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NORDIC 'ECOTOPIA': MAPPING THE POLITICS OF 'REGION' THROUGH MAJA LUNDE'S CLIMATE DYSTOPIA, *THE END OF THE OCEAN*

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Abstract

The paper makes an inquiry into Maja Lunde's climate fiction, The End of the Ocean (2019), to investigate the politics of 'region' through the narrative trope of 'ecotopia'. It will examine the Nordic nations' dichotomous politics of environmental sustainability by focusing on Lunde's representation of Norway as a nation bisected between environmentalism and capitalist exploitation of nature in the name of economic development. The nonlinear narrative technique of the novel will be examined to explore how Lunde historicises a connection between present political inaction on global climate change and its future repercussions by weaving together two parallel stories: Norway's capitalist exploitation of nature in the late twentieth century, and the climate catastrophe that strikes the Southern and Western parts of Europe around the mid twenty-first century. The study will also offer a scope to examine the contradiction that underlies the self-proclaimed image of Nordic ecotopia through the representation of ecological crisis. From radical ecofeminist approaches, the paper will attempt to destabilise the essentialism of Eurocentric man/culture and woman/nature binaries for imagining a climatically or ecologically sustainable world. The theoretical idea of 'critical dystopia' will be pertinent in this study to examine the importance of the recurrent motif of 'catastrophe' in environmental narratives.

Keywords

Capitalism, Critical Dystopia, Ecofeminism, Ecotopia, Region, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Ecotopia is a portmanteau word derived from two distinct words: ecology and *utopia*. A utopia is an idealised state of a region where social and political harmony prevails, where justice is perfectly maintained and where sadness, pain and violence do not exist. The term 'Ecotopia' was first used by Ernest Callenbach to refer to an ecological utopia in his novel *Ecotopia* (1975). Hence, the term 'ecotopia' signifies an ecologically sustainable region where an environmental harmony between nature and culture is perfectly maintained. It is a model of a socio-political system that promotes the principles of sustainable development and calls for an ecological balance between humans and all other non-human entities (Fedak, 8). This study critiques the idea of 'ecotopia' in relation to the environmental representation of the Nordic regions. In the Scandinavian nations, the Nordic region is referred to as *Norden*, meaning 'The North'. While Scandinavia is typically used to denote Denmark, Norway, and Sweden in modern contexts, *Norden* encompasses a wider geographical and political area (Henning et al. 5). The Nordic Region encompasses five sovereign states—Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland, along with three autonomous territories: the Faroe Islands, Åland Islands and Greenland ("Facts about the Nordic Countries").

Notably, the Nordic nations represent a self-generated ecotopian image in global politics.The political leaders of the Nordic regions altruistically share the Nordic model for creating environmentally sustainable societies with the rest of the globe (Henning et al. 1).

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From Nordic Ecotopia to Eco-Dystopia:

However, this study subverts this self-serving rhetoric of eco-aware nationhood by critically examining the Norwegian author Maja Lunde's conflictual representation of environmental sustainability and material development in her novel *The End of the Ocean* (2019). In the novel, Lunde historicises Norway's environmental transformation through the female protagonist Signe. During Signe's childhood days, Norway was a pristine landscape—a perfect ecotopian region. The River Breio used to be "a luminous ribbon" (Lunde, 2). But in recent years, the Nordic countries, like the rest of the world, have gone through severe climaticconditions like floods, sea level rise and glacier melting. The unprecedented change in the global climate pattern has caught the special attention of the Norwegian writer Maja Lunde, whose novel *The End of the Ocean* depicts a bleak future in which the Nordic landscapes appear to have lost their ecotopian aura. On returning to her country after almost fifty years, Signe's childhood memory of the Norwegian landscape deceives her. For her, Norway has become a 'surreal' region because of the environmental changes, especially the glacier retreat that the country has gone through. According to Andreassen et al. (2012), Norway has the largest glacier area in mainland Europe, with 1282 glaciers covering 2692 km^2. But the Norwegian glaciers, which were for several centuries an integral part of Norwegian national identity, have been diminishing since the last decade of the twentieth century. In her novel, Lunde fictionalises this increasing loss of glaciers through the glacier Blåfonna, which was once a major attraction for both citizens and tourists, but is now beginning to disappear. Signe narrates,

> All glaciers melt, I know that, but it is something else witnessing it… the ice is still there, but not where it used to be. When I was a little girl, I walked from the edge of the glacier almost all the way to the mountain cliff where waterfalls disappeared below, where the glacier and the waterfalls were connected. But now the glacier is located high up on the mountainside. It's a long way, a hundred meters perhaps, between the cliff and the blue tongue. The glacier has moved, as if trying to escape, get away from humans (Lunde, 8).

