

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATURE AND HUMANITY IN URSULA LE GUIN'S
SPECULATIVE FICTION

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Annotatsiya

Mazkur maqolada Ursula K. Le Guinning fantastik asarlari -- Vaster than Empires and More Slow (1971) va The Word for World is Forest (1972) -- da o'rmon tafakkuri, ekologik imperializm va noinson sezuvchanlik masalalari ilmiy-tanqidiy nuqtayi nazardan tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqot Val Plumwoodning hyper-separation konsepsiyasi, o'simlik ko'rliqi nazariyasi va Suzanne Simardning mikoriza tarmoqlari haqidagi kashfiyotlari bilan qiyosiy o'rganish asosida ko'rib chiqadi. Maqolada Le Guinning badiiy texnikasi -- perspektiv o'zgarishi, metaforik tildan foydalanish va empatik aloqa modeli -- ekologik etikani shakllantirish vositasi sifatida baholanadi. Natijalar shuni ko'rsatadiki, Le Guinning fantastik tasavvuri insonning tabiatga nisbatan instrumentalistik munosabatini tanqid qilish va o'rmonlarni murakkab, faol va sezuvchan tizim sifatida anglashga undash uchun noyob badiiy-falsafiy imkoniyat yaratadi.

Kalit so'zlar: ekologik imperializm, o'rmon tafakkuri, sezuvchanlik, hyper-separation, plant blindness, mikoriza tarmoqlari, postkolonial ecocriticism, Ursula K. Le Guin.

Abstract

This article provides a critical analysis of forest consciousness, ecological imperialism, and non-human sentience in Ursula K. Le Guin's Vaster than Empires and More Slow (1971) and The Word for World is Forest (1972). The study examines the relationship between nature and humanity through a comparative lens, drawing on Val Plumwood's concept of hyper-separation, the theory of plant blindness, and Suzanne Simard's research on mycorrhizal networks. The paper evaluates Le Guin's literary techniques -- perspective shift, metaphorical language, and the model of empathic contact -- as instruments for cultivating ecological ethics. The findings demonstrate that Le Guin's speculative imagination offers a unique artistic-philosophical framework for critiquing the instrumentalist treatment of nature and for repositioning forests as complex, agential, and potentially sentient systems.

Keywords: ecological imperialism, forest consciousness, sentience, hyper-separation, plant blindness, mycorrhizal networks, postcolonial ecocriticism, Ursula K. Le Guin.

INTRODUCTION

Ursula K. Le Guin's works of speculative fiction have attracted sustained scholarly attention not merely as literary phenomena but as philosophical and ecological texts that engage with some of the most pressing problems of our time.⁸⁸ Her two novellas published in 1971 and 1972 -- Vaster than Empires and More Slow and The Word for World is Forest -- reframe the subject of the forest

⁸⁸Dobrzynski, D. (2022). Thinking Forests in Ursula K. Le Guin. Journal of Literature and Science, 15(1), 44-58. The author provides a rigorous philosophical and ecological analysis of forest consciousness and sentience.

in an entirely new register: the forest in these works transcends its conventional function as setting and emerges as a complex, agential, and potentially thinking entity.

These texts are contemporaneous with Le Guin's active participation in the American anti-war movement of the 1960s and 1970s. As the author herself acknowledged, the practice of deforestation and the policy of ecocide during the Vietnam War exerted a direct influence on her creative work.⁸⁹ In the context of accelerating globalisation, these concerns have acquired renewed urgency: deforestation now ranks among the primary drivers of the biodiversity crisis and anthropogenic climate change.

