

## **Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction**

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### **Discussion On Ecoprecarity and Ecodystopias - II**

Alright, so we are back. Yes Anna, you wanted to respond to Sharad's point about genetic mutations and humans who no longer remain humans, that was in conjunction with the point we were making that nature seems to return several of these eco-dystopian texts where once humanity is either reduced to nothing, non-entities not in control or decimated in large segments of the Earth's territories and nature comes to reclaim it, but you had something to say. Go on.

Yeah, I'm thinking of an example actually from a text which I don't, it qualifies somewhat as an eco-dystopia but not entirely which is *Clay's Ark* again, Octavia Butler which also features genetic mutations except that over here because, one, Earth is anyway gone for a toss and as always there are all these marauders who are wandering over the landscape and that's also one of those features like you said when you said landscape you always have thugs and hooligans who will be wandering around and they will have access to some fuel, some ammunition, they also will have access to some food and this we see also in McCarthy's *Road* where you have people who have holed up in houses and they are also doing certain other things, which I want to come back to later on as well, but when you look at say, *Clay's Ark* and you see these genetic mutations, it's also because of a virus which is there and the human changes. Now one of the ways in which I used to think about it was also that because the version of the human that lived till now made such a mess of things then this genetically mutated human that has come to be which has elements from in the case of *Clay's Ark*, a virus, which has come in from outside the Earth and which has made its presence felt in these people. It creates children who have extraordinary skills so in some ways, super children, but they also have features of the animal integrated into them. So, I don't know whether you both of you remember this but so you'll have children who have the speed of wild cats and then you have children who have exaggerated properties of hearing or sight and so on and so forth. Now, in many ways it responds to the idea of the human as we know it today, fallible, limited and it augments that human but also makes it more animal like and if we were to go with the idea not just of vulnerabilities but also of the posthuman, then it fits neatly over there because in a world that is posthuman, how do you see a human who has melted into

himself or herself elements from the animal world as well and that is a dystopic, eco-dystopic feature as well because if you think of the human as having lost precedence and having lost his primacy of place then here you have animals coming together with the human and it's fascinating in *Clay's Ark* because those are the children who are then able to save their populations when there are attacks from outside as well. So, it fits into that eco-dystopic paradigm.

That's quite interesting because also the question is why do we assume human evolution will continue the way it is up to this point that the future of human evolution does not necessarily mean we cannot merge with other species. It's this species cosmopolitanism that I have argued about as a feature of the posthuman school of thought but it also means that we are addressing a question that theorists have looked at as we no longer can think of humans as autonomous creatures but we lead entangled lives and novelists like Octavia Butler emphasize the fact that in *Clay's Ark*, for instance, that there are certain "purely" human characteristics then there are purely animal characteristics but the future means that they will it will no longer be possible to disentangle them because the future of human evolution means the future of evolution with others borrowing some of their characteristics and losing some of ours, whether that is actually a dystopian vision or a utopian one remains open to question but Sharad might have something to say on that.

Yeah, I mean in relation to what Anna was saying there's also Octavia Butler's parable of the summer where the protagonist herself has hyper-empathy. So, if you think about augmentation of the human then empathy or the ability to feel the pain of others on a scaled-up basis that is something that we find there. I was thinking about the moral dimension of this because if you look at the road what we see is a form of resilient humanity and humanity I'm using it not just in terms of the biological characteristics of human beings as a species as we have known so far liberal humanism and that kind of anthropocentric ideology but if you think about the fact that while there is so much devastation and while there's and I think I'm anticipating or stealing from Anna's point over here there's cannibalism around there is a possibility of some people eating of children to survive on the other hand so that would be pedophagy, I think is the technical term for this. On the other hand, there's so much tenderness and affection in this father-son relationship and they are archetypal characters almost, right, because the man and the boy are never named so they become almost representative or emblematic of the last remnant of humanity in terms of the father-son relationship and that being one of nurture and ethic of care. So the while the father looks out for and looking is very central to the entire novel he's always looking through the binoculars also, he's also caring for and care you know caring for the child the child also cares back, so it's also a relation of reciprocity where he says that "I'm not going to drink the coke alone you will have to partake of it" so those little elements of something that remain is a remainder from the or

the residue from the older world not just in terms of the material science that we were talking about so the fact that they have that that shopping cart that they use almost like an anachronistic referent or a material reminder of what the world used to be and could be also you know a hint at the excesses of consumerism, if that becomes a kind of an icon for that. But what remains or what survives is also this form of resilient humanity which is to do with caring for the child and child caring back for the parent in opposition to or in contrast with a general landscape where there is the possibility of people eating one another up. So, I thought the moral dimension of the ethics of care is also something that we might be able to relate to in addition to what we are looking at in terms of the bodily or the sensory changes that take place in the category of the human.

