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An Ecocritical Analysis of Ursula Kroeber Le Guin's *The Dispossessed***Abstract:**

Concern for environmental issues has always been a central theme in literature. Various eminent creative artists have raised their concerns for the degrading and depleting resources of the mother nature through their works of art. Ursula Kroeber Le Guin a prominent American science fiction writer and winner of several literary awards has also highlighted the devastating effects of such an obliteration. Le Guin has a deep sensitivity to nature, and is considered one of the remarkable figures in the rejuvenation of utopian writing starting in the 1970s. Science fiction as a genre of critical interrogation presents: 1. How things are, not as they seem to be 2. How they should be for a better world to function effectively and 3. What if things are not changed accordingly. Therefore science fiction not only highlights the issues relevant to humanity but also prophecises where these issues can lead us to in near future if not addressed adequately. The selected text *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* like many of Le Guin's texts is environmentally oriented and depicts the oppression of mother nature by thankless humans. This paper seeks to demonstrate a dual world of tantalizing ecotopia and repulsive dystopia in relation to the

functioning and management of both the worlds. Phenomenon of environmental justice and environmental discrimination by analysing the functioning of two contrary planets Anarres and Urras where the latter one is much like our planet Earth, thus signifying the urgency to respect flora and fauna of mother nature in benevolent and thankful manner.

Keywords: Environmental justice, Sustainable development, Environmental equity, Environmental discrimination, Utopia, Dystopia.

My world, my Earth is a ruin. A planet spoiled by the human species. We multiplied and gobbled and fought until there was nothing left, and then we died. We controlled neither appetite nor violence; we did not adapt. We destroyed ourselves. But we destroyed the world first.

—Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*

American literature has always produced discourses that focus primarily on environmental issues. But in the last few decades particularly after 1960s this trend has gained momentum. These discourses have not only raised the issues regarding environmental degradation but also suggested probable ways to relinquish the deteriorating relationship between human beings and the natural world. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines environmental justice as:

The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Fair treatment means that no group of people should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, governmental and commercial operations or policies. Meaningful involvement means that: (1) people have an opportunity to participate in decisions about activities that may affect their environment and/or health; (2) the public can contribute to regulatory agency's decision-making; (3) their concerns will be considered in the decision-making process; and (4) the decision makers seek out and facilitate the involvement of those potentially affected. ("Environmental")

The concept of environmental justice originates from the civil liberties campaigns of the 1960s and the more recent Environmental Justice Movement in the United States. It was historically concerned with widespread distributive inequalities which manifested as discrimination mainly on the basis of race and economic status in environmental matters. In more recent years, environmental justice concerns have become more profound owing to the diversity and gravity of global environmental problems such as global warming and climate change, natural resources depletion and widespread air and water pollution. It is generally considered that the environmental justice evolved through various phases. The first wave of environmental justice is thought to be before 1950s. Efforts were initiated to preserve and conserve the natural resources but the efforts were limited to the needs of elite class. Shrader-Frechette in his observation on first wave environmental justice maintains that “the early United States environmentalists were the most educated and powerful people in the country. Their environmentalism consisted of bird-watching or expensive ecotourism, *not addressing areas of greatest pollution where poor people live*” (emphasis added 4).

Second wave of American environmentalism emerging in 1960s till 1970s is generally considered as beginning of modern environmentalism. Some commentators argue that the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962 marked the beginning of modern environmentalism. This book was the first documented analysis of the wide ranging impacts of pesticides on natural resources and human beings, as well as the wider environment. This period was also marked by the global realisation that industrialisation was producing environmentally harmful effects such as radioactive waste.

The period between the early 1980s and late 1990s marked the third wave and it was a very active period in the evolution of the concept. A number of activities took place to mark the convergence of civil rights, social justice and environmentalism. This period was initially characterised by reactive responses to adverse effects on the environment. The anthropocentric view towards the environment, evidenced by the infusion of social justice values of equity and fairness in environmentalism, took root during this era. Environmental justice concerns were more prioritised during the third wave.

