



Research article

Ecotopia: Ecological Concerns and Alternate Womanspace in Select Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin

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Abstract:

The term ecotopia draws attention to the etymological link between utopia and ecologism, which emphasizes the importance of maintaining a sustainable relationship with the natural world in the context of an ideal egalitarian society. Literary utopias aim to evoke a longing for a society that differs from the present, playing a crucial role in breaking free from conventional thinking and envisioning alternatives to oppressive social institutions. The concept of green utopias is unthinkable without radical social reforms and changes in culture and lifestyle. Feminist ecotopia proposes a gendered deconstruction and reconstruction of a green utopian society. In her ecotopian novels *Always Coming Home* and *Tehanu*, Ursula K. Le Guin explores the relationship between ecologism and utopia. The structure of these novels frequently exhibits an ecotopian sensibility, while their content emphasizes the process of creating a better society. Le Guin's transgressive concept of utopia and ecology seeks to challenge and subvert the ideological frameworks that support materialist and dominant patriarchal conceptions. It provides feminist writers with a distinct space to imagine transgressive and oppositional ecotopian alternatives, where mothering-related myths and feminized characteristics are valued. This paper delves into how Le Guin's utopian novels interrogate and deconstruct powerful patriarchal structures, creating a cultural space for women to imagine transgressive and oppositional ecotopian alternatives.

Keywords: Ecotopia, Utopia, Ecology, Feminist Utopia, Terraforming, Yin-Yang, Daoism



[Gender Equality, Life on Land](#)

Introduction:

Conventionally many scholars upholding the superficial dichotomy between realism and utopia, criticized that utopian thoughts are problematic, incomplete, or ambiguous. From Thomas More to Ursula K Le Guin, Utopian thought has developed an enlightened and original mode of social thought in a transgressive way. Utopian imagination is always optimistic in nature. According to

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Ruth Levitas, utopia is the longing for a better way of life, a type of optimism that is rooted in our capacity to fantasize about things that are beyond our experience and in our potential to reorganize the environment in which we live (*Ruth*, 1986, p. 1). Fredric Jameson defined utopia in earlier work as "a kind of desiring to desire, a learning to desire", and this creation of the desire is known as utopia. This description of utopia inspired the subtitle of his encyclopedic *Archaeologies*, "The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions" (Nadir, 2010, p. 24). Everybody needs to construct their utopia for the well-being of humanity and of the earth. Frazer and Lacey argue that "Utopian thought is important in breaking the bonds of everyday thinking and imagining alternatives to the social institutions that are causing anguish" (Frazer, 1993, p. 38-40). Readers can overcome "the setting of patriarchal society and its suppositions" (Roberts, 1993 p. 67) by imagining a feminist utopia in which women are unaffected by reality and are free to develop their identities. Thus, feminist utopian thought offers the chance to examine numerous theories about social structure and moral principles. However, only feminist Utopia is no longer sufficient. Feminist women science fiction writers contribute a utopian vision of nature and science simultaneously. To establish new models of coexistence, they create ecotopias, which unite humans and nonhumans with equal ecological, social, and political order. We wish to create a society without patriarchal systems, in which people respect one another and their environment and where ethical qualities are valued equally with material requirements.

