women are compelled to procreate in order to replenish Gilead, a town that has been harmed by inappropriate environmental techniques, such as pesticides, nuclear blasts, and air and water pollution (Atwood, 1996). This environmental setting itself is something which can potentially create a discriminated hierarchy among the people. Due to its involvement in greenhouse gas emissions, environmental deterioration, and the disturbance of natural ecosystems, pesticide and fertiliser use is a major contributor to climate change. The use of fertilizers and pesticides is deeply intertwined with climate change through various mechanisms like greenhouse gas emissions, soil degradation, energy consumption, and ecosystem disruption. While these chemicals are essential in industrial agriculture for boosting crop yields, their long-term environmental costs are significant. The U.S. Environmental Protection agency-EPA provides a summary of the environmental issues surrounding Lake Okeechobee, including the impact of agricultural runoff and nutrient pollution. Thus it is important to focus more on the changes that are happening in the environment because of the intervention of human beings that will ultimately lead to the instability among people, especially the marginalised sections in the gendered hierarchy.

Considering the status of women in a patriarchal social setting, there will be a two time discrimination when it comes to a place which is disintegrating because of human intervention in the environment. However, gendered power and abuse of power lie above environmental damage, making it a concerning factor when it comes to ecological topics. Resources are becoming limited as a result of human manipulation of the environment, and nations are failing to take the necessary steps to shield future generations from environmental calamities and climate change.

Atwood talks about certain environmental themes and their impact on human health and reproduction-"Stillbirths, miscarriages, and genetic deformities were widespread and on the increase, and this trend has been linked to the various nuclear-plant accidents, shutdowns, and incidents of sabotage that characterized the period, as well as to leakages from chemical and biological-warfare stockpiles and toxic-waste disposal sites, and to the uncontrolled use of chemical insecticides, herbicides, and other sprays." (Atwood, 1996) Contextually this signals to us about the nuclear explosion -The Bhopal Gas Tragedy, one of the worst industrial disasters in history, occurred on the night of December 1984, in the city of Bhopal, India (Wikipedia, Wikipedia, n.d.). It involved the release of methyl isocyanate (MIC) gas from a pesticide plant owned by Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL). The tragedy had devastating consequences for the environment and the people living in the area causing infertility and extreme health issues. In order to control the women, Gilead links the

female body to nature, making environmental degradation the focal point of female subjugation in the book. Rereading *The Handmaid's Tale* through an ecocritical perspective is crucial to comprehending the basic problems of patriarchy disposing of the environment through the female body for self-serving purposes.

Ursula K. Le Guinn's science fiction book *The Dispossessed* examines the tensions and relationships between the Anarres and Urras, two very different societies. Gender roles in a hierarchically structured society and an anarchist society are contrasted in this book. These positions are balanced in the state of Anarres, but there is a definite bias in favour of the male gender in the state of Urras. People in the state of Anarres have virtually forgotten what it is to be male or female, and works are separated based on gender. In Urras, women are viewed as a commodity, whereas men occupy significant social and political positions. Though women still suffer barriers in practice, especially in their roles as mothers, workers, and carers, gender equality is theoretically advocated on Anarres as part of the larger ideal of equality. Women are still subjected to expectations and pressures despite society's efforts to address gender inequity. In the state of Urras, women are dehumanised and viewed as a subhuman category, whereas in the state of Anarres, women do not use gender. Therefore, we may say that gender roles are balanced and gender discrimination does not exist in an anarchist utopia. Similar idea of gender can be found in the speculative worlds created by the author in her other science fiction novels

The idea of communal life on Anarres implies that women are frequently required to carry out conventional responsibilities, such as taking care of the home and raising children, although these duties are frequently marginalised. The two planets, Urras and Anarres, act as opposing landscapes that shape the protagonists' perspectives. Because of its society's emphasis on austerity and shared pain, Anarres is a desolate, dry, and resource-poor place. The physical surroundings influence people's perspectives by highlighting scarcity and the necessity of group collaboration, even at the expense of individual liberty. The harsh, desert-like terrain of Anarres is a direct result of the environmental damage brought on by years of seclusion and neglect. With few resources, the populace must adapt and live. (Guin, 2019)

Parable of the Sower written by Octavia Butler is set in California and centres around a character named Lauren Olamina, a black fifteen-year-old living in a neighbourhood called Robledo. Los Angeles is portrayed as a place teeming with underprivileged and desperate individuals who have resorted to criminal activity in order to cope with the severe drought-induced hunger and thirst that exist outside of this neighbourhood. Lauren leaves America for Canada in pursuit of cheap water, work, and a way out of the perils of poverty, starvation, and slavery after pyromaniacs attack her area. The effect of forced migration which comes as a result of environmental degradation or calamity may affect the people, mostly women. The Kenya drought response recorded by OCHA under the United Nations speaks a lot about such adversities. "Malnutrition has risen at an alarming rate, with at least 942,000 children under the age 5 and about 134000 pregnant or lactating women in urgent need of treatment in the ASAL region" (OCHA, n.d.).