The aim of the present study is to examine the themes of forest consciousness and ecological imperialism in Le Guin's two novellas through a comparative engagement with contemporary ecological theory. The investigation is organised around three central research questions: Through what literary techniques does Le Guin articulate forest sentience? By what philosophical and ecological criteria is Captain Davidson's instrumentalist attitude subjected to critique? And in what ways does the concept of forest consciousness intersect with contemporary scientific discovery?⁹⁰

METHODOLOGY

The present article employs a conceptual-analytical methodology. The primary texts were subjected to close reading; the methods of ecocriticism and postcolonial theory were applied throughout. The principal theoretical frameworks drawn upon are Val Plumwood's ecological philosophy,⁹¹ Suzanne Simard's research on mycorrhizal networks,⁹² Eduardo Kohn's anthropology of forest consciousness,⁹³ and the theory of plant blindness developed by Wandersee and Schussler.⁹⁴

Dion Dobrzynski's article *Thinking Forests*, published in the *Journal of Literature and Science* (2022), serves as the primary scholarly source for this study; the present paper aims to apply and extend that analysis within the Uzbek academic context. Supplementary sources include Marino (2010), Mancuso and Viola (2016), Gagliano et al. (2017), Sheldrake (2020), and Tsing (2015).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Hyper-Separation and Ecological Imperialism: The Figure of Captain Davidson

In Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest*, the figure of Captain Don Davidson embodies Val Plumwood's concept of hyper-separation in its most extreme form.⁹⁵ Davidson characterises the forests of Athshe as a 'primeval murk' and a 'tree-jumble'; he perceives the indigenous Athsheans as

⁸⁹Radkau, J. (2014). *The Age of Ecology*. Polity. The historian characterises the 1970s as an era of ecological revolution and examines the global scope of the environmentalist movement.

⁹⁰Le Guin, U. K. (2015). *The Word for World is Forest*. Gollancz. (Original work published 1972). The novella depicts the inseparable bond between forest and indigenous community under the existential threat of colonisation.

⁹¹Plumwood, V. (2002). *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. Routledge. Plumwood defines hyper-separation as the absolute severance of the human from nature within a dualistic logic.

⁹²Simard, S. (2018). *Mycorrhizal Networks Facilitate Tree Communication, Learning, and Memory*. In F. Baluska et al. (Eds.), *Memory and Learning in Plants* (pp. 191-213). Springer. Mycorrhizal networks are theorised as analogues of neurological communication systems in forest ecosystems.

⁹³Kohn, E. (2013). *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. University of California Press. The ethnographic study examines how the Runa people of the Upper Amazon are embedded in a trans-species habitus with the forest.

⁹⁴Wandersee, J. H., & Schussler, E. E. (2001). *Toward a Theory of Plant Blindness*. *Plant Science Bulletin*, 47(1), 2-9. The theory explains human inattention to plants as a convergence of biological predisposition and cultural-philosophical attitude.

⁹⁵Plumwood, V. (2002). *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. Routledge, pp. 9-10. On the concept of hyper-separation as the master logic of domination.

insensate robots or primitive animals. This attitude is grounded in the Cartesian notion of the Bete machine -- the idea that non-human animals are reflex-driven mechanisms devoid of interiority.

Plumwood defines hyper-separation as the dualistic logic by which the dominant identity preserves its supremacy by positing an absolute severance between the human and the non-human -- a severance that serves to justify domination and conquest.⁹⁶ For Davidson, this logic performs a double function: it strips the Athsheans of human attributes, while simultaneously reducing the forest to a reservoir of timber. As Zierler (2011) notes, the term 'ecocide' was coined precisely in this period -- in 1970 -- to describe the ecological devastation wrought by the defoliant Agent Orange.⁹⁷

Crucially, Le Guin presents this attitude not merely as a feature of individual psychology but as a systemic ideological formation. In the novel, women are instrumentalised as sexual objects, indigenous populations as slave labour, local fauna as game, and the forest as timber -- all of these operations converging in what Plumwood terms hegemonic centrism. This framework allows postcolonial ecocriticism to read speciesism, colonialism, and racism as structurally homologous formations sharing a common philosophical foundation.⁹⁸

2. Plant Blindness and the Shift in Perspective: Lyubov and the Apprehension of the Forest

The theory of plant blindness, developed by Wandersee and Schussler (2001), describes the inability to recognise the biological importance of plants, to appreciate their aesthetic and unique biological features, and the misguided anthropocentric ranking of plants as inferior to animals.⁹⁹ In Le Guin's fiction, this phenomenon is presented not as a character flaw unique to Davidson but as a universal problem confronting all representatives of Earth-human civilisation who arrive on Athshe.

