

Presidential Address

Space, Place, and Landscape in Literatures of the World

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Our last year's conference was on Space, Place, and Landscape, and in my address last year, I referred to Michel Foucault who, in 1967, had written an essay "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias." So this year, we thought let us move to the more familiar and the less theoretically taxing part of the 'other spaces' that the world literature abounds in, utopias and dystopias. 'Topos,' the Greek word for 'place' is not a common word in English, but 'topos' derivatives have been part of our vocabulary for centuries. Languages, including English, develop and grow by adding prefixes and suffixes to root words. Everyone here would know that in the Greek language, the prefix 'ou-' means no, 'eu-' means good and 'dys-' means 'not good,' and this conference is going to be about good places that do not exist except in imagination and literature, and bad places that we may have to encounter in real in the future. The theme sounds interesting as the romantic poet, S. T. Coleridge, has been roped in to invite, or may be tempt, scholars to write on sunny pleasure-domes and caves of ice, emblematic perhaps of the utopias and dystopias in world literature. But I may strike a note of caution here. In Coleridge the line that the theme is based on, uses the preposition 'with' and not the coordinating conjunction 'and.' The poem refers not to a sunny pleasure-dome and caves of ice, but just to "The **shadow** ... of a sunny pleasure-dome **with** caves of ice." And that fits in with what I think of great literature: it is less concerned with presenting good or bad places before us, and more with making us re-think about what we consider to be good or bad. And literature being less about places and more about human beings, I would prefer to focus on the utopian and dystopian impulse or imagination in literature than on the nouns utopia and dystopia as literary genres.

With anti- and post-humanisms gaining popularity, and humanism being considered just an ideological construct, many of you may not agree with me, when I say what I firmly believe in, that Literature is human, this-worldly, and secular in nature. We have been persuaded to believe that we are social or familial or linguistic constructs, living in a world of *maya-jaal*, or appearances and false consciousness. But what about our lived experiences, and if someone has problems with the expression 'lived experiences,' then allow me a bit of philosophical abstraction: are appearances less valid than the essence, is not the experience of appearances more valid than the theoretical debate on essences. Human beings do not have a permanent identity or a self, because they have self-contradiction as their essence. The search for utopia, too, is an expression of this self-contradiction. Immanuel Kant convinced us long back that the use of our rational faculty beyond the domains it is meant for traps us in antinomies, and yet we continue to use reason in our conferences. Poststructuralists tell us that language rebounds on itself, and yet we continue to use it in our lives. In the same way the desire for perfection is based on the desire to achieve the unachievable. If you achieve what you desire, it is no more desirable, but so long as you have not achieved it, you want to achieve it. That is the utopian

impulse. To a layman, the sunny dome is the antonym of the caves of ice, but Coleridge's image merges the two without destroying either of them. Same way, dystopias and utopias have a dialectical connection. But let us move away from abstractions, and deal with some basic human experiences and issues.

Human beings till now have lived in a world of material scarcity, and religions of all varieties, the linear Judaic ones or the cyclical Indian ones have given them pictures of the golden Age that is lost, the Hindu *satya yuga* or the Judaic Garden of Eden. Religions also offer us the idea of Paradise, etc. as a utopian future, but not in this material world. All religions give man the hope that we may re-attain the lost utopia or find a new utopia, but only after physical death. The post-Renaissance modern Western civilization, of which we too are partly a part, on the other hand, is this worldly and man-centered, and hopes, irrespective of whether one is a liberal or a fascist or a Marxist, that with technological development, the world of scarcity will be transformed into a world of plenty and that utopia is a possibility in this world itself. By this world, I mean the world of human beings, even though unlike earlier utopias that focused on travellers to new places, in science fiction, one tends to go into extra-terrestrial worlds and into a far future.

Even before, we had been told of many types of places, Atlantis, El Dorado, Shangri La, etc., which seem like utopias. For illustration purposes, let me go to the idea of Cockaigne, the medieval European notion and not the drug cocaine, though the two may be linked. The French word is *pays de cocaigne* which means the land of plenty. In a feudal economy, the peasant or the serf had to struggle hard for food, and what would he dream of or aspire to, if not food. The blurb on Herman Pleij's *Dreaming of Cockaigne: Medieval Fantasies of the Perfect Life* (2001) describes it as a place where

roasted pigs wander about with knives in their backs to make carving easy, where grilled geese fly directly into one's mouth, where cooked fish jump out of the water and land at one's feet. The weather is always mild, the wine flows freely, sex is readily available, and all people enjoy eternal youth.