As a subgenre of utopia, ecotopia focuses on a harmonious relationship with the natural world to create an ideal society. *Ecotopia* by Ernest Callenbach, published in 1975, is regarded as a masterpiece in the field. By placing *Ecotopia* on the American West Coast, Callenbach contributes to the development of an ecological tradition of green utopias with egalitarianism, to which Kim Stanley Robinson and Ursula K. Le Guin also make contributions. The word "ecotopia" derives from the Greek word "oikos", which means "home," and emphasizes the relationship between utopia and ecologism (Callenbach, 1990). This connotation is central to terraforming, given its concern with constructing new homes (*Ecotopia*). The concept of 'home' offers stability, protection, and happiness—a place where everyone gets the freedom of their own and a sense of belongingness. This concept, in a metaphorical sense, refers to a nation. When we see some precarious, unhealthy issues associated with our home, we desperately try to solve it, thinking it would be a great loss to us personally. In *Ecotopia* (a sense of home), people are very concerned with the environment and living beings, taking the whole Earth as their home. Ecological awareness is essential for the development of an ecotopian space in terraforming, which is a literature of landscape and habitation (Pak, 2016, p. 135). In *Ecotopia*, geoengineering issues are discussed in relation to social, political, and economic change (Pak, 2016, p. 135). In order to synthesize nature and culture and integrate utopianism with eco-libertarianism, *Ecotopia* connects countercultural ecologism with its analysis of science and technology. Kim Stanley Robinson's short story collection *Future Primitive: The New Ecotopias*, which is titled after the phrase "Ecotopia," serves as evidence of the term's influence on science fiction (Robinson, 2013, p. 95). The development of an eco-centric culture, in accordance with Robyn Eckersley, is essential to finding a long-term solution to the ecological catastrophe. Her claim is that without "eco-centric sensibility, radical changes to protect our natural environment won't be generally supported" (Eckersley, 1992, p.185). Thus, in green utopias, sacrifice is not a temporary but an urgent requirement for survival. The surrounding plants and animals hold a special place in the

Ecotopians' hearts. They genuinely love the environment they live in and show it the utmost respect. Callenbach's novel *Ecotopia* helps to establish an ecological and egalitarian tradition of green utopias to which Le Guin contributes. Le Guin draws on the relationship between ecologism and utopia most notably in her experimental critical ecotopian novels *Always Coming Home* and *Tehanu*. These novels balance and integrate ecology and feminism emphasizing the process of building a better society with the concept of utopia.

Always Coming Home:

Le Guin's novels have drawn a lot of feminist interpretations and received plenty of consideration and appreciation from recent ecofeminist analysis. Her book *Always Coming Home* (1985) has also aided in the development of ecofeminism and is still a vital component of the ecofeminist conversation. Murphy argues that Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* effectively integrates ecology and feminism, making it the most balanced and successful novel he has ever read (Murphy, 1996, p. 238). In *Always Coming Home*, Le Guin creates an ecotopian Kesh society using Daoism to challenge the traditions of the genre of utopian fiction and to present an environmental ethos for the future. Daoist environmental ideas have contributed to the development of the ecocentrism position within environmental ethics, as Lawrence Buell has noted (Buell, 2005, p. 101). Daoism's representation of this alternative way of thinking in her writing may be its most significant function. According to Douglas Barbour, she represented the thematic notions of totality and equilibrium in her Hainish works by using a constantly contradictory visual pattern (Barbour, 1975, p. 248). While working on *Always Coming Home*, Le Guin in an anthology of essays (*Dancing at the Edge of the World*), especially, her explicit discussion of Utopian literature in "A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be", presents a strategy for reviving the utopian genre, using the Daoist philosophy. "Utopia has been Euclidean, it has been European, and it has been masculine," Le Guin writes and suggests that "our final loss of faith in that radiant sandcastle may enable our eyes to adjust to a dimmer light and in it perceive another kind of utopia" (Dancing, 1997, p. 88). According to the Daoist perspective, nature is not anything external to us but rather a mindset that is interconnected within us. The two principal texts of Daoism are Laozi and Zhuangzi which emphasise the inherent characteristics of objects and living things. The moral guidance provided in the Daoist texts is based on a deep reverence for all life's manifestations. According to James Miller, the Laozi realise us that without taking into account the overall state of the ecosystems, humans cannot act in ways that are beneficial to themselves. They also maintain the belief that nature is a dynamic system of life-sustaining processes with the fundamental quality of self-determination (Miller, 2015, p. 4-10). The evolving structure of yang and yin, which stand for the ups and downs of a kind of the heartbeat of the universe (Brunskow, 2017), respectively, may be what most people associate with the Daoist world. Hence, the universe is viewed as an organism that continually regenerates and renews itself. Le Guin needs a positive description of a new kind of utopia, and proposes yin, as related to the yang characteristics of the Western utopian tradition. Here, Le Guin proposes that "we must return, go round, go inward, go inward" (Le Guin, *Dancing*, 1997, p. 90). A "yin utopia" would look totally different than the yang ones: "It would be dark, wet, obscure, weak, yielding, passive, participatory, circular, cyclical, peaceful, nurturant, retreating, contracting, and cold" (Le Guin, *Dancing*, 1997, p. 90).

