

UTOPIA/DYSTOPIA AS ECOMASCULINE SPACE IN ERNEST CALLENBACH'S ECOTOPIA

Vineeth Radhakrishnan,

Ph.D. Scholar,

V.G. Vaze Kelkar College,

Mulund (E)

Email: vineeth27rk@gmail.com



Abstract

Ecological masculinism has been an interesting concept that has evolved in the recent years which emphasizes the possibility of identifying a particular kind of masculinity that emerges in earthcare. This concept challenges the idea of traditional masculinity by proposing the earth-first concern in a discourse on gender. Within the concept of ecomasculinity, is the problematic of space and location. Fictional space or cultural space too has been very integral in conceptualizing ecomasculinity. This paper makes an attempt to investigate Ernest Callenbach's Ecotopia to Show how the writer uses the imaginative freedom of creating a utopia/dystopia to discuss and negotiate boundaries of gender. The paper employs the tools of ecocriticism and Gender Studies to explain the link between the non-place of a utopia and its effect on gender awareness.

Ecotopia is an earthcare fantasy that ecologises a posed gendered topography marked with mini-cities, tree worship and zero-tolerance to pollution that replace the urban sprawl of the United States. Such a space urges the protagonist to ecologise his masculinity and to redefine love and sexuality. This paper explains all these themes in detail.

Key terms: Ecomasculinity, earthcare, ecology, utopia, dystopia, Eros.



Utopia/Dystopia as Ecomasculine Space in Ernest Callenbach's

Ecotopia

Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* is a novel that is concerned with earthcare and environmental restoration. This influential utopian novel is set in an imaginary land (*Ecotopia*) that got separated from the union of United States and now it is a self-governing nation with its fascinating eco-friendly laws and policies. An interesting topography is mapped by the author in this novel to endeavor ecologically sound and sustainable future. Callenbach uses the imaginative freedom for social experimentation, aiming at the green movement and counterculture. The norms and values of *Ecotopians* substantially differ from the mainstream American society in terms of the environmental agendas and practicality. *Ecotopian* society is governed by the principles of environmentalism, gender equality, political ecology and green conservatism. Callenbach invites attention of the readers towards a sustainable green future through the eyes of the fictional *Times-Post* international affairs reporter, William Weston. *Times-Post* assigns Weston, the task of examining and preparing a concrete report on each and every aspect of *Ecotopian* life. Through the course of the novel, Weston makes life-changing discoveries in *Ecotopian* land that mesmerizes and challenges his old convictions about the "darkest *Ecotopia*" (3).

This paper analyzes *Ecotopia* from an ecomasculine perspective to show how a fictional or a cultural space urges the protagonist to ecologise his masculinity and redefine the notion of love and sexuality. Ecomasculinity is an interesting area of research that interlinks two academic fields – ecocriticism and Masculinity Studies. Ecological masculinism has also given Gender Studies a new dimension that questions the hegemonic nature of masculinity by proposing the earth-first concern in a discourse on gender. It emphasizes the possibility of identifying a particular kind of masculinity that emerges in earthcare. Fictional or a cultural space too has been very integral in conceptualizing ecomasculinity. This paper scrutinizes Callenbach narrative to show how the writer uses the imaginative freedom of creating a utopia/dystopia to discuss and negotiate boundaries of gender. The paper employs the tools of ecocriticism and Gender Studies to explain the link between the non-place of a utopia and its effect on gender awareness.



Ecotopia envisions an earth-friendly future where the people of this nowhere land have already accomplished the goals set by the scientists and environmentalists worldwide. This ecological utopia aims at viable solutions to the current environmental crisis like pollution, global warming, overpopulation, lack of environmental justice and policies etc. The timeline of the novel is 1999, twenty four years later after its first publication. Ecotopia, after its secession from the United States in 1979 (twenty years earlier) comprises the former states of Washington, Oregon, and the northern half of California. The main reason behind the formation of this independent nation could be the reaction against the imperialist and capitalist policies of the US government with its lackadaisical attitude towards the environment. The life and progress of this isolated nation post-secession remains a mystery for the world till the journalist, William Weston takes up the task of visiting and investigating the happenings in Ecotopia. It is the first official visit by any American to Ecotopia since its independence from the United States.

