

Eco-Politics in James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: 15/3/2021

Accepted: 22/4/2021

Published: Spring 2021

Keywords: *Eco-criticism, James Hilton, Lost Horizon, Nature, Human being.*

Doi:

10.25212/lfu.qzj.6.2.32

ABSTRACT

Eco-criticism as a newly emerged theory pays attention to environmental issues. It aims to grow awareness about the planet and identifies factors damaging nature. James Hilton in his famous utopian novel *Lost Horizon* notifies human beings of the horrific consequences of war and other violent actions. He draws the reader's attention to a world which is on the brink of destruction due to the war and its aftermath. On the other hand, he creates a harmonious society for the war-weary people who flee their places due to the political tensions. Throughout the novel, Milton expresses his anger toward the politicians who have put life and nature at stake. As nowadays, the trench of warfare has exceeded human miseries; it has resulted in several environmental problems. This article aimed to examine the novel and its depiction of the horrors of war from an ecocritical perspective. Hilton's novel, as an eco-fictional work, demonstrated an apocalyptic world dominated by horrors of war. On the other hand, it also demonstrated a tranquil world which is free of war and natural destruction.

1. Introduction: Eco-criticism

Throughout history there has been a close link between environment and human being. This link has been represented through ecofictional works. Ecofiction as a branch of literature encompasses environment-oriented works of fiction. Thus, it



sheds light on the impacts of human beings on nature. Literature has always been an effective factor in raising awareness about the environmental issues. Eco-criticism as a new literary theory is mainly concerned with the environmental problems, as the horrific consequences of human being's actions have put mankind and habitat in jeopardy.

In addition, eco-critics and readers study literary texts from an environmental perspective and sometimes provide possible solutions to the environmental problems. On the other hand, ecological utopia pays a great deal of attention to "future world, a world that does not yet exist but that perhaps could come to be. Utopists examine the future rather than the present" (Moos, 1977). Moreover, the main mission of utopia is to grow awareness about the environmental issues that threaten human lives and ecosystem.

Lost Horizon is a utopian novel by the famous British novelist James Hilton. The novel was published in 1933 and won some prestigious awards including Hawthornden Prize, and it was Hilton's best-selling book. *Lost Horizon* tells the story of four characters; Hugh Conway, the British Consul; Charles Mallinson, his Vis-Consul, Henry D. Bernard, an American man and a British missionary, Miss Roberta Berinklow who want to escape the political unrest in the city of Baskul (Hilton, 1933). As they attempt to flee the country, they board a plane and they have no clue that they have been kidnapped.

As the plane runs out of fuel it crashes into the mountains of Himalaya in Tibet, China. As a consequence, the pilot dies and the other four passengers survive. Then, they are discovered by a group of Chinese men. Chang is the group leader of the Chinese men who speaks English. So, he speaks with Conway and his colleagues; he offers them assistance. Conway talks with his colleagues and tells them that going with them is the only solution; there is no other way to survive. Therefore, they decide to go with Chang, and he guides them to a place called the valley of the Blue Moon or Shangri-La.

2. The Catastrophe of War

James Hilton in his famous novel, *Lost Horizon* portrays the horror of war. He is well aware of the devastating consequences of war because war not only annihilates human beings but it demolishes the natural world too. *Lost Horizon* depicts the story of four characters in Baskul. Hugh Conway, who has already experienced other wars, is the protagonist of the story along with the other three characters who are in Baskul. As the political tensions intensify, they attempt to escape the country:

DURING that third week of May the situation in Baskul had become much worse and, on the 20th Air Force machines arrived by arrangement from Peshawur to evacuate the white residents (...) four passengers embarked: Miss Roberta Brinklow, of the Eastern Mission; Henry D. Barnard, a U.S. citizen; Hugh Conway, H.M. Consul; and Captain Charles Mallinson, H.M. Vice-Consul. (Hilton, 1933, p. 25)

The author does not go into details about the political tensions and the civil war in Baskul. However, he informs the readers that the people of Baskul including these four foreigners have been obliged to leave the country due to the war and its aftermath. Hilton does not reveal whether the residents of Baskul managed to escape or not. However, his main focus remains on Conway and his three colleagues.