Lunde's depiction of the increasing rate of glacier retreat serves as a salient indicator of the detrimental ecological impacts of climate change that the Nordic regions have witnessed in recent years. For instance, in 2019, a group of activists and scientists in Iceland (one of the Nordic countries) held a funeral for Okjokull, the first Icelandic glacier to be officially declared lost due to climate change (Brackett). This gradual loss of the pristine glacier signifies the vulnerability of the ecotopian image of the Nordic regions.

Moreover, the ecological depletion of the Nordic region and "the damage inflicted on the wildlife by excavation work" (Lunde, 3) becomes more poignant through Lunde's integration of the generic element of bildungsroman into the environmental narrative. Bildungsroman is "an account of the formation of a man's unique identity" (Upadhyay, 197). The employment of the bildungsroman element in a story gives the author a scope to reflect on the sociopolitical changes of a nation by focusing on the physical as well as the psychological development of the protagonist. In *The End of the Ocean*, by focusing on the development of the character Signe, Lunde highlights not only the changes that modern technological innovation has brought to the human–nature relationship, but also their ecological consequences. In Signe's childhood days, nature was unspoilt and untouched by the ruthless hand of modern technological inventions. Everything in nature moved in harmony with its rhythm: "[T]he glacier grew every single winter; it accumulated snow; every winter it grew as it should, and every summer it melted, releasing

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drops, drops that became streams, flowing downwards, driven by gravity, and the streams joined other streams, becoming waterfalls, rivers" (Lunde, 1). The luminous view of the Sister Falls caught the attention of the tourists, who would find this part of Norway to be "beautiful, fantastic, amazing" (Lunde, 3).

However, the encroachment of unchecked technological advancement into the territory of nature has destroyed the ecotopian environment of the region. The Sister Falls and Sonstebo's summer farm used to add to the fascinating aura of the landscape. But the construction of a hydraulic power plant on the River Breio has led to their disappearance. The construction of a power plant requires the installation of dams and a water reservoir, which divert the natural course of the river, thereby disrupting the biodiversity of the local landscape. In the novel, Signe's father, who was an active environmentalist, envisioned the environmental impacts that the construction would bring about. He says to Signe, "Everything around you is going to change. A tunnel will be dug here, and the water will be diverted away. Down there is where the power plant will be…. And from there, they will install enormous power lines. And the river, it will disappear. In the riverbed, where it's flowing now, there will only be stone" (Lunde, 116). Here, Lunde historicizes Norway's ecological transformation and reflects on Norway's dichotomous politics concerning environmental sustainability and corporate economy.

Nonetheless, Nordic countries have been considerably admired for their significant contribution to environmental policies and for maintaining a harmonious coexistence with nature. One important area in which the Nordic nations have established their reputation as leaders at the regional, national, and global levels is environmental policy. In 1972, the United Nations convened its inaugural environmental conference in Stockholm, Sweden. Moreover, it was under the leadership of Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, who chaired the World Commission on Environment and Development, that the concept of 'sustainable development' was introduced into the international political discourse (Henning et al. 4). Their initiative to preserve the pristine natural landscapes has led to the idealised portrayal of the Nordic region as an Ecotopia.

Apart from the political initiative, the Nordic nations have seen a surge of literary works that critically examine their position as the pioneers of environmental sustainability. Norwegian Writers' Climate Campaign, founded in 2013, was the first environmental organisation of writers in the world that was fully committed to climate action (Furuseth et al. 9).The organisation aims to make people, especially people in the Nordic region, aware that they are living in a climatically changed world, and if immediate action is not taken against it, then they will be left with no option but to face an apocalyptic world in the near future. As Emmi Itaranta, a Nordic writer who has also dealt intensively with the climate crisis in her novel, *Memory of Water* (2012), has rightly said, "the Arctic region is warming two to three times faster on average than the rest of the world"(James). But the political leaders in the Nordic region emphatically represent themselves to the rest of the world as "responsible eco-citizens" (Henning et al. 1).Here, an attempt has been made to challenge the representational politics of the Nordic countries by examining their self-proclaimed ecotopian image.

Norway, one of the Nordic nations, seems to exhibitdouble-standard politics towards environmental sustainability and economic growth, especially since its discovery of fossil fuel in the early 1970s. Numerous studies show Norway as one of the biggest exporters of gas and oil worldwide. This generates a conflict with the country's aspirations to lead the world in combating such environmental crises as climate change. In *The End of the Ocean*, Signe recounts that every day the Norwegian government "bring[s] up two million barrels of oil, two million barrels. One barrel is 159 liters" (Lunde, 134). This demonstrates what many environmental activists refer to as Norway's "paradox: Norway wants to be at the forefront of international efforts to address climate

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change, yet it continues to rely on heavily polluting fossil fuel extraction for continued economic prosperity" (Arvin). Norway's paradoxical relationship with environmental sustainability and its support for a fossil fuel economy further intensifies the climate crisis around the world. In Lunde's novel, Signe says, "all those who are constructing Norway, the nation, while simultaneously they are destroying the world" (Lunde, 134). The paradox of constructing Norway while destroying the world is not only political but also ideological. This emphasises how ecological injustice is often ideologically justified in the name of economic security.