Le Guin's most powerful literary technique is the shift in narrative perspective. In the opening chapter of the novel, the forest is rendered through Davidson's eyes -- seen from a helicopter window, at a distance -- as a dark and meaningless mass. In the second chapter, the narrative perspective plunges into the forest interior, disclosing its intricate complexity.¹⁰⁰

All the colours of rust and sunset, brown-reds and pale greens, changed ceaselessly in the long leaves as the wind blew [...] Little paths ran under the branches, around the boles, over the roots; they did not go straight, but yielded to every obstacle, devious as nerves. (Le Guin, 1972/2015, p. 27)

In this passage, the syntax itself enacts the physics of the forest: long sentences eddy around colons and semi-colons, moving like a current of water. The metaphor 'devious as nerves' lifts the forest out of the category of mere environment and likens it to a neurological system. As the ethnographer Raj Lyubov becomes increasingly immersed in Athshean culture, his relationship to

⁹⁶Plumwood, V. (2002), p. 102. Hegemonic centrism defines the dominant identity in opposition to the subordinated identity in order to justify exploitation.

⁹⁷Zierler, D. (2011). *The Invention of Ecocide: Agent Orange, Vietnam*. University of Georgia Press. The term ecocide was coined in 1970 to describe the ecological devastation wrought by defoliant warfare.

⁹⁸Huggan, G., & Tiffin, H. (2010). *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge. Postcolonial ecocriticism identifies speciesism, colonialism, and racism as structurally homologous formations.

⁹⁹Wandersee, J. H., & Schussler, E. E. (2001), p. 3. Plant blindness is defined as (a) the inability to recognise the importance of plants in the biosphere; (b) inability to appreciate their aesthetic and biological features; and (c) the anthropocentric ranking of plants as inferior to animals.

¹⁰⁰Le Guin, U. K. (2015). *The Word for World is Forest*. Gollancz, p. 27. The narrative shift from Chapter One to Chapter Two enacts an epistemological reorientation from detached anthropocentrism to ecological immersion.

the forest undergoes a corresponding transformation -- demonstrating that plant blindness, as a cultural-philosophical attitude, is susceptible to cognitive revision.¹⁰¹

3. Mycorrhizal Networks and Forest Consciousness: At the Intersection of Science and Speculative Fiction

In *Vaster than Empires and More Slow*, the forest of World 4470 possesses a biospheric sentience that emerges from the radical interconnectivity of its plant communities. This conceit resonates compellingly with the actual scientific discoveries of Suzanne Simard (2018) regarding mycorrhizal networks.¹⁰² As Simard demonstrates, the subterranean networks linking plants and fungi are homologous to neural networks: they transmit biochemical signals through synaptic-like processes, reconfigure in response to new information, and permit one to speak meaningfully of plant memory.

The ecologist Mannon, in Le Guin's narrative, advances a pivotal argument: if a neuroscientist were to examine a single axon or an isolated glial cell, that scientist would be unable to determine, from the evidence of that single unit alone, whether the larger system of which it forms a part is capable of sentience.¹⁰³ This line of reasoning coheres with Mancuso and Viola's argument that plants are dividual rather than individual entities -- divisible organisms whose component parts can survive and regenerate independently of the whole.¹⁰⁴

The progression of Osden's language in the story is itself analytically significant: he begins with 'something in the forest,' advances to 'sentient plants,' then to 'a sentience,' and finally to 'one big green thought.' This linguistic evolution registers the difficulty that human cognition and human language encounter when attempting to apprehend non-human sentience. As Gagliano et al. (2017) observe, we continue to require plants to exhibit animal-like qualities before we are prepared to acknowledge them as sensitive living organisms.¹⁰⁵

4. Empathy and Trans-Species Habitus: The Human as Constituent of the Forest System

Kohn (2013) describes the relationship between the Runa people of the Upper Amazon and the forest they inhabit as a trans-species habitus -- a shared mode of dwelling that refuses the distinction between nature and culture.¹⁰⁶ Le Guin renders the Athsheans' relationship to the forests of Athshe in precisely this key: to locate their dwellings, one must search for rooftops nestled among tree roots like badgers' setts. Their acoustic and material presence is entirely absorbed into the ecology of the forest.