But it's also interesting to have the child there because the dystopian novels also think in terms of continuity where for example the father is dying, clearly is ill, or the let us expand it to other texts the older generation on the verge of death is sick etc. and the question of the human race not continuing becomes more and more important. I'm thinking of novels like PD James's *Children of Men* and the question even in the Dan Brown which is not actually an eco-dystopian novel *Inferno* where sterility has been induced in the human race through a virus it's a population control mechanism etc. But in all those cases the worry is about the human race continuing and hence the child becomes central and Anna mentioned *Clay's Ark* before but there also the children are important they're absolutely crucial at the heart of it is how do you take care of the child so the point about care is wonderful what Sharad said but it's also something to do with the "child is the father of the man", "the child is the marker of continuity" and things like that over to you Anna.

Yeah, so we are talking about the child we talked about the father and then there is of course the question of the woman in all of these dystopias because there's of course the iconic *Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood's big one over there. But in recent years I think about the last 10 years there has been a particular flurry of dystopias which feature worlds wherein reproductive rights are severely curtailed for women as in the Atwood story and the control over a woman's reproductive biology is in the hands of either men or other women and how in that context children are seen as of course continuity and all of that but there are also hardly any children left so I've been reading some of these and there is this one called *The Carhullan Army* which begins with this world dystopic, eco-dystopic as well, where the world has changed completely, people are no longer able to reproduce as easily as they seem to have done in past eras and so on and so forth but also that the government controls who will reproduce at what time and what kinds of people who should be reproducing etc. The interesting part over there is that the women set out to build their own commune so they escape from this very dystopic world and they go into they have their own little farm, higher out of reach, it's also of course an armed

guarded setup men are invited occasionally but they do not form part of the commute and over there what happens to the child because the child, like you said, is of course about continuity, there is the ethical notion of care for the child. But what happens also and this is something that actually all the ecod-utopias also feature that women are always prey in there. Everybody is prey but women are particularly prey right? So if you remember the *Parables* which Sharad also referred to which we spoke about earlier as well so in the first *Parable* even as Lauren is walking, there is always the fear that the marauders the thugs they will take away the women, they also take away young boys so we're back to the idea of the child and the woman, the vulnerable, the particularly vulnerable, if you will, in an ecodystopia, or a dystopia, for that matter.

Yeah and the question of reproductive rights and the control over the woman's body as becoming a state enterprise which would be say the state of in *Handmaid's Tale*, which is where much of this originates. So the right over the rights over the body the rights over reproduction and the rights of what progeny you might produce and this is particularly a point and scene in *Handmaid's Tale* where I think it's Offred who says "yeah but and there will be family pictures but we won't be a part of them" so the idea of the family where the woman has been literally "used" to ensure the continuity of the family and is still not part of the family but Sharad would share something to add to that?

Yeah so I was thinking about how if we if you were to think about the *Handmaid's Tale* the text that both of you just referred to there is a motion of the decline rates of fertility and that is seen as a specifically gendered problem so it is the women who are considered to be barren and not men who are sterile and if a man is supposed to be sterile it's spoken about in hushed tones, it's not out in the open. So we see that there is that idea of a certain natural degradation in what is assumed to be a biological feature of the humans as a species, of capacity to reproduce, and that thing is located in the gendered human body specifically the female human body so the natural or the degradation of natural characteristics is then located in the woman's body so the woman's body becomes a site and the product of such perceived degradation. There's an object also, it becomes an object of fascist control, in the sense that then the woman's body is valued only in terms of the biological labor that it performs and it undergoes what is supposedly a process of denaturalization so her body then becomes only valuable and it becomes a transactional object in terms of a subjugation as within the patriarchal setup. So we see that if natural degradation is something that we see as being symptomized in the woman's body then it is also something that can be brought back within the patriarchal economy as a product that can be utilized so there is a "re-socialization" and a "re-naturalization" of the woman's body, within quotation marks, because then it is seen differently.

And the re-naturalization is actually a state enterprise, in the sense of the investment in the woman's body and reproduction is a state policy actually how it has to be done. But in most of these eco-dystopias, therefore, the question of eugenics actually comes back in a certain way. This is actually eugenics being returned to us in a slightly different modified form but essentially saying that the state will monopolize and control who can give birth and into what kind and what kind of children should be allowed to continue. So, continuity is of course a major theme. The problem is that the next generation that comes in the progeny in such texts will be inheriting an earth which is more or less unlivable and where they begin afresh so what does that suggest that it suggests going back to point zero, more or less, where technology is lost, agricultural practices have been abandoned, we no longer have fuel all the things that made humanity and civilization what it is have been erased or eroded or have just been unworkable anymore so in that case when the children appear on the scene, so to speak, this is the world they inherit. So is it a kind of optimism also being inscribed into what is otherwise a severely dysfunctional, non-functional world?