Always Coming Home begins with the quail's song that highlights the interconnected relational lifestyle of Ecotopian people. It shows how civilisation will 'rise' and 'run' in the symbolic figure of

quail (Le Guin, 1986, P. 3). Le Guin composes two contrasting social worlds – the Kesh and the Condors (Hanafy, 2014, p. 3). The Kesh culture is presented as a yin ecotopian society that is communal, matriarchal, and non-hierarchical. According to the Kesh, people must live in balance, referring to their cultural symbol, the “heyiya-if.” The symbol of wholeness consists of five colours: red, green, blue, yellow, and black. The right arm symbolises eternity, representing white, and the left arm represents mortality (Le Guin, 1986, p. 47). The connotation of this symbol includes “sacredness, hinge, connection, spiral, center, praise, and change” (Le Guin, 1986, P. 50). The “heyiya-if” presents the sacred interconnectivity of people and natural elements. It is the path of relational rather than hierarchical. The Kesh people are a mixture of agriculturalists, hunters, and collectors of food. They had no faith, no belief in any gods, and no deity. They seemed to have possessed a useful ‘working metaphor’ (Le Guin, 1986, p. 55). They have a strong respect for nature. The fundamental principle of Kesh culture is the interconnectedness of all things in nature, which is devoid of gender inequality and values non-human things. In Kesh, all names have meanings related to the natural world. The character Stone Telling mentioned that her “mother was named Towhee, Willow, and Ashes... In Sinshan babies’ names often come from birds, since they are messengers”, (Le Guin, 1986, p. 8) even her first name was North Owl. The people of the valley named as Sky, Rainbow, Sun, Stars, and Oceans (Le Guin, 1986, p. 49). In Kesh culture house is the matrilineal property; women have the right whether they allow men to live with them or not. Their houses are divided into five categories as Obsidian, Serpentine, Blue Clay, Yellow and Red Adobe, and all are completely tied to nature. There is no hierarchal power and class structure among living beings. Here, all creatures—animals, plants, and people—are seen as species rather than as individuals, with humans being regarded as a tribe, people, or species, along with the majority of bird species, the deceased, and the unborn (Le Guin, 1968, p. 49). In fact, by taking care of nature from any actions that could harm it, the Kesh civilization has demonstrated its loyalty to nature through its way of life. It has been noticed that nature is more of a friend to humans than a place to rule over (Hanafy, 2014, p. 3). The Kesh people firmly believe that if nature is treated well, it can satisfy humanity's longing for peaceful coexistence. Because of their appreciation for nature, Kesh uses less science and technology. Marius de Geus defines ecotopia as a society in which happiness is found not through material prosperity but through "a conscious relinquishment of material pleasures and the restraining of human wants" (De Geus, 2002, p. 189). People in Kesh believe that humans are always at the root of natural disasters, and that man is the main culprit responsible for the degradation of the environment. Essentially, Kesh people are very generous in nature. The ownership is never going to be the personal property of a single person, instead belongs to the entire society as long as happiness, misery, and prosperity have been shared with everyone in the Valley. Because the Kesh culture is renowned for its emphasis on equity in all spheres of life, they hold a strong belief in supporting one another in all circumstances. The Kesh concept of property differed significantly from ours, as it believed that wealth was not in things but in the act of giving, rather than in the possessions of one's house, town, and people. This differed from our understanding of property ownership (Le Guin, 1986, p. 112). The poem “Come among the unsown grasses” highlights the connection between humans and nature, describing the beauty of unsown grasses, oaks, and sweet roots in unploughed earth. It also mentions the presence of deer, fish, and quail in the meadows, which are food for humans but we have to take care of them also (Le Guin, 1986, p. 76).

