

**EXPLOITATION OF LAND AND EXALTATION OF HUMAN SPECIESISM IN J.
G. BALLARD'S *THE CRYSTAL WORLD***

N. Rama Gommathi, Reg. No. 21111274012014, Research Scholar, Department of English, St. John's College, Palayamkottai, (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli -627012, TamilNadu, India)

Dr. D. Nalina Palin, Associate Professor, Department of English, St. John's College, Palayamkottai, (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli -627012, TamilNadu, India)

Abstract

James Graham Ballard, a British author, associated with the New Wave science movement is famous for his climate disasters and dystopian settings. Ballard in his apocalyptic novels brings out the negative effects of modern science and advanced technologies. His quadrilogy serves as a cautionary tale to be aware of the future and protect the present environment. The fourth in Ballard's quadrilogy is *The Crystal World*, narrates an unusual story of people getting crystallized. The protagonist Dr. Edward Sanders witnesses a strange phenomenon of crystallization in the jungle of Africa where he is working with leprosy patients. This study focuses on the supreme power of humankind over land referring to Aldo Leopold's land ethic. Anthropocentrism insists on human beings at the center of the universe whereas land ethic proposes the preservation of land with the aspect of environmental ethics. Through allegorical narrative, Ballard exposes the immediate need for the preservation of land and ecological conscience in humans.

Keywords: Dystopian, Crystallization, Land ethic, Anthropocentrism, Eco-consciousness.

Dystopian literature, the opposite of utopian literature is set in the future or near future where the social structures are in calamitous decline. A Dystopian society is mostly a fictional society and authors use these types of setting in their works to examine the amplified social and political systems. The core aim of a dystopian setting is a commentary on contemporary society through an unfamiliar setting. The characters in these worlds are placed in a state of decline, like a post-apocalyptic wasteland, or an environmental disaster that threatens human civilization. Dystopian pieces of literature include themes like climate fiction, technology control, elements of survival, and so on.

James Graham Ballard, a contemporary English novelist, and short story writer has written catastrophic fiction that portrays the devastation of the world through environmental

disasters. Ballard is the forerunner of climate fiction and he has given four disaster fiction commonly called disaster quartets that includes *The Wind from Nowhere*, *The Drowned World*, *The Drought*, and *The Crystal World*. These quartets have a post-apocalyptic setting where the plot takes place in a future world that was completely devastated by global elements like air, water, fire, and earth respectively. The fiction *The Crystal World* is based on the story of supernatural events taking place in the jungles of Africa. The protagonist Dr. Edward Sanders arrives at the fictional town of Port Matarre, Cameroon to treat leprosy patients. While on duty, Dr. Sanders encounters a mysterious phenomenon of crystallization occurring in the jungles crystallizing together the living community.

The forest is the most beautiful in Africa, a house of jewels. I can barely find words to describe our wonder each morning as we look out across the slopes, still half-hidden by the mist but glistening like St. Sophia, each bough a jeweled semi-dome....Fortunately the people of these forest slopes move through life with a kind of dreamlike patience. (*Crystal World*12)

Reaching the port Sanders encountered mysterious aspects happening, people living there viewed the crystallization of land as a source of commodity and started picking the vitrified leaves and flowers to sell at a high rate to the visitors. This attitude shows that humans view land as a mere object that they can abuse and misuse. The concept of the supremacy of humans forms the baseline for this paper.

Glittering below her in the sunlight was what appeared to be an immense crystalline orchid carved from some quartz like mineral. The entire structure of the flower had been reproduced and then embedded within the crystal base, almost as if a living specimen had been conjured into the centre of a huge cut-glass pendant. (*Crystal World*31)

This paper aims to interpret *The Crystal World* in the context of anthropocentrism and Aldo Leopold's land ethic. Ballard through this fiction gives a message of an urgent need for land ethic as the western colonizers enslave and encroach the land for the valuable stones it produces. Ballard narrates how humans show a merciless attitude towards land and possess the natural environment as if they were the supreme dominators of nature. Humankind lies at the core of Anthropocentrism. The position humans occupy in the universe constitutes anthropocentrism. Val Plumwood states Anthropocentrism, like sexism and racism, displays itself at various levels: at the human level through individual ideas and acts, at the level of

identity, through institutions and knowledge systems. It is to be acknowledged that anthropocentrism thought is as harmful and belligerent as other forms of –isms that are known in society (99).

This paper signifies the need for land ethics. ‘Land Ethic’ is an essay in Aldo Leopold’s book *A Sand Country* almanac published in 1949. Leopold, an American environmental philosopher, and scholar proposed the need for land ethic. He stresses the importance of environmental education and his essay on land ethic turns out to be a prominent model for environmental education. To him, the land is one among the community and has to be treated with respect. His ideology is that people must see the land as a being with needs like human beings who also have needs. Leopold points out that there are three major reasons to view land as an energy circuit: first land is not just soil, second because the creatures living on land help in maintaining a cycle and third it shows how human changes are more vibrant and effective than gradual natural changes.

Land, then, is not merely soil; it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals. Food chains are the living channels which conduct energy upward; death and decay return it to the soil. The circuit is not closed; some energy is dissipated in decay, some is added by absorption from the air, some is stored in soils, peats, and long-lived forests; but it is a sustained circuit, like a slowly augmented revolving fund of life. (216)

Leopold expresses three paradoxes: man the conqueror versus man the biotic citizen; science the sharpener of his sword versus science the searchlight on his universe; land the slave and servant versus land the collective organism (223). He defines two types of human beings one who conquers the land and the other who lives as a part of the community. Leopold also defines two types of land, one that is encroached upon and the other shared by all living organisms. Leopold insists on land ethic for he believes that it changes the role of humans from being a conqueror of land to normal citizens in the holistic land community. He entitles this changeover as ecological conscience as it forms the basis for land ethic.