If I may? So when we think of these words that these children inherit and if you think about Gilead and Atwood's Gilead where these children who are born are going to be still functioning within this world and her sequel to that *The Testaments* wherein she had children who grew up within that regime encultured within that, indoctrinated within that, and learning only that way of life. But there are also the other ones where these children who grow up in these eco-dystopias find that even their lives are severely curtailed, liable to be ended abruptly, and I think Pramod might have read this. This was an old Neal Shusterman book called *Unwind*, which was also located in an eco-dystopia and it was about how children who don't fit in terms of their ethics, morals, their conduct, their attitudes, after a certain age and they're allowed to grow till they are I think 18 or 15 I forget now but they're allowed to grow up to a point and then they can be unwound for their body parts each of their body parts will be taken out and they can be given to other people whom they will fit better. It's a fascinating idea because what we are also speaking about is, in continuation of Sharad's earlier point about care, we are talking about caring for these children in these dystopic worlds which are short of, short of everything, right. So they don't have enough food they don't have enough of anything except for the governing community which of course lives in comparative plenty but the others struggle and in their struggles you have these children who then who they don't fit in can be unwound so that their body parts can be used for those of others and when you think of care and when you think of how the traditional customary stereotypical aspect of caring for children and the ethics of care for ethics of care for children, many of these eco-dystopic and dystopic texts overturn that aspect of care completely where the child has to struggle. I'm sure all of you remember *The Hunger Games* and the kind of flutter it caused in the Dovecote because it showed children fighting gladly at her life and those

were, again, children who have to fight if their families have to survive. So the eco-dystopia does not only render vulnerable the adult, it of course, always renders vulnerable those who are the most precarious of them all, the children and women, and many of these dystopias are focusing upon the fact that children who are seen as deviant from the dominant modes of being do not deserve to live. And the *Unwind* text made this particularly gruesome because they showed this happening. Children being operated on, kept conscious till the end, and operated on, so that they could then be broken up into individual parts. Pramod's eugenics carried to its logical extreme, in one sense that even after.

Yeah and you are selecting, no, it's actually a selection process isn't it, who will survive and of course, most importantly for what purpose will they be allowed to survive. It is also to do with a very odd turn to eugenics because this is also kind of commodification. their body parts and the best example would be *Never Let Me Go*, of course, which is not actually speaking either sci-fi or eco-dystopia, it's dystopian, because it's science fiction without the science in many ways and there too it's the commodification and commodification of the human form the human body of the human body parts is now a more or less legal enterprise by the state, which is also the case with *The Handmaid's Tale* because trafficking in organs organ transplantation is not illegal because it is part of the state policy to ensure that people stay alive and so on so forth so that's quite interesting because if you are think we have as you can see we have moved quite a bit from species cosmopolitanism to this. But Sharad, would you have anything to say to Anna's point about children and care, which she extended your point?

Yeah so I was also thinking about *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro's cult novel, and we see that it's taken of course to its logical extreme where these kids, when they grow up they also try to find the original so to speak who they have been cloned from and the idea of the family then I mean even if you're derived from in a certain biological sense or a scientific sense from a parent, you do not necessarily have the parent-child relationship, in fact it is conspicuous by its absence the fact that these children grow up in a kind of an orphanage type setting. We also think about the terms that are used the language itself so that the organs are harvested or these children these so the term that is used in Ishiguro's text is "harvesting" if you think about Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* one particular term that stood out for me is that the world is "interstate". Now that term has so many connotations right ,so if you have not made it well as a parent then you have been not responsible enough also it will imply that there's nothing to leave behind which is why you're not bothered to make a will what do you leave behind is also important then what kind of world will these children inherit so that particular term it just stood out for me through in the entire book what does it then mean to not leave a will to not have something to leave behind because what you had is anyway completely lost so if we were talking about

memory also, right? So he he's aware of the fact that his child the boy will never experience the world that he remembers that this is a completely different world and he will not live into the world that this child will grow up in, if he does grow up. He is trying very hard to ensure that he is not killed or eaten up but then we see that this idea about being interstate works at so many levels then in terms of parental responsibility as well as in terms of what you leave behind.