As the story progresses, Hilton reveals more about the tragedy of war and its devastating consequences. Hilton brings to light the wars that Conway, the protagonist of the story, had already witnessed: “Twelve years earlier he had grown to hate the perils of trench warfare in France, and had several times avoided death by declining to attempt valorous impossibilities” (Hilton, 1933, p. 37). He was mentally and physically traumatized due to the war. Conway had a group of friends, whenever they gathered, they talked about him and how he had disappeared for such a long time. Conway was a clever student and was able to speak many foreign languages but the war had affected his life. His colleagues constantly talked about his



cleverness and brilliance before being affected by the war; “A pity you didn’t know him at Oxford. He was just brilliant—there’s no other word. After the War people said he was different—I think myself he was” (Hilton, 1933, p. 16). Through his characters, Hilton constantly brings to light the catastrophe of war. Because war leaves nothing undamaged including the innocent people, children, animals and the natural world. Nowadays, the trench of warfare goes far beyond mankind miseries, it causes environmental destruction and leaves nothing unharmed (Halle, 2009, p. 7). Therefore, Hilton keeps his readers concentrated on the theme of war. This is due to the fact that humans have always been the cause of such destructions “The root of all evil is man and thus he is himself the root of the specific evil, war” (Waltz, 2001, p. 3). Even in times of peace humans have caused environment crisis. Therefore, during wars, the damage could be much severe:

The environment has long been a silent causality of war and armed conflict. From the contamination of land and the destruction of forests to the plunder of natural resources and the collapse of management system, the environmental consequences of war are often widespread and devastating. (Martin, 2016, p. 75)

James Hilton is acutely aware of the humanitarian and ecological costs of war. During the 1930s the world was on the brink of destruction. As Oscar Arias argues that there was a fear of militarization and nature could be another victim of the war “Each day the hope that our countries will receive as much aid for human development as they once received for militarization grows increasingly remote” (Hastings, 2000, p. 1). Nowadays, it can be noticed that the super-power countries allocate much of their budget to the military sector. The money that is spent on military and weapons is spent against nature, because it demolishes nature and annihilates humankind.

As time passes, the passengers realize that they have been kidnapped. However, they cannot do anything. Conway had been in much worse situations. He did not worry about whether he is hijacked or not. However, the others passengers are anxious and ask Conway to do something but Conway replies them quietly: “If you would have all

the experience I've had, you'd know that there are times in life when the most comfortable thing is to do nothing at all. Things happen to you and you just let them happen. The War was rather like that" (Hilton, 1933, p. 78). Conway narrates his experience during the wars so that he can persuade the other three passengers to stay in Shangri-La. Throughout the book, Hilton constantly expresses his rage against the super-powers that have caused the destruction of nature and the annihilation of human being:

[...] As I have already told you, and it seemed to him that all the loveliest things were transient and perishable, and that war, lust, and brutality might some day crush them until there were no more left in the world. He remembered sights he had seen with his own eyes, and with his mind he pictured others; he saw the nations strengthening, not in wisdom, but in vulgar passions and the will to destroy; he saw their machine power multiplying until a single weaponed man might have matched a whole army of the Grand Monarque. And he perceived that when they had filled the land and sea with ruin, they would take to the air [...]. (Hilton, 1933, p. 191)

Hiltons sees war as a great threat to humanity, to the world as well as to nature. He foresees another war; a war that would bring more destruction to the world.

2.1 Shangri-La

James Hilton in *Lost Horizon* creates an idyllic world for Conway and his other three companions, a world that everyone would hope to live in, a world which is quite different from the outside world. After crashing into the mountains of Himalayan, the pilot dies due to the crash and the other four passengers are discovered by a group of Chinese men "He spoke a kind of Chinese that I don't understand very well, but I think he said something about a lamasery near here – along the valley, I gathered— where we could get food and shelter. Shangri-La, he called it" (Hilton, 1933, p. 64). Chang who is the leader of the Chinese men talks to them and tells them about



Shangri-La. In Shangri-La he can provide them anything they need. However; at first the passengers were in disagreement over Shangri-La. They did not know anything about it. Although, there were no other ways to survive but Mallinson was against the idea of going to Shangri-La. His only reason was that Shangri-La was far away from civilization. Mallinson's opinion was different from the other three passengers and he considered Shangri-La as an evil place (Campbell, 1991, p. 87).