The relationship between 'dream-time' (*orzular vaqti*) and 'world-time' (*dunyo vaqti*) in Athshean culture is of particular theoretical importance. In the Athshean language, the word for 'dream' is also the word for 'root' -- a linguistic fact that testifies to the imagining of the forest as a

¹⁰¹Hall, M. (2011). *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*. SUNY Press. Hall argues that plant blindness is a cultural-philosophical attitude rather than a fixed evolutionary disposition, and is therefore subject to revision.

¹⁰²Simard, S. (2018), pp. 191-213. The mycorrhizal network enables biochemical communication and adaptive reconfiguration among multiple plant and fungal species, functioning analogously to synaptic signalling in neural tissue.

¹⁰³Le Guin, U. K. (2015). *Vaster than Empires and More Slow*. In *The Wind's Twelve Quarters and The Compass Rose* (pp. 167-201). Gollancz. (Original work published 1971). The ecologist Mannon's thought experiment challenges prevailing epistemological frameworks for identifying sentience.

¹⁰⁴Mancuso, S., & Viola, A. (2016). *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence*. Island Press. The authors argue that plants are dividual rather than individual - divisible entities whose parts can survive and regenerate independently.

¹⁰⁵Gagliano, M., Ryan, J. C., & Vieira, P. (Eds.). (2017). *The Language of Plants*. University of Minnesota Press, p. 14. Plants are still expected to exhibit animal-like qualities before being acknowledged as sensitive living organisms.

¹⁰⁶Kohn, E. (2013), p. 132. The Upper Amazon rainforest constitutes a shared trans-species habitus that does not observe the distinctions we might otherwise make between nature and culture.

symbiosis between psychological interiority and biological exteriority.¹⁰⁷ When set alongside the actual functioning of mycorrhizal networks, this poetic metaphor acquires the character of a scientific proposition.¹⁰⁸

In *Vaster than Empires*, the possibility of establishing contact with the non-human through empathy is the story's central dramatic concern. Osden is initially overwhelmed by the encounter with the sentience of World 4470 -- the forest is afraid of him, and he is afraid of the forest. His eventual decision to remain on the planet enacts a model of ethical encounter grounded in the recognition of, rather than the assimilation of, radical alterity.¹⁰⁹¹¹⁰

5. Anthropomorphism and 'Useful Anthropomorphism': A Methodological Problem

Le Guin's literary technique raises a genuine methodological problem: can the representation of non-human sentience escape anthropomorphism altogether? Sheldrake (2020) crystallizes this question by asking whether anthropomorphic metaphors humanize the plant, or whether they vegetate a set of human concepts -- reversing the direction of epistemic appropriation.¹¹¹ Mike Cadden characterises Le Guin's forest-mind metaphor as an instance of 'useful anthropomorphism' - an approach that opens a space for careful and self-aware engagement with the Other, beyond mere synthesis or absolute separation.

As Dobrzynski (2022) argues, the horror of World 4470's forest derives not from human-like motivations but from its radical otherness to human consciousness.¹¹² It is precisely this otherness -- resistant to measurement by human standards -- that constitutes one of speculative fiction's most distinctive affordances: it compels the reader to step outside anthropocentric frames of reference. Tsing (2015) deploys an analogous strategy in her ethnomycology, using the Matsutake mushroom as a lens through which to re-examine the conditions of life in a post-capitalist world.¹¹³

It must be acknowledged, however, that Le Guin's approach is not without its difficulties. Ecocritics such as Latham (2007) and Garrard link Le Guin's close association of the Athsheans with the forest to the 'Ecological Indian' stereotype -- the idealisation of indigenous peoples as essentially 'closer to nature.'¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, Lyubov's self-critical observation that 'the anthropologist cannot always leave his own shadow out of the picture he draws' demonstrates that Le Guin was conscious of this danger and undertook to address it through an internal critique inscribed within the text itself.

¹⁰⁷Le Guin, U. K. (2015). *The Word for World is Forest*, p. 80. The Athshean word for dream is root - the roots of a literal tree are essential to, inseparable from, and as substantive as, its bole, branches, and leaves.