The Yang-type patriarchal Condor culture, in contrast, views nature and women as things to be subjugated. The patriarchal culture of the condor strongly disagrees with gender equality. As a male-dominated society, Condor culture constantly attempts to oppress women and nature in order to advance civilization. As a result, nature and environmental issues are left untreated there.

The three poems of Pandora by Le Guin encapsulate the key Daoist principles discussed in the book. The first poem describes the Kesh utopia using Daoist imagery of water. It describes how we coexist with animals and plants, eating them, expressing gratitude to them, and dying with them. Water becomes a metaphor for blending in with nature rather than trying to dominate it. The second poem, "Newton Did Not Sleep Here," compares this worldview to Western Enlightenment values, emphasizing the importance of finding a place within nature. Pandora proposes learning to step on the rainbow and walk on the wind to reach utopia, emphasizing Daoist embeddedness in the world. The third poem diagnoses the Enlightenment mentality as "single-minded" and missing the sense of wholeness characteristic of the Kesh/Daoist worldview. The Daoist environmental sensibility is evident in the imaginative restructuring of our relationship with nature, ensuring that nature cannot be seen mechanically or as something outside of us.

Tehanu:

Tehanu (1990) was written purposefully breaking away from the fantasy tradition with a unique tone and subject. It is a simple story of a middle-aged widow named Tenar and her adopted daughter Therru's living on a farm rather than an exciting tale of magic and adventure. The conclusion of the Earthsea saga is marked by celebrations of the reunification of people and dragons, the equality of the sexes in terms of power, and humanity's ultimate fusion with the ecosystem. This book ends on a Taoist note: "We broke the world to make it whole," which is the echo of transgressive utopian philosophy. Influenced by feminist thoughts Le Guin feels that it is the responsibility of a woman writer to "discover, invent, make our own [women's] truths, our values, ourselves" (Language, 1979, p.142). Tenar's caring experiences and her deep bond with Therru, who represents the idea of a "womanself" that is tightly associated with "the uncontrollable, animal, unclean," allow Le Guin to create an ecotopian society with women's truths and ideals (Dancing, 1997, p.117) (Tsai, 2003, p.163). The plot of Tehanu begins with Therru, who was beaten, raped, and burned by her father. Tenar raised the deformed Therru as her own daughter, treating her with affection. The name "Tenar" derives from the Latin 'tenere', which means "to have, to hold, to keep"(McLean, 1997, p.112). And Tenar's usage name is Gosha, which means "a little white web-spinning spider" (Tehanu, 1990, p.1). Spider-Woman is a grandmother character from American mythology who creates a web of life that connects everything on Earth. In this dragon-people story, Le Guin mentioned the tragic truth in modern society that humans have isolated themselves from nature. Tenar's relationship with Therru (half human, half dragon), implies that woman's freedom cannot be separated from the liberation of the downtrodden and the wild. Therru, a deformed girl, is described as an animal with ugly scars due to an evil act. The deformed Therru resembles a 'horny-skinned wild animal' (Tehanu, 1990, p.199). Tenar reassures Therru that despite having ugly scars from an evil act, she is not ugly or evil, but beautiful, as she believes (Tehanu, 1990. P.182). Tenar also assures Therru that he is beautiful and can work, walk, run, and dance beautifully. Therru's name comes from a Kargish word meaning "burning," causing him to lose one eye and turn one hand into a claw. Therru's unseeing eye looks into an alternate reality and the normal one sees human reality. McLean interprets that "she can integrate wisdom

and power, reason and feeling action and caring ...because she is part dragon... a symbol of nature, of wildness and freedom and anger" (Mclean, 1997, p.113). Therru's badly burnt bone on her cheek implies two figures, one of an animal, the other representing a human figure. Even she never cried; perhaps her tears had been scorched out of her. The flame that emerges from Tenar's hair and the fire which burns Therru, represents both the primordial fire of the star Tehanu, the Arrow in the sky, and the rage with which Tenar confronts the darkest aspects of patriarchy (Bhanu, 2007). Tehanu's transformation into the powerful dragon will cause social and structural changes to Earthsea, which will result in the terraforming of a new conceptual land. Tehanu's power is not solely used for individualist ends; it also leads to a collective transformation that Tehanu is able to bring about through the application of her ability to affect all of Earthsea (Bhanu, 2007).