On the other hand, Conway is a wise and thoughtful man. He understands the situation very well. He is aware that going back to Baskul is not an alternative; war has started and it has jeopardized everything. Moreover, staying in the mountains would be risky because there was no food and the weather was too cold. Ultimately, they decided to go with the group led by Chang "I shall be delighted to act as your guide [...] I shall esteem it an honour to accompany you and your friends" (Hilton, 1933, p. 70).

Mallinson was still skeptical about Shangri-La. After deciding to go with Chang, he was still looking forward to finding other ways to return back to what he called civilization "We shall pay for anything we have, and we should like to hire some of your men to help us on our journey back. We want to return to civilization as soon as possible" (Hilton, 1933, p. 70). So, Mallinson considers civilization as the only way of life. Even though he came from a civilized society where he hardly escaped from war and yet he prefers it. Regarding the relation between civilization and war, William Eckhardt argues that "We can learn a lot about war through the study of civilization. We can learn a lot about civilization through the study of war" (Bowden, 2011, p. 122). He believes that there is a connection between war and civilization. To put it another way, the more civilized we are, the more we become cruel and unkind.

All in all, they arrived in Shangri-La, and they were given shelter, food and everything they needed. As they settled, they realized that the world of Shangri-La is quite different from the outside world. However; unlike the others, only Conway found Shangri-La so interesting "Conway alone submitted to a rich and growing enchantment. It was not so much any individual thing that attracted him as the



gradual revelation of elegance, of modest and impeccable taste, of harmony so fragrant that it seemed to gratify the eye without arresting it” (Hilton, 1933, p. 113). On the contrary, Mallinson found no attraction in the beauty of Shangri-La; he “found himself no less fatigued” (Hilton, 1933, p. 112). Unlike Conway, Mallinson still did not appreciate the world of Shangri-La, in which everything was perfect, the ruling system, the natural world and the lifestyle of its people. So it is impossible to protect the world or nature when even you do not understand or appreciate it “obviously, we cannot protect what we do not understand” (Hillel, 1991, p. 9).

As the story advances, the reader comes to know some strange facts about hijacking Conway and his other three companions. They were hijacked to observe the differences between the outside world and the quietude world of Shangri-La. They were taken to the Shangri-La to learn from it, to see the beauty of nature. Chang, the Chinese man, explains and answers all the questions raised by Conway and his companions. He explained to them the ruling system, the co-existence and the need to provide a tranquil life for the citizens (Sorkhabi, 2008, p. 75).

In Shangri-La, Hugh Conway and his companions were introduced to a world where everything is in harmony. Life has its values and ethics. People are respected and nature is appreciated. Shangri-La is away from what is called civilization “there was quite a probability that the nearest human settlement was hundreds of miles away” (Hilton, 1933, p. 61). Yet its people live together in peace and are intellectual. In Shangri-La, neither children nor the elderly suffer from the tragedy of war and its aftermath.

Furthermore, in Shangri-La people age slowly as they live in peace and find comfort in the beauty of the natural world “Shangri-La was a utopia—a perfect, peaceful, beautiful place where people age very slowly, often living for hundreds of years” (Hamilton, 2007, p. 18). Therefore, it is clear-cut evidence that living in a world where its environment is clean can affect the life expectancy of human beings. Unlike the outside world, people in Shangri-La had all the needs of life. Their culture and ruling system were different from the outside world. Besides, they also devoted some time

to meditation. Nature was the real source of their happiness. In addition, Shangri-La was not defended by military forces; its geographical area was the source of its protection as it was far away from the outside world and civilization (Marchyan, 2017, p. 1).