Economic and safety issues from the climate crisis particularly affect women in Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. Homeless women are frequently sexually assaulted. Even the female youngsters in the narrative are frequently sexually assaulted. One of the adolescent girls in the neighbourhood is left "naked,

filthy, bloody between her legs" (Butler, 2019) when Robledo is destroyed. Climate change disproportionately marginalises women because of pre-existing inequalities like socioeconomic poverty and gender-based violence. The unaffordability of women's healthcare and the inaccessibility of safe spaces are two ways that Butler's book illustrates the specific economic losses experienced by women. The Parable of the Sower emphasises how pre-existing gender inequality and economic vulnerability, exacerbated by climate change, can put women at risk for physical and mental health issues as well as financial exploitation of women. The novel gives an idea that how the climate change conditions can develop the subordination of women. The women of Pinsalu in Labutta district in the Delta face a higher risk to their lives during a natural disaster and are more exposed to the growing ravages caused by climate change according to the UN environment programme. The women of Labutta lack access to information and other resources needed to adapt to the changing climate. (United Nations, n.d.). While climate change affects everyone, women, especially those in vulnerable communities, face unique challenges that exacerbate their financial struggles and increase their exposure to sexual violence. The work assigned to women in a conventional patriarchal societal setup such as the domestic work, childcare responsibilities and securing food for the family will exacerbate the vulnerability of women towards challenging life situations.

Kim Stanley Robinson skilfully combines reality and fiction with the climate issue in her 2020 book, *The Ministry for the Future*, which is set in the 2040s. On the basis of the scientific accuracy and non-fiction descriptions of historical events, the novel is considered as a hard science fiction. *The Ministry for the Future* opens with a horrifying incident in which 20 million people were killed by extreme heat and humidity in the northern plains of India.

A young American volunteer named Frank May witnesses this mass death event and is permanently damaged by the event and ends up being one of the recurring characters in the book, prone to desperate actions that he believes can alter the course of history. Holding Mary Murphy, the head of a Ministry for the Future established under the Paris Climate Accord, captive for a small period of time and requiring her to do everything within her power to change the world's direction is one of these acts. Despite being traumatised by this encounter, Murphy comes to the realisation that it is essential to work on the worldwide system to implement some significant improvements. Through the perspectives of its wide array of individuals and their predictions of the future, Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* examines gender dynamics. Refugees, slaves, and survivors are among the characters in the book, and their experiences serve to illustrate how climate change affects various populations.

Methods and materials

This research article has employed a qualitative literary analysis to explore the intersection of gender and environmental themes in science fiction novels. The analysis is based on a combination of thematic analysis focusing mainly on ecofeminism, ecocriticism and climate-fiction narratives, which allows for the navigation through the ways of how gender dynamics are portrayed in relation to the concerns of ecology. The methods employed include the analysis of selected science fiction novels and the theoretical framework as mentioned above is grounded in ecofeminist theory. In addition to the text analysis, a comparative approach is used to identify commonalities and divergences across the works.

The materials for this research primarily consist of selected science fiction novels, with a focus on works that are prominent in discussions of gender and the environment. Critical articles on ecofeminism and science fiction that can provide foundational context for understanding how environmental issues and gender are framed in speculative fiction were also used as materials along with literature reviews and analyses of other science fiction works that deal with ecological and gender-related concerns.

Conclusion

This study examines the intricate connection between gendered orders and environmental collapse in science fiction literature, showing how these works not only mirror popular anxieties but also subvert long-held beliefs about identity, power, and ecological sustainability. When viewed through the lens of ecofeminism, it is evident that many science fiction works portray broken ecosystems as a reflection of the systemic gendered and socioeconomic injustices that still influence our world, rather than only as the result of environmental neglect. Science fiction creates important arenas for reimagining alternative futures, ones in which social justice, environmental resilience, and gender fluidity are essential to survival, by exploring the stories of protagonists who struggle with both ecological degradation and the reassertion of patriarchal power. Environmental collapse and the strict, hierarchical gender structures that rule society are closely related in books like *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Parable of the Sower*. These books contend that the removal of these hierarchies is necessary for any significant response to the ecological crisis in order to make room for more sustainable and egalitarian lifestyles.

In conclusion, science fiction literature offers a powerful platform for exploring the entangled fates of the planet and its inhabitants. The works analyzed in this study underscore the urgent need for a holistic approach to environmental and social justice, one that challenges the foundational structures of power that perpetuate both ecological degradation and gender-based oppression. By engaging with these speculative worlds, we are reminded that the future is not predetermined; rather, it is something we can actively shape through our awareness, choices, and collective action toward a more just and sustainable world.

This study has demonstrated how science fiction literature reveals the patriarchal foundations of environmental exploitation under the perspective of ecofeminist theory. Environmental destruction is frequently shown in these works as a direct result of social structures that prioritise dominance over cooperation and exploitation over sustainability, rather than as a backdrop. Thus, the shattered ecosystems depicted in science fiction are symbolic of shattered identities, especially those of women, marginalised communities etc. We cannot consider all these as dystopian tales. These texts also offer glimpses of hope, presenting characters who challenge the dominant gendered and environmental paradigms. In novels like *The Ministry for future* and *The Dispossessed*, protagonists struggle not just to survive in a harsh, resource-scarce world but also to reimagine new social and environmental orders. Through acts of resistance and solidarity, these characters embody the possibility of reconstituting both ecological systems and gendered identities, breaking free from the confines of their fractured worlds. Moreover, the exploration of fragmented identities in these works discusses the wider cultural ramifications of the way our own societies define gender and environment. In the same way that science fiction conjures up other worlds, it also serves as a mirror to the existing world, highlighting

the ways in which societal conventions, gender roles, and environmental regulations frequently serve to uphold inequalities. Because of the genre's speculative nature, readers are prompted to consider alternate futures that place equal emphasis on gender inclusion and ecological balance.

Ultimately, science fiction's portrayal of shattered identities and ecosystems offers more than simply fantastical stories. They are potent metaphors for our world's urgent need to confront gendered hierarchies and environmental degradation. Interacting with these texts challenges us to re-evaluate how we may reconstruct a future where social justice and environmental sustainability are mutually reinforcing rather than antagonistic, providing a more just and peaceful existence for everybody.

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