Tenar had the option of becoming a magician, but instead, she married a farmer and started a family. She expressed, "I could be dressed up as a warrior, with a lance and a sword and a plume and all, but it wouldn't fit, would it? What would I do with a sword? Would it make me a hero? I'd be myself in clothes that didn't fit [...]" (Tehanu, 1990, p. 95). Tenar's comments questioned the authority of male knowledge and the heroic values of war which ultimately creates discrimination and violence. Tenar had abandoned the knowledge and abilities that Ogion had bestowed upon her. However, she decided to hold the power and authority of a woman (Tehanu, 1990, p. 34). She is fully aware of the fact that no man is capable of being her guide. She is well aware that being a wife, a farmer's wife, a mother, and a householder entail exercising the authority that was bestowed upon her by mankind (Tehanu, 1990, p. 34). She becomes a housewife "doing what a woman should do: bed, breed, bake, cook, clean, spin, sew, serve" (Tehanu, 1990, p. 31). But she expressed her objection firmly- "And are those not true arts, needful and noble? Is wisdom all words?" (Tehanu, 1990, P. 133). She chooses the non-heroic domestic life but society does not value the ordinary life, specifically as lived by women (Rawls, 2008, p.133). Tenar seems to be challenging the concepts and values of mainstream society by her own decision. Here, Le Guin defines a woman's strength from her personal experience of daily reality, her nurturing power, and her relationship with others. Through Ged's diminishing magical power, which doesn't include competition, conquering, or ordering others around, Le Guin strives to redefine what it means to be strong. Ged got an opportunity to experience family life when his power of magic was lost. From it, he learns the wisdom that only women will know from their caring service. This is the kind of magic that women do under the name of 'caring for a family and domestic work.' Joan Tronto states that women are assigned the service of "caring for" children, the old, and the sick, while men are credited for "caring about" such romantic ideals as "the prosperity of the family (Tronto, 1989, p. 172-88)." Le Guin tries to support the unique wisdom that women gain from "doing what they must do". Le Guin places Tenar in a universe where she can rely on nothing but her own experience as a woman. She builds an Ecotopian society where the enterprises are owned and controlled by the women.

Many significant interpretations of women's magic and abilities are found in Tehanu. It is supposed that "wizardry was a man's work, a man's skill; magic was made by men. There had never been a woman mage" (Tehanu, 1990, p. 36). If women are skilled in wizardry, then women are condemned as "Weak as women's magic; wicked as women's magic", a well-known saying of the Earthsea series. Women are treated as weak, evil and marginalized. Tehanu reveals the blatant

reality of gender inequality and discrimination based on social hierarchy. Moss tells Tenar that a woman's magic is older than a man's:

"Who knows where a woman begins and ends?... I have roots deeper than this island. Deeper than the sea, older than the raising of the lands" (Tehanu, 1990, p. 52).

Women were never given any training of magic. Moss proclaims that she is a mage of without book-learning- "All my learning's in the earth, in the dark earth" (Tehanu, 1990, p. 53), a commentary on the sacred relationship with nature and extensive ignorance of the men in power. "What is a woman's magic?" Characters in *Le Guin* asks. "What is a man's?" Witch Moss responds that women have powerful magic. It all has roots. It resembles a mature blackberry thicket. And a wizard's power is perhaps like that of a majestic, tall fir tree that will easily be uprooted by a storm. Women's magic is like a blackberry bramble that cannot be killed by anything (Tehanu, 1990, p. 100).