Conway and his companions realize the differences between Shangri-La and the outer world. The rulers of Shangri-La explained to them that Shangri-La wants to save humanity, save man from the horror of war and from the coming of Dark Ages: “It will be such a one, my son, as the world has not seen before. There will be no safety by arms, no help from authority, no answer in science. It will rage till every flower of culture is trampled, and all human things are leveled in a vast chaos” (Hilton, 1933, p. 240). The people of Shangri-La expect the worse from the world of Conway and his companions “But the Dark Ages that are to come will cover the whole world in a single pall” (Hilton, 1933, p. 241). *Lost Horizon* was published before the World War II. Therefore, looking at its historical background may explain the meaning of Dark Ages. Throughout the novel, *Lost Horizon* reminds the readers of more destruction due to the political tensions between the world powers and the corrupt system of governing. To put it another way, James Hilton’s main aim in creating such a utopia is to save humanity and nature and to notify humankind of another destruction which he calls it Dark Ages:

He foresaw a time when men, exultant in the technique of homicide, would rage so hotly over the world that every precious thing would be in danger, every book and picture and harmony, every treasure garnered through two millenniums, the small, the delicate, the defenseless—all would be lost like the lost books Livy, or wrecked as the English wrecked the Summer Palace in Pekin. (Hilton, 1933, p. 192)

Another point that draws the reader’s attention in *Lost Horizon* is the governing principles of Shangri-La. Conway and the other three travelers are surprised by the beauty of Shangri-La; the harmonious atmosphere, the co-existence of different ethnic groups. Chang explains the way they rule Shangri-La:

I should say that our prevalent belief is in moderation. We inculcate the virtue of avoiding excess of all kinds [...] in the valley which you have seen, and in which there are several thousand inhabitants living under the control of our order. We have found that the principle makes for a considerable degree of happiness. We rule with moderate strictness. And in return we are satisfied with moderate obedience. And I think I can claim that our people are moderately sober, moderately chaste and moderately honest. (Hilton, 1933, p. 90)

Mr. Chang explains to them that their society is based on moderation. They believe in moderation. And with moderate strictness they rule the valley of Shangri-La. Conway had lived in different countries and had seen different systems; however, he had never experienced anywhere like Shangri-La. Its people, its natural beauty and its co-existence were all different from the outside world. Ultimately, Conway believes that moderation as the principle is the reason for the happiness of society in a world where political conflicts have put every valuable thing in jeopardy.

3. Conclusion

In *Lost Horizon*, James Hilton expresses his anger toward the politicians who have put the world at stake. He creates a peaceful world for war-weary Conway and his other three companions. Hilton portrays the tragedy of war and its aftermath. He is acutely aware of the horrific consequences of war. Through the novel, Hilton reminds the readers of another war; a war that would leave nothing safe and names it Dark Ages. The author expresses his humanitarian and ecological concerns about war. He criticizes the way world powers spend their money on military and weapon equipment. He regards it as a threat to our lives and our planet. The nations strength themselves to destroy whatever is left; eventually, they would take to the air. Therefore, he creates a quietude and harmonious world far away from civilization for Conway and his colleagues who have left the war-torn city of Baskul. After being hijacked, they are purposefully taken to Shangri-La. The author envisages the world of Shangri-La in a fantastic way. There are mysteries that Conway and his colleagues



should know. As the kidnapped group arrive in Shangri-La, they discover the beauty of life. They come to know that life is not about annihilation, it is about construction. Furthermore, they realize that the rulers of Shangri-La do not waste their budget and wealth on weapons to annihilate human beings and demolish nature. Moreover, they come to know that the people of Shangri-La live a happy and tranquil life. Unlike the outside world, they live many years beyond the lifespan; they age slowly and remain healthy. They find out that the key to all of these blessings is nature. Nature has provided them all the needs of life, and agriculture is their main source of income. Eventually, Conway and his companions learn the differences between the outside world and Shangri-La. All in all, Shangri-La becomes a haven for Conway and the other passengers. Throughout the novel, Hilton notifies man of Dark Ages. He urges us to work together to protect this planet. Even though *Lost Horizon* is a fictional work, however; the author brings to light a danger that can become a reality in the future. He urges us to take actions and protect our nature. If we do so we can attain our own Shangri-La. To achieve it, peace should replace violence; love should replace hate, and construction should replace annihilation.