Moreover, Nordic regions' dichotomous politics are articulated through Lunde's portrayal of Signe's boyfriend, Magnus. Signe was separated from her capitalist lover, Magnus, because he betrayed her by involving himself with the exploitation of natural resources. Initially, he was also fighting for environmental causes, but he changed his ideological position when he got a job opportunity from Iris on the condition of not joining the nature conservation campaign. His character signifies the political and ideological changes that the Nordic nations have adopted towards ecological issues. However, Signe, along with her father, continued the protest against the construction work with banners and paintings: "Nature Conservation. Stop the Construction Work. Without Sister Falls Eidesdalen Will Die" (Lunde, 252). But all their efforts went in vain as the Norwegian government issued a threatening order against the protesters. This explicates how the capitalist ideology is institutionalised in Norwegian climate politics.

Ecofeminist Analysis of Environmental Exploitation:

The ecofeminist thinkers argue that the capitalistic treatment of nature will inevitably bring an environmentally cataclysmic world in the near future. They believe "that systems of domination, such as capitalism, patriarchy, and imperialism, are ecologically destructive" (Carlassare, 92). The main characters in the first timeline of Lunde's novel, *The End of the Ocean,* are divided into two groups based on their perspectives about natural resources.

In the novel, the portrayal of the characters of Bjorn and his wife represents contrasting ideologies of environmental sustainability and the capitalist form of economic development, respectively. Though a female character, Iris is depicted to be an embodiment of the capitalist economy. Iris's capitalist perspective prompted her to consider the installation of the hydraulic power plant on the bed of the River Breio as "an incredible opportunity" (Lunde, 84) for the people of the village of Ringfjorden. But her husband, Bjorn's environmental awareness propelled him to foresee the apocalyptic future that would follow the human exploitation of nature. From the early years of his student life, he was an avid environmentalist. He conducted research on the freshwater pearl mussel, Margaritifera that lived in the River Breio. In his study, he found that the adult mussels that fed on microorganisms could clean the river for the surrounding environment. The construction of a hydraulic power plant, encouraged by Signe's mother, would certainly lead to the mass extinction of this species.

Through the portrayal of these characters, Lunde destabilises the European essentialist view that women are closer to nature than men because of their reproductive quality. Her depiction of Men/Culture and Women/Nature binaries demonstrates the social ecofeminist discourse about the social construction of these binaries. While Bjorn said that because of the power plant construction,"[t]he freshwater mussel will die out"(Lunde, 86), Iris argued that "it's just water… it can be converted into electricity; it can create jobs. It can bring life to the village" (Lunde, 86). Lunde's portrayal of the character of Iris explicates that capitalism is a contagious ideological framework that can affect anyone irrespective of gender. Similarly, her depiction of the character of Bjorn demonstrates that environmentalism is both an intellectual discipline and a sociopolitical practice that goes beyond the boundary of gender construction.

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Capitalism and Environmental Cataclysm:

Two timelines of the novel serve as the cause and effect of anthropogenic climate change. The human exploitation of nature in the first timeline leads to an apocalyptic world in the second one. In the novel, the author, through the narrative trope of exploitation and revenge, fictionalises how human activities trigger environmental cataclysm. Lunde criticises the double-standard politics of the Nordic regions by depicting how the Norwegian government promotes corporate economic development that is run by self-centred capitalist people like Magnus. In the novel, Signe narrates:

> They are extracting ice from the glacier—pure, white ice from Norway—and marketing it as the most exclusive ingredient to be put in drink, a floating mini-iceberg surrounded by golden liquor, but not for Norwegian customers, no, for those who have really deep pockets; the ice is to be shipped to the desert nations, the homes of oil sheikhs, and there it will be sold as if it were gold, a white gold, to the wealthiest of the wealthy (Lunde, 7).

From an ecofeminist point of view, it can be argued that the commodification of natural resources is one of the leading forces that accelerate environmental degradation. Carolyn Merchant (2005), a radical ecofeminist scholar, interprets this capitalist exploitation of natural resources as the one of the primary causes of making the earth uninhabitable (Merchant, 208–9). It is argued that if humans do not take into consideration the inevitable consequences of their indiscriminate utilisation of the natural resources, then nature will take revenge on humans because "in nature nothing takes place in isolation" (Engels, 89–90). In her novel, Maja Lunde fictionalises this eco-revenge concept by interweaving the two parallel stories together. The consequence of the capitalist treatment of nature in the story of the first timeline is interconnected with the apocalyptic narrative of the second timeline, which is set in the year 2041 in Timbaut, Bordeaux, a fictitious French region ravaged by climate change.