Moss's voice and bright red eyes challenge patriarchal power structures, stating that no one knows where a woman begins and ends, and that no one can define her power. She believes that women's power is deeper than trees, islands, and the moon and that no one can say where it begins or ends (Tehanu, 1990, p. 59). Tenar, who lacks much of the skills of a wizard, meets the oldest dragon face-to-face during a confrontation. She had been told that "men must not look into a dragon's eyes, but that was nothing to her" (Tehanu, 1990, P. 38), indicating that she is also devoid of their awareness. By showing a woman's world, hobbies, magic, and issues from Tenar, the hero of *Tombs* who is now a middle-aged widow, Tehanu restores the equilibrium. Women of diverse ages and occupations are depicted - even the witch Ivy, who despises Tenar—are sympathetic. The men, on the other hand, appear to be weak and vision-limited, even when they have the best of intentions, misogynistic, depraved, and vicious when they give in to positive evil, as in the cases of Handy, who has burned and raped his own daughter, and Aspen the wizard, who tortures both Ged and Tenar in a sadistic manner (ursulakleguin.com). Susan Mclean highlights Tehanu's attempt to challenge patriarchy by exposing its dark side and proposing an alternative women's power system (Macleane, 1997, p. 110). By definition, magic violates the laws of nature. It must be regarded as distinct from nature in order to perform magic. As magic is no longer present, the author of the text invites the reader to acknowledge how magnificent nature is as a source of magic. Now Ogion's magic books are useless to Ged. At the conclusion of the novel, Tenar realizes that she has left the books at home even though she has long since rejected magic. Nothing seems to matter. Therru, who might be the next Archmage, wants to plant a peach tree realised that the natural environment is more important than the supernatural. The novel ends with a discussion of as usual ordinary life with the easy activities that must be completed to maintain life. It's more crucial to start a vegetable garden than to learn magic.

Conclusion:

When *Le Guin* was asked whether she would write books on 'terrible injustice and misery' or on 'escapist and consolatory fantasies', she told in a roundabout way that "I am offered the Grand Inquisitor's choice. She asserts that one would choose freedom without happiness or happiness without freedom, but she believes that the only possible response is 'no' (Dancing, 1997, p. 98). *Le Guin* always maintains a harmonious developmental approach to society building rather than the monological, hierarchal approach that dominates others. Her utopian concept forged new

alliances empowering all, though imaginaries but celebrates a vision and foregrounding of harmonious society. Jameson argues that the Utopian form is 'a representational meditation on radical difference', otherness, and the systematic nature of social totality. It is difficult to imagine fundamental changes in our existence without igniting 'Utopian visions like sparks from a comet' (Jameson, 2005, p.12). In Ecotopian novels, a non-hierarchical relational society developed harmoniously with human beings and environment. These two ecotopian novels of Le Guin reflect on the web of life, and the interconnectedness with nature. To her, Ecotopia is a female-dominated stable-state government as she encourages each of us to imagine our own Utopia. The Ecotopian always achieves a harmoniously strong relationship. As in Callenbach's ecotopian woman Mariss, who "[She] is in tune with herself, her own biological being" (Callenbach, 1990, p.106). And at the end of Watson's diary, he writes "A new self has been coming to life within me here" (Callenbach, 1990, p.166). Indeed, the Ecotopian concept changed the patriarchal mindset and slowly transformed people into an egalitarian. Her altered yin utopian concept certainly empowered all. According to Andrew G. Kirk 'Ecotopia melded the counter-culture lifestyle and social values with a strange brew of libertarian thinking, collectivism, states' rights, and technologically enthusiastic environmentalism'(Pak, 2016, p.134). Furthermore, the ecofeminist goal can be fulfilled in the ecotopian concept. Nowadays, multiple ideological concepts are connected to Eco-Utopian philosophy. Utopia is the process of making a better world, the name for one path history can take, a dynamic, tumultuous, agonizing process, with no end. Struggle forever (Robinson, 2013, p. 95).

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