Leopold suggests humans regard themselves as one among the biotic community rather than being dominators and exploiters of nature. He emphasizes that the advancement in science and technology and all other disciplines tempted humans to harm the environment. To get out of this, land ethic is needed as this philosophy exceeds all boundaries and local limitations. He establishes a land ethic philosophy for the whole ecosystem. In short, Leopold

set the foundations of environmental philosophy through the establishment of an ecological conscience, conservation of the ecosystem, and the land ethic which proposes a holistic understanding of the natural environment.

Ballard in his *The Crystal World* represents a response against the anthropocentric attitude and their merciless relationship with the land. During Dr. Sanders' visit to the fictional city of Port Matarre, the western colonizers have been exploiting the land and looting the resources. In this circumstance, the man takes the role of conqueror or destroyer and land takes the role of servant. As per Leopold's binary oppositions, humans belong to those who exploit and abuse for selfish interests, and science does not enlighten humanity but serves the interests of greedy exploiters. The land that lies at the center of *The Crystal World* has been enslaved by western colonizers throughout the novel. These western conquerors dominate and abuse land to the core. The westerners exploit African soil for their precious stones, especially diamonds and gems:

It didn't matter with the costume jewelry, but some of the native miners started using the same technique on the small diamonds they smuggled out. As you know, the diamond mines here don't produce gem-stones, and everyone was naturally surprised when these huge rocks began to reach the market. The share prices on the Paris Bourse climbed to fantastic heights. That's how it all started. (*Crystal World*71)

Most of the action in *The Crystal World* revolves around the land and its natural resources. The land is the ultimate entity being exploited without any mercy. All characters easily disregard land and all the non-human bodies as this attitude make humans loot all the precious possessions of the land. This merciless attitude is expressed by Thorenson, the greedy mine owner

He passed a small patch of pavement that remained clear of all growth, below the broken window of one of the mine depositories. Handfuls of looted stones were scattered across the pavement, ruby and emerald rings, topaz brooches and pendants, intermingled with countless smaller stones and industrial diamonds. This abandoned harvest glittered coldly in the moonlight. (*Crystal World*175)

The colonizers had a voracious mentality towards the land's priceless resources and are greedier in stealing and smuggling the precious resources they encounter. This massive

exploitation clearly shows their merciless attitude of considering the land as a mere commodity that is to be attained and possessed for its market value. The degradation of nature is visible throughout the narrative. In a dialogue between Sanders and the clerk, Sanders asks: “‘Tell me, why is it so dark in Port Matarre? It’s not overcast, and yet one can hardly see the sun.’ ‘It’s not dark, Doctor, it’s the leaves. They’re taking minerals from the ground, it makes everything look dark.’” (*Crystal World*19)

In Leopold’s perspective, this outlook of humans is due to a lack of ecological conscience and land ethic. Humans the conquerors regard nature only for its exchange value rather than intrinsic value. Characters in *The Crystal World* establish a highly materialistic relationships with the land ignoring the whole ecosystem, just a commodity to be possessed. Even the protagonist Dr. Sanders exhibits a different attitude. In the beginning he considered his occupation as humanitarian service, later when he faced crystallization, he also expressed a jealous attitude towards those who are lucky to be crystallized. After almost being crystallized himself, Sanders writes the following to his hospital supervisor:

What was really remarkable was the extent to which I accepted all those wonders as part of the natural order of things, part of the inward pattern of the Universe. True, to begin with I was as startled as everyone else making his first journey up the Matarre River to Mont Royal, but after the initial impact of the forest, a surprise more visual than anything else, I quickly came to understand it, knowing that its hazards were a small price to pay for its illumination of my life. (*Crystal World*93)

Sanders’s report expresses his presence in an ironical tone. He turns out to be a part of the exploitative system. At the end of the story, people move interior to the forest not to grab the crystals but to become crystals, especially in the case of lepers. They are at the stage of dying so they enjoy this phenomenon of crystallization. Towards the close of the novel, father Balthus is showing his organ in the crystallized church: “In this forest we see the final celebration of the Eucharist of Christ’s body. Here everything is transfigured and illuminated, joined together in the last marriage of space and time” (*Crystal World*194). As the novel ends Dr. Sanders’ decides to return to the forest as almost one-third of the world’s surface will be crystallized in near future: “The forest is now advancing at the rate of progress at least a third of the earth’s surface will be affected by the end of next decade...” (*Crystal World*201)

The narrative ends with the process of crystallization spreading all over the world, and the colonizers disrupting the harmony of nature providing permanent damage to the ecosystem, *The Crystal World* displays the urgent need for a land ethic and ecological conscience.

The Crystal World narrates the story of colonizers affected by an unknown phenomenon of crystallization. Ballard has ironically emphasised the power of nature. The whole story begins and ends with the concept of the land. Ballard creates an ironic story where men systematically destroy the land but is eventually destroyed by the same land. Ballard describes the power of nature by deconstructing anthropocentrism. Ballard states that humans will accept and acknowledge ecological conscience only when land ethic is established leading to a better relationship between humans and the land.

References

Ballard, J. G. *The Crystal World*. United States of America, 1998.

Callicott, John Baird. *Thinking Like a Planet: The Land Ethic and the Earth Ethic*. Oxford University Press, New York, 2014.

Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1949, pp.201-226.

Plumwood, Val. *Environmental Culture: The ecological crisis of reason*. Routledge, London and New York, 2002, pp.99-103

TAN, Cenk. "Land Ethic and Anthropocentrism in J. G. Ballard's *The Crystal World*".

International Journal of Social Sciences, vol.5, no.2, FALL, 2021, pp.39-58. DOI: 10.30830/tobider.sayi.9.3