Moreover, in this fictional city, displacement, migration, war over food shortages, and freshwater scarcity has become the primary indicators of climate change. People like the protagonist, David, are moving away from this city towards the North— "the water countries [where] long-term drought didn't exist" (Lunde, 24). However, the northern region is also not safe from the catastrophic impacts of the climate crisis. Climate change has impacted the planetary system to such a scale that while people in this region do not have to confront the harsh consequences of climate change, they still can't expect a risk-free region because human lives in this northern part of the world are heavily affected by such climate disasters as floods and cyclones. As the narrator says, in that part of the world, "rain was an affliction, arriving in storms. Where rivers flooded over and dams burst, abruptly and brutally" (Lunde, 25). This represents climate change as a global phenomenon because it is quite impossible to imagine the entire Earth to be an environmentally risk-free region.

In fact, Lunde fictionalises a risk region where people's socio-political attachments to their places are severed and where mobility and migration are the only means of survival. In *Climate Change Fictions* (2016), Antonia Mehnert notes: "mobility and uprootedness are the only response to global climate change, which no longer allows for any risk-free spaces at all" (Mehnert, 56). But climate change not only destabilises the individual's sense of identity but also problematises the migration problem because the climate migrants do not find a safe region in the foreign country. For instance, in Lunde's *The End of the Ocean*, the French climate refugee David chooses mobility and migration as a means of survival. But his climate migration, which at the beginning might appear to be a path to safety, is instead fraught with continuous exposure to

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political, legal, and social risks. This highlights the broader tension in the current global politics, where climate change and migration intersect to exacerbate climate precarity.

So, it is a matter of great urgency to speculate alternative ways of survival in a climatically apocalyptic world. Through the character of David, Lunde fictionalises the future possibility of desalination technology as another alternative way to survive water scarcity in the time of the climate crisis. In the novel, *The End of the Ocean*, David works in Thomas's desalination plant to mitigate water scarcity for the people of the drought-stricken city of Argeles. However, David fails in his attempt to deal with the water shortage because the desalination process is interrupted by the frequent cut-off of electricity. A close examination of the representation of the desalination plant in the novel demonstrates how Lunde satirises the human hubris that technology is a sole solution to climate crises. Thomas said, "[i]t was the electricity production from coal-fired power plants that contributed to creating global warming and the water shortage in the first place, and now we needed even more electricity to produce water"(Lunde, 319). This illustrates the paradox of power production: "energy is at the heart of climate change– and key to the solution" (United Nations). Fossil fuel consumption for the production of power is the main source of the greenhouse gases that cause global warming and, ultimately, bring in such climate catastrophes as drought and water scarcity.

However, the dystopian narrative in the novel is not only utterly pessimistic, but it also provides a critical lens that holds "a utopian impulse" (Baccolini and Moylan, 7). Maja Lunde's rejection of utter pessimism and integration of hope into a dystopian climate narrative elevates the novel to the genre of 'critical dystopia'. For Lyman Tower Sargent, critical dystopia is "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia" (Sargent, 222).

Conclusion:

To conclude, Lunde's incorporation of the critical dimension into the dystopian climate narrative offers ample scope to interrogate the prevalent social, political and economic dynamics of modern society. It also reflects on the capacity of technological innovations to deal with the crises triggered by anthropogenic climate change. While David's attempts at the desalination plant fail to cope with the crises of water scarcity, drought and food shortages, his sexual liaison with Marguerite towards the end of the novel brings rain upon the dry earth. The soil becomes wet and muddy, and nature once again "has turned green. The water has infused all the greyness with colour. The ground is no longer dusty but safe and solid. The trees are no longer black; they are sprouting leaves" (Lunde, 390). From an ecofeminist point of view, their unison is symbolic of the restoration of human coexistence with all non-human nature. To preserve nature as a living thing, an equitable and balanced connection is required. This equilibrium is undervalued by the mechanistic worldview, which regards nature as inanimate and subject to manipulation (Shiva, 39). For Vandana Shiva, violence to women and nature is perpetuated by the Western patriarchal capitalism "which cripples nature and woman simultaneously" (Shiva, 39). In Lunde's novel, David and Marguerite's union subverts these hierarchical binaries of man over woman and culture over nature by emphasising the need to embrace an embodied and reciprocal relationship between man and woman and between the human and the non-human nature. The novel thus proposes the possibility of eutopian transformation from risk region to a sustainable society that is attainable not through domination or technological mastery as shown through the characterisation of Magnus and Iris or Thomas respectively but through an ethos of care, reciprocity, and restored kinship with the non-human nature symbolically represented by David and Marguerite's union.

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