Weston embarks on his investigative journey to Ecotopia with a prejudiced notion and presumptions about the civilization of the Ecotopian Society and with a reasonable feeling of goodwill. And the moment he enters Ecotopia, he encounters a drastic change in the topography and lifestyle as compared to that of his country. During his journey by train from Tahoe to San Francisco, Weston begins to get a fair idea about Ecotopian sentiments for nature: “Their sentimentality about nature has led the Ecotopians to bring greenery into their trains, which are full of hanging ferns and small plants I could not identify. My Companions, however, reeled off their botanical names with assurance” (8). The “recycle bins”, grouped with three letters – M (metal), G (glass) and P (paper) in the trains were unusual in America, whereas the “rigid practices of recycling and re-use” (8) in Ecotopia has amazed Weston. He also observes that instead of paint, Ecotopian houses are covered with vines or bushes. He has even more surprising experiences the moment he reaches San Francisco, the de facto capital of Ecotopia. He expects the usual urban sprawl like – “car honking, swooping, clots of people pushing about in the hurry of urban life” (12). Instead, he comes across a mall planted with thousands of trees, streets with electric taxis, minibuses, bicycle lanes, fountains, little garden surrounded by benches etc. The occasional song of a bird is another phenomenon that seemed unbelievable for Weston on a “capital city’s crowded main street” (12).



The surprises continue throughout Weston’s stay in Ecotopia and there is a constant comparison going on in his mind between the Ecotopian and the American urban spaces which he is familiar with. For instance, Weston reflects on the crowded streets: “Despite the quite, the streets are full of people, though not in Manhattan densities” (13). Similarly, he finds the Ecotopian farm houses inferior to that of the Americans though they are well cared for: “Yet how dingy and unprosperous the farm building looked, compared to the White-painted farms of Iowa or New England!” (10). Georg Drennig in his essay “Cities of Desire: Ecotopia and the Mainstreet Cascadia Imaginary”, explains the spatial and earth-centric experiences of Weston that condition his new perspective on Ecotopia. He states “In Weston’s perception these new patterns of settlement represents a radical departure from the U.S norm. The same radical change applies to the new role of nature in urban fabric” (Drennig 146).

The narrator examines in detail the environmental awareness of the Ecotopian society. The modes of transportation in Ecotopia are one of the best examples of the earth-friendly civilization. For instance, private motor vehicles are hardly used. Instead people prefer public transport. Another interesting fact is that bicycles are available for free. Weston states “Ecotopians setting out to go more than a block or two usually pick up one of the sturdy white-painted bicycles that lie about the streets by the hundreds and are available free for all” (14). However, Weston remarks that the system of serving free bicycles would be an easy option for thieves to steal the bicycles. But a pedestrian gives a contradictory yet an appealing reply to Weston’s remark. The pedestrian says “it is cheaper to lose a few bicycles than to provide more taxis or minibuses” (14). Weston also appreciates the Ecotopian habit of walking. He says they carry “heavy burdens like backpacks and groceries for long distances, and they have a generally higher level of physical activity than Americans” (37). Ecotopia thus, has an inspirational and healthy model of transportation and lifestyle that keeps environmental pollution in check and it limits the use of non-renewable fuels like petrol or diesel. Weston also examines the Ecotopian ways of producing and using plastics. “Ecotopian plastics are entirely derived from living biological sources (plants) rather than from fossilized ones (petroleum and coal) as most of ours are” (83). The plastics are of low cost and they are “biodegradable” that can be used as fertilizers and reproduce plastics out of the new crops. Ecotopians find this cyclic process as a “stable-state system” (83). Weston is also thrilled to see



the progress made by Ecotopians in the field of Science and technology. He is overwhelmed by the sight of the “massive thermal-gradient power at Punta Gorda” (111). He notes that the Ecotopians have been consistent with the use of solar energy, wind energy and tidal energy and its constant use will not affect the local biosphere.