I do not want to bring in Abraham Maslow on human needs here, but we know that human beings and therefore literature are not concerned only with biological needs. Literature is concerned with Man in this world, and this world itself is more than just biological and physical needs. As Ralf Dahrendorf says, "except that occasionally some things do happen in utopia (p. 117)," utopias are more like a cemetery. Perhaps that is why literary classics are more prone to dystopias. *We*, *Brave New World*, *1984*, *Clockwork Orange*, *Fahrenheit 451* – are all classics and all dystopias. These are usually an extension of the desire for a utopian world, rebounding on itself. Writers know that human beings by nature are complexities, beyond good and evil. We want to change the world for the better knowing fully well that a better world will not be this world, and we have no desire to get out of this world.

Let me go to the Greeks. Those of us who have watched the 2004 movie *Troy* would remember the lines from Achilles played by Brad Pitt: "The gods envy us. They envy us because we're mortal, because any moment may be our last. Everything is more beautiful because we're

doomed.” And let me also mention the 1954 movie *Ulysses* in which Silvana Mangano plays the role of both Circe and Penelope. Circe is in love with Ulysses, and wants him to stay with her, and not return to his wife, Penelope. In Homer, Calypso offers a gift to Ulysses; in the movie it is Circe, but what is important is not who offers the gift, but how utopian the gift is. It is immortality and eternal youth, and you decide for yourself, if anything can be more utopian than that. In the movie, Circe says to Ulysses:

Listen to me! I shall give you something that will make you forget all your petty dreams. Your miserable kingdom. Your wife who grows old. Remain, and this very night, Olympus shall welcome a new god: Ulysses! ... This is my gift -- the greatest gift that has ever been offered to a man!

And Ulysses’s answer after a short pause is: “No. There are greater gifts. To be born and to die, and in between to live like a man [i.e., like a human being].”

So you see, Ulysses is offered a utopian world but prefers to return home to Penelope.

Karl Mannheim, I think, believed that while ideological thinking seeks to preserve the status-quo, that is, the current social order, utopian thinking seeks to change it. When I look at literatures of the world, I agree with theoreticians who tend to look at all literature as simultaneously ideological and utopian. Fredric Jameson under the influence of Herbert Marcuse and the Frankfurt School says “The Utopian idea ... keeps alive the possibility of a world qualitatively distinct from this one and takes the form of a stubborn negation of all that is (p. 111).” And yet we have to agree that though an absolute utopian world is not possible, certain writers try to visualize such worlds based on what the problems in their particular context are.

What can the paper presenters possibly discuss in the coming three days?

With ideas of equality and justice gaining ground, we found that our human world is under pressure from social issues of class, caste, gender, and race, etc. The Land of Cockaigne, for example, is the vision of utopia in a world of haves and have-nots. In the twentieth and twenty-first century, rather than the scarcity of goods, leading to haves and have-nots binary, what bothers people more are gender and racial binaries, the man-woman, the white-black, the coloniser-colonised hierarchic binaries, and that is why many of you would be looking at how feminists visualize a utopia or how a black man does so. Lately we are also troubled by ecological crises. And in the last thirty years, with ecological crisis becoming a major threat, we have people coming out with ecotopias, though we should not forget that we earlier, too, had idyllic versions of unspoiled wilderness in Arcadias.

Dystopias are often political and based on totalitarian practices, or economic ones, e.g., the issue of planned versus free market sees dystopias in terms of privatization or corporatism. Depending on one’s socio-economic preferences, one can visualize the total market based on “private sector” and corporatization and globalization as a dream or a neo-liberal nightmare.

We have also been fascinated by techno-dystopias, which focus on the negative effects of technology. Science/Speculative Fiction has a lot to offer us on this aspect of dystopia.

With artificial intelligence developing at a mind-boggling pace, techno-utopias and techno-dystopias would be a major concern. Right from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in 1818 down to 21st century science fiction, we are concerned with our very existence itself. It was in mid-20th century that the German-Jewish thinker Günther Anders spoke of negative utopias, the megamachine and the outdatedness of man. The world is transforming very fast, but I believe that human beings will continue to be involved in utopian hope and dystopian fear, so long as human beings are born and not constructed. As most of Anders's works are not available in English translations, I am tempted to use Wikipedia for what it claims to be a quote of Anders from his 1956 book *The Outdatedness of Human Beings*: "It does not suffice to change the world. We do that anyway. And to a large extent that happens even without our involvement. In addition, we have to interpret this change. Precisely because to change it. That therefore the world does not change without us. And ultimately into a world without us." So long as artificial intelligence remains within our control, we would continue to be interested in how the living body and bone beings visualize the future. I use the expression 'body and bone beings' deliberately, because as Anders had apprehended long back, some of us have already started feeling embarrassed about "being born and not manufactured." But those of us who are into world literatures, I know, will never be embarrassed about being human with utopian hopes and dystopian fears.

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