It was also only with the fourth wave of the environmental justice movement (EJM) that the interconnection between environmental justice and other environmental concepts such as sustainable development, are being understood. The environmental justice as a movement came

out of US and took the shape of a global movement. Certain legislations were incorporated and the constitutions of many countries were amended for implementation of environmental justice laws. The definition of environment was extended to include social, economic and development issues in line with the goals of sustainable development.

Environmental discrimination on the other hand is a broad concept, which according to authors such as Bullard “arises where community members are treated disparately on the basis of race, class, ethnic or other distinguishing characteristics” (7). It is seen as the root of all environmental injustices. The first ever court case that alleged environmental discrimination in the United States was *Margaret Bean et.al v. South-western Waste Management Corporation et.al*. The plaintiffs sought an injunction to prevent the construction of a solid waste disposal facility in Houston on the grounds that it had a disproportionate environmental impact on the black minority community. Environmental discrimination determined by factors such as race, gender, and class has been documented as the root cause of environmental inequity and injustice. The term ‘environmental equity’ has been used almost synonymously with ‘environmental justice’ in the United States. Environmental equity denotes desirable outcomes in the environmental decision-making processes. Both environmental equity and justice refer to the means through which environmental inequalities can be addressed, remedied and possibly prevented from recurring. According to the EPA, environmental equity refers to the:

Equal protection from environmental hazards for individuals, groups, or communities regardless of race, ethnicity, or economic status. This applies to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies, and implies that no population of people should be forced to shoulder a disproportionate share of negative environmental impacts of pollution or environmental hazard due to a lack of political or economic strength levels. (“Terms”)

Environmental equity also represents an ideal of equal or balanced treatment and protection for disadvantaged groups under environmental legislation. The purpose of environmental justice is to achieve environmental equity. Furthermore the concept of environmental justice and sustainable development is interrelated as one leads to another.

Ursula Krober Le Guin is a science fiction writer who has advocated for change in human actions so as to stop the overuse and exploitation of natural resources. This idea has been

tremendously presented in the novel *The Dispossessed* a utopian science fiction novel. *The Dispossessed* takes place on the only two inhabited worlds in the Tau Ceti star system, Urras and Anarres. As the larger of the two planets and the original home of the Cetians, Urras is a large planet made up of competing nation-states: A-lo, a industrial capitalist republic, and Thu, a totalitarian socialist state. As the novel unfolds, the conflict between these two city states looms larger and larger. The economically underdeveloped state of Benbili becomes the central front in a proxy war between the two main powers on Urras, echoing the conflicts in South East Asia that were fought by Capitalist and Communist interests during the last half of the 20th century. The difference between the capitalist worlds of Urras and Terrans and communist world of Anarres is highlighted by a Terran :

This is a living world, a harmony. Mine is a discord. You Odonians chose a desert; we Terrans made a desert.... We survive there, as you do. People are tough! There are nearly a half billion of us now. Once there were nine billion. You can see the old cities still everywhere. The bones and bricks go to dust, but the little pieces of plastic never do they never adapt either. We failed as a species, as a social species. (454-455)

While the societies of Urras are forever in conflict, the residents of the planet Anarres have almost completely removed themselves from any connection to their previous home. Inspired by the anarchist philosopher Laia Odo, the Anarrestis are actually descendants of the first Odonian separatists to leave Urras in the hopes of establishing a new utopian society upon Anarres. We are first introduced to Anarres culture 200 years after the founding of the settlement, during which time the Anarrestis haven't almost completely isolated themselves from what they consider to be the decadent, violent, and materialist culture of Urras. While the societies and conflicts on Urras sound surprisingly like the ones found on planet Earth, Anarres culture is characterized by a lack of governmental structures and controls. Based off the teachings of Odo, Anarrestis culture is rooted in the idea that personal property is an illusion and that governments and laws are what serve to corrupt society. The idea of ownership is so antithetical to the Anarrestis that their language doesn't even have a possessive form. On Anarres there is equal distribution of all resources although resources there are scarce but they are not confined to any one social group.