¹⁰⁸Simard, S. (2018). The discovery of transgenerational ecological memory in mycorrhizal networks offers a scientific parallel to the collective dream-ecology of the Athsheans.

¹⁰⁹Le Guin, U. K. (2015). *Vaster than Empires and More Slow*, p. 201. Osden chooses to remain on World 4470, enacting a model of ethical encounter grounded in the recognition of radical otherness rather than assimilation.

¹¹⁰Sheldrake, M. (2020). *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds and Shape Our Futures*. The Bodley Head. The symbiotic relations between fungal networks and plant communities are examined at the intersection of biology and philosophy.

¹¹¹Sheldrake, M. (2020), p. 238. Sheldrake asks whether anthropomorphic metaphors humanise plants, or vegetalise a set of human concepts - reversing the direction of epistemic appropriation.

¹¹²Dobrzynski, D. (2022), p. 53. The horror of World 4470 derives not from human-like motivations but from its radical otherness to human consciousness.

¹¹³Tsing, A. L. (2015). *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press. The ethnomycological study uses the Matsutake mushroom to map collaborative systems of relation in a pericapitalist world.

¹¹⁴Latham, R. (2007). Biotic Invasions: Ecological Imperialism in New Wave Science Fiction. *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 37(2), 103-119. The critic argues that Le Guin's close association of the Athsheans with the forest naturalises their culture rather than dismantling the nature-culture dichotomy.

CONCLUSION

Ursula K. Le Guin's *Vaster than Empires and More Slow* and *The Word for World is Forest* are exemplary artistic phenomena situated at the intersection of ecological philosophy, literary studies, and contemporary scientific discovery.¹¹⁵ These texts were born of the ecological crisis of the 1970s and reflect that decade's political and scientific debates; yet they have lost none of their urgency in the intervening half-century.

The present study has arrived at three principal conclusions. First: through the figure of Captain Davidson, Le Guin presents ecological imperialism, colonial and racist logic, and speciesism as structurally related manifestations of a single philosophical formation -- constituting a powerful artistic embodiment of Plumwood's concept of hyper-separation.¹¹⁶

Second: through the shift in narrative perspective and through the resources of literary language, Le Guin assists the reader in overcoming plant blindness -- enabling a reconceptualisation of the forest as an active, responsive entity possessed of complex interconnected systems rather than a passive backdrop to human action. This imaginative reconceptualisation has been substantially confirmed by contemporary scientific research into mycorrhizal networks.¹¹⁷¹¹⁸

Third: Le Guin's model of empathy and trans-species habitus proposes a new paradigm for ecological ethics -- one in which the human being is not an external observer of the forest but an active constituent of the forest system. This proposition finds resonance in both Kohn's ethnographic research and Simard's scientific findings, and contributes to the philosophical renewal of the case for forest conservation.¹¹⁹

In conclusion, Le Guin's speculative imagination cannot substitute for rigorous empirical method; but it constitutes a unique artistic-philosophical space within which to reconsider the terms of our relationship to forests -- a space whose importance has only grown in the context of the global ecological crisis. These works represent a body of fiction that demands deeper engagement within Uzbek literary scholarship.

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¹¹⁵Dobrzynski, D. (2022), p. 44. Reading Le Guin today has never been as important as it is now - not because her fiction prophesises scientific discoveries, but because it offers an enduringly insightful approach to the otherness of non-human sentience.

¹¹⁶Plumwood, V. (2002), pp. 4-9. Hegemonic centrism positions anthropocentrism, speciesism, colonialism, and racism as structurally equivalent formations arising from a shared dualistic logic.

¹¹⁷Simard, S. (2018), pp. 191-213. Mycorrhizal networks exhibit analogues of memory, learning, and adaptive reconfiguration that were prefigured in Le Guin's speculative fiction.

¹¹⁸Calvo, P. (2017). Are Plants Sentient? *Plant, Cell and Environment*, 40(11), 2858-2869. Contemporary plant neurobiology raises the possibility of sentient behaviour in the absence of a centralised nervous system.

¹¹⁹Kohn, E. (2013), p. 79. Kohn describes the forest as an emergent and expanding multilayered cacophonous web of mutually constitutive, living, and growing thoughts.

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