Yeah and the educational possibilities of this in McCarthy's *The Road*, which is the text all three of us come back to all the time, he says something about the words no longer being available because the things that they represented: the birds, the colors, the objects which the words described are no longer around. So, there's no referential purpose to language, so the language will die because what it signifies makes practically no sense, which also means that the question of care and continuity hinges on a re-education program, which sounds suspiciously close to what the totalitarian states did in the early 20th century. And the kind of regimes which believe that children should be brought up into a certain ideological formation and if you look at texts like Butler's the *MaddAddam* trilogy, the Butler one would be talking about Earthseed and a new religion there again the question of eco-distribution hinges on what have we learned from our pasts and how would we re-educate the next generation in, say, the ways of the world. Anna, anything to add to this?

Yeah I was thinking actually that seems to be a good progression if you move from eco-dystopia to a kind of utopic enterprise which would be what you see in Becky Chambers' *A Psalm For The Well-Built* so it's this duology which has I mean I am not really sure what the second book is called but the first one which is *A Psalm For The Well-Built* and it's actually just a novella, in that you have a world wherein they have learned from all the mistakes of the past and the world that they have created is one where still no fuel, so they don't use fossil fuels, they don't have rampant consumerism. There is the gender question which dominates so much of the dystopic worlds that we read about in literature that has been taken apart because you have you have all these pronouns at work so you can have "he", "she", "it", "they" and you can pick your pronouns so you're not limited. Fluid gender identities are made powerful, of course, there is a return to an earlier less industrialized world ,so you do have things like 3D printers, but you also have the simple farming life and you have the return, in large parts of the world, they are kind of not maybe fenced off, but they are restricted you cannot build there you cannot live there they are given over given back to the wild. So when we think about the equal dystopia and the impossibility much of these equal dystopias or many of these equal dystopia seem to believe that it is impossible for us to learn. But Becky Chambers' duology also tells us that there is the possibility of learning and learning to live in simpler more humane ways more eco-friendly ways so that the world and you flourish together. It's very difficult to

think about when you read the kinds of books like *The Road* or the earlier Nevil Shute or *The Last Man* any of these ones because when you look at them, you're like "mankind is doomed", which is of course our favorite point. But you read the Chambers book and you actually think maybe we will learn that there is the possibility of learning to live in a world which is more equitable which does not try to unwind children or to die interstate, the point that Sharad made, that you can make a will that will leave a better world for those whom you leave behind. It's lovely I mean still in the realm of fiction not fact I guess.

Yeah, before I hand it to Sharad for the final remarks yes, it's interesting to see how our discussion has progressed from eco-dystopias to ecotopias, which is the term used to describe the Chambers work and an earlier novel of that same title the term originates in the title of the novel 70s 80s work called *Ecotopia* and the myth shall we say of a better world that we leave it to. But final remarks to Sharad and we will close. Sharad?

No I mean while there's this idea of being able to rebuild a world that is in some senses more human although you alter the anthropocentrism of that human if you're thinking about a more ecologically balanced way of living there's another part to this and that is either you think that the world is completely doomed and there's nothing we can do about it and because we are only one of so many billions who are doing it so anything we do will not make a change to something that is so massive so that's the idea of the sublime, the hyper object which climate change itself is. Or you have another route again in mainstream popular Hollywood kind of cinema and that is the route of escape you escape into another world you abandon this one so then you have something like even a more sophisticated film than *The Day After Tomorrow* would be *Interstellar* where you, again, because the earth itself is so ecologically devastated that crops are failing, you have the last crop of okra being referred to, that you leave for another world literally and you find some form of a wormhole to go through so there's that root also that popular culture takes of actually just abandoning the mess that we have created and going to another place. The opposite of this would be something like *Don't Look Up* although it is not an eco-dystopia, where they do manage to escape earth and travel for I don't know how many light across how many light years and land in a habitable planet except to find that there are these monstrous creatures that then gobble them up, so they literally eat up the survivors. So, there's that kind of an odd sort of an ending to that also. I don't know if this ends very well with the trying to perform discussions, we have been having so far but I just wanted to say that there's an escape route also that a lot of these...

That is actually quite interesting because terraforming as it is called is a big theme in a lot of ecological dystopian novels I think it's also there as part of the Octavia Butler series where they are headed for another planet and you can think of say *Solaris* which



inaugurates there's also a Stanley Kubrick film and much of what's happening now including *Dune*, the notion, the idea, the myth, the fantasy of another planet which we can occupy. But, of course, the possibility remains that we'll muck up that planet as much as we have done here. So, thank you both for some fascinating discussion moving from eco-dystopias to ecotopias I'm going to stop recording here now, okay. Thank you.