Weston also talks about the Ecotopian fashions – “denim is common” and he assumes that denim recreates the American fashions of the pre-secession decades. Apart from denim, he says, sandals are common even during cold weather. He also states that the leather and fur seems to be the much loved material for “pouches, pants and jackets” (14). Denim emerges as a democratic ecomasculine symbol in the novel. Firstly, it is unisex and thus subverts masculine power over women. Secondly, it is a marker on body and as a marker it underplays gender discrimination. Further, dress can be considered as an image that gives recognition for body in space. Capitalist economies promote distinctions of individual bodies in social spaces while denims in Ecotopia neutralizes this war of commercial enterprises in attire industry by making all human beings occupy social spaces, with uniform dress code. Denim also subverts the dichotomy between private space and social space in Ecotopia as denim and unisex pants gives people a license to occupy different spatial dimensions.

Along with the fashions, Weston has made detailed descriptions about Ecotopian women and their culture. He finds them independent and equally empowered in work and relationship just as men. The Ecotopian culture does not reflect gender discrimination at any level. In fact, Ecotopia’s chief of state is a woman and she heads the Survivalist Party, a women-dominated organization. Weston observes that this organization had played a crucial role in the Independence struggle. However, Weston who carries American notion of masculinity finds these women’s approach as feminine just like any ordinary woman despite their “heavy responsibilities and hard work” (36). At the same time, he remarks that the Ecotopian men are open-minded than the American men and their “feelings of weakness – still seem masculine” (36). The equality among gender is a spatial practice in the novel that alters the conventionally structured and indexed spaces into a non-space similar to that of a forest. Structured space or indexed space is the result of a habit of dividing spaces into gender specific preoccupation. For instance, a kitchen is considered feminine a space while a work place is considered



more masculine. Ecotopia smudges this dichotomy by allowing both genders to move freely between the cultural and social boundaries of social and domestic spaces. The urban space in the novel is appropriated to wilderness than to a cityscape with its trees, gardens, birds, vines, bamboos, bushes and ferns. The Ecotopian urban space appears as similar to the forest where the gender norms of masculinist civilization have no place.

Forest too gets depicted in the narrative but not as a binary of the city but as the extension of the city. Weston's meeting with Marissa Brightcloud at a forest camp is a life changing experience that helps him to overcome his prejudices about Ecotopia. He learns that Marissa is one of the seven members of elected committee that runs camp and manages thousands of acres of forest. He realizes Marissa's intense love and closeness to nature during their conversation. She says "This forest is my home...I feel best when I'm among trees. Open country always seems alien to me...Among trees you're safe, you can be free" (54-55). He observes Marissa's behavior when she in the company nature. He notes "She has special trees all over the places, they're really important to her...she studies their character, revisits them to see how they've grown and changed...Even talk to them rather mutters..." (74). At this juncture. Weston thinks of writing a column on trees of Ecotopia, though he mentions Merissa's behavior as crazy. Merissa helps Weston with his inspection at the forest camp and subsequently they engage in sexual relationship. Weston's sexual encounter with Marissa ecologises his masculinity which makes him realize that he has started loving both Marissa and Ecotopia. At one point, Weston says that he finds his lumber story as the best among all his reports and that he is inspired by Merissa for writing the same. Callenbach's vision of utopia is best manifested in his inversion of wild space. Merissa considers trees as friends and hence the forest her home – a philosophy which is totally different from the Western one wherein trees are aligned to the mysterious or the fearful. Merissa is at her natural best among trees and her sexual urge is ecologised. Her sexuality, as it seems, is an extension of nature along the principles of Eros upheld in nature writing in ecocriticism. Eros is that version of love and sexuality which is contrary to the Christian notions of them. It stands for a celebratory sexuality which is prelapsarian. Weston enjoys blissful and sin-free sex with Marissa which wouldn't have been possible in America. It is this space of liberating wilderness that liberates sexuality from sin in the novel.