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ئىكۆ-پۆلتىكىس لە رۆمانى لۆست ھۆرايزن ى جەيمس ھيلتن

پوختە: ئىكۆ-كربتسىزم ۋەك تىۋرىيەكى تازە دەرکەوتو گرنگى دەدات بە ۋە بابەتانەى كە پەيوەستن بە ژىنگە ۋە سروشتە ۋە. ئەم تىۋرىيە ھەولەدەدات كە ھۆشيارى بلاۋ بکاتە ۋە دەربارەى زەوى ۋ ئەو ھۆكارانە دەستىشان دەكات كە زيان بە سروشت دەگەيەنن. جەيمس ھيلتن لە رۆمانە يوتۆپىيە بەناۋبانگە كەيدا بە ناۋنیشانى (Lost Horizon) مرۆڤ لە كارىگەرە ترسناكەكانى جەنگ ۋ ويرانكارىيەكانى ئاگادار دەكاتە ۋە. لە رۆمانە كەدا نوسەر سەرنجى خوینەر بۇ جىھانىك پادەكېشى كە لەليۋارى ويرانبون داپە بە ھۆى جەنگ ۋ دەرەنجامە مرۆيى ۋ ژىنگەيەكانى. لەلايەكى تىرىشە ۋە جىھانىكى ھيمن ۋ دور لە جەنگ بۇ ئەو مرۆڤانە دروست دەكات كە بە ھۆى جەنگە ۋە بى لانه بوون. لە رۆمانە كەدا نوسەر تۆپەى خۆى بەرامبەر بە سىياسىيەكان دەرەبېرېت كە زيان ۋ ژىنگەيان خستۆتە مەترسىيە ۋە. چونكە لەم سەردەمەدا پېرشكى جەنگ جگە لە كارەساتى مرۆى چەندىن مەترسى ۋ زيان بە ژىنگە دەگەيەنېت. ئەم توۋىژىنە ۋە لە روانگەيەكى ئىكۆ-كربتىكە لە ۋە لە رۆمانە كەى كۆليۋەتە ۋە. رۆمانە كەى ھيلتۇن، ۋەك بەرھەمىكى ئىكۆ-فىكشن، جىھانىكى ئەپۆكالىپتىك پېشان دەدات كە بە ھۆى

جهنگه وه هاتوته ئاراو. له لايه كى تريشه وه نوسه ر جيهانىكى به ههش ئاسا پيشان ده دات كه خاليه له جهنگ و ويرانكارى ژينگه يى.

وشه سه ره كيه كان: ئيكو كرېتيسيزم، جهيمس هيلتن، لوست هورايزن، سروشت، مروفت

ئيكو-بلتيكس فى **Lost Horizon** لجميس هيلتون

المخلص: ظهرت ئيكو-كرېتيسيزم كنظرية جديدة تهتم بالمواضيع المتعلقة بالبيئة والطبيعة. تحاول هذه النظرية نشر التوعية حول كوكب الارض وتحديد الاسباب التي تضر بالطبيعة. جيمس هيلتون يحذر الناس من الآثار الخطيرة للحرب والدمار في روايته اليوتوبيا الشهيرة (**Lost Horizon**) فقدت أفقي في الرواية، يلفت المؤلف انتباه القراء إلى عالم على حافة الدمار الناجم عن الحرب والنتائج البشرية والبيئية. ومن ناحية أخرى، فإنه يخلق عالماً سلمياً خالياً من الحروب للشعوب التي لم تُرَكَّر لها الحرب. في الرواية، يعرب الكاتب عن غضبه من السياسيين الذين يعرضون الحياة والبيئة للخطر. لأن الحرب في هذا العصر تشكل تهديداً للبيئة، باستثناء الكوارث البشرية. تهدف هذه المقالة إلى تحقيق الرواية وتصويرها لكوارث الحرب من منظور النقد البيئي. أظهرت رواية هيلتون، كعمل خيالي بيئي، عالماً مروعا تهيمن عليه كوارث الحرب. من ناحية أخرى، أظهرت ايضاً عالماً هادناً خال من الحروب والدمار الطبيعي.

المفردات : طبيعة , البشر , **Lost Horizon** , إيكو كرېتيسيسم , جيمس هيلتون