On arid Anarres, the communities had to scatter widely in search of resources and few of them could be self-supporting, no matter how they cut back there notions

of what is needed for support. They built the roads first, the houses second. The special resources and products of each region were interchanged continually with those of others, in an intricate process of balance: that balance of diversity which is characteristic of life, of natural and social ecology. (288)

As mentioned earlier on Anarras there is no ownership. Whatever is produced or received from the nature is distributed equally. The planet has the utopian system of governance where there is no government. The justice prevails through mutual understanding of equality and responsibility. The Anarresti agree with Odo when she writes “Excess is excrement,” Odo wrote in the *Analogy*. “Excrement retained in the body is poison.” (79, 80) Anarresti own nothing. They derive from the nature only which is required for their sustenance and the rest is shared with the needy and this is why they feel free.

We have nothing but our freedom. We have nothing to give you but your own freedom. We have no law but the single principle of mutual aid between individuals. We have no government but the single principle of free association. We have no states, no nations, no presidents, no premiers, no chiefs, no generals, no bosses, no bankers, no landlords, no wages, no charity, no police, no soldiers, no wars. Nor do we have much else. We are sharers, not owners. We are not prosperous. None of us is rich. None of us is powerful. (241, 242)

This quote from the text echoes the argument that Anarresti society is the one where there is environmental justice. It conforms to the basic principle of environment equity which states that there is equal distribution of environmental risks among all. If there is a drought everybody is affected by it equally and policy response to such environmental risk is framed keeping every section of society in mind and not a particular class. It is more so because this is a classless society. Unlike Anarres, Urras has a capitalist society. When Shevek arrives on Urras he found the planet quite pretty, nothing like what he has been told on Urras.

He had been taught as a child that Urras was a festering mass of inequity, iniquity, and waste. But all the people he met, and all the people he saw, in the smallest country village, were well dressed, well fed, and, contrary to his expectations, industrious. (106)

But this was only one part of what was apparent to him. It was quite later in the novel when he came to know about the inequity and injustice being done to a particular class of people. A

particular class of people were dying of starvation while the propertied class was enjoying all the luxuries of life. While there was famine in nation of Thu and people were struggling to get food the propertied class people were enjoying both food and women.

“A famine in Bachifoil Province in the Nation of Thu,” the commenter’s voice had said. “Bodies of children dead of starvation and disease are burned on the beaches. On the beaches of Tius, seven hundred kilometers away in the Nation of A-Io (and here came the jeweled navels), women kept for the sexual use of male members of the propertied class (the Iotic words were used, as there was no equivalent for either word in Pravic) lie on the sand all day until dinner is served to them by people of the unpropertied class.” (quotation marks original)(54).

Urras in contrast to Anarres is more like a dystopia. Although there is a kind of ecological control and the husbanding of natural resources this is applicable only for lower class people. The propertied class people had all the rights to use these resources lavishly. There was no controlling agency for these people. The balance of natural diversity which is the basic characteristic of life was missing on this planet. The laws of environment equity were not applicable for proleterians. In other words this planet is perfect embodiment of environment discrimination.

Protecting the minority and the poor population from environmental injustice is the basic concern of environmental justice literature. Education and awareness will promote environmental justice and this novel also presents such an endeavour. Taken together, these themes of environmental justice and discrimination in *The Dispossessed* espouse a vision of a future based on inclusion, not exclusion; on nonviolence, not violence; on reclaiming the commons, not their closure; on freely sharing the earth's resources, not monopolizing and privatizing them Le Guin’s novel offers solutions both simple and radical that the Millennial generation desperately needs to hear.

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