Weston finds a gradual change in his attitude towards this green new space. He states that “the more closely I look at the fabric of Ecotopian life, the more I am forced to admit its strength and its beauty” (103). His self-analysis challenges his notion of love and sexuality. He realizes that a new self has come to his life that questions his American identity. He says

I begin to see that I have fallen in love with her country as much as with Marissa. A new self has been coming to life within me here, thanks to both her and her people. The new me is a stranger, an Ecotopian, and his advent fills me with terror, excitement, and strength....But I am ready for it at last. I don't know what it will all mean, how we will live, or even where. But all the possibilities seem natural and inviting. I want to stay at the forest camp for a while – have never lived in such close touch with natural surroundings, and would like to know what it's like to work with my hand. (180)

Weston's self-awareness is the result of eco-centric vision of life which replaces the ego-centric one. He realizes that his identity is contingent to people and places and that he is connected to everything else. Having lived in Ecotopia for a while he cannot think of himself independent of the country and Merissa. The novel ends with a twist in the narrative. Weston steps out of Ecotopia in his letter to the editor- in- chief, Max. The letter indicates his final decision to sever his ties with capitalist and ego-centric world: “I've decided not to come back, Max. You'll understand why from the notebook. But thank you for sending me on this assignment, when neither you nor I knew where it might lead. It led me home.” (181). These statements also indicate that making a home by connecting spiritually and emotionally to people, to biotic factors and abiotic factors is more important than exploring or investigating them. He realizes that his search for his home was more significant than any other search.

Weston reexamines the notion of masculinity throughout the novel. His masculinity is shaped by the acceptance of positive and assertive sexual urges of Merissa and the realization that a man-woman relationship can be at the best when there is no gender based discrimination. He enjoys sex with Merissa without the baggage of the thought that he is a male or a dominant partner. This sexual relation is allegorical of his relation with nature too. He realizes that his masculinity should be discovered in protecting and conserving wilderness rather than in exploring,



conquering and exploiting. By ecologising sexuality and gender he gains greater freedom in his life as if to indicate that a dominating male is a slave of the habit of domination.

Ecotopia is at once a utopia and a dystopia. It is an eco-centric utopia, an imaginary non-space in which the inhabitants are free from the harmful effects of pollution, urban sprawl and mindless materialism. It is an ideal society though it has many references to human civilization in city. Callenbach, by combining urban activities in space such as work, travelling and construction, makes an attempt to keep it recognizable as American spatial reality. He also redefines it by making the urban imaginary in his novel an alternate space wherein everything oppressive and environmentally disastrous is altered. The novel is a dystopia in a feminist sense: it has the reversal of gender politics, making women-powered governance and Survivalist organization possible. Plants and vegetation representing living world that makes a machine such as train into a biotic unit, is also another inversion. In a normal condition one doesn't find an ecosystem within a moving train but only human beings occupying mechanical space. In Ecotopia however, the novelist creates an ecosystem within a train to question the conventional binary of machine and life. All these utopian and dystopian devices deployed in the novel make it a fascinating ecomasculine space that induces the protagonist to redefine his masculinity in terms of his concern for his ecosystem.

Works Cited

Callenbach, Ernest. Ecotopia. New York: Bantam Book, 2009.

Drennig, Georg. "Cities of Desire: Ecotopia and the Mainstreet Cascadia Imaginary". Real-Year Book of Research in English (2010): (145-158). Web.
periodicals.narr.de/index.php/real/article/download/1581/156

Bibliography

1. Allister, Mark. Eco-Man: New Perspective on Masculinity and Nature (Under the sign of Nature). Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004. Print





2. Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996. Print.
3. Hultman, Martin. "The Making of an Environmental Hero: A History of Ecomodern Masculinity, Fuel Cells and Arnold Schwarzenegger". *Environmental Humanities Volume 2* (2013): 79-99. Web. 7 May 2014. <http://environmentalhumanities.org/arch/vol2/2.5.pdf>
4. Jameson, Frederic. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. New York: Verso Books, 2005. Print.

