

A Feminist Perspective on the End of Humanity: P. D. James's *The Children of Men*

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ABSTRACT: *The imagining of the worst ends of humanity has been so present in the genre of SF written in English that it has given rise to the subgenre of 'apocalyptic SF'. Among the 'existential risks' contemplated are cosmological or geological disasters, our use of weapons, global plagues and other pandemic agents, ecological collapse and climate change. However, the gradual or sudden loss of human fertility is not very often considered in masculine SF, but it is an important topic in feminist SF, which often tackles with the issue of sexual reproduction. As an example of this subgenre of open or critical feminist dystopia that portrays the end of humanity caused by global human infertility, P. D. James's *The Children of Men* (1992) will be analysed. As the article will show, James's novel raises crucial questions about gender roles and social constructions, as well as on the issues of breeding, social control and dissidence.*

KEYWORDS: *Apocalyptic literature; Feminist SF; In/Fertility; Literature in English; Speculative Fiction.*

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I. INTRODUCTION: APOCALYPTIC SCIENCE FICTION

Science fiction has generally been considered the literature of progress, and the political philosophy of SF to be essentially liberal (MacLeod 2003). However, global disaster, mass destruction and the end of the world as we know it have also been a common trope in the genre of SF. “[F]rom early works like Mary Shelley’s 1826 plague story *The Last Man*” (Masri 2015: 573), H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1985) —which ends up in complete darkness—, and M. P. Shiel’s *The Purple Cloud* (1901) —where a volcano’s toxic gasses cover the planet—; to Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach* (1957) —where a deadly radioactive cloud approaches— and Carol Emshwiller’s “Day at the Beach” (1959) —portraying family life in the nuclear holocaust—; and, more recent, Greg Bear’s *Blood Music* (1985) —examining the threats of nanotechnology—, Phyllis Dorothy James’s *The Children of Men* (1992)—the novel we will analyse in section three—, and Jenni Fagan’s *The Sunlight Pilgrims* (2016) —portraying a freezing 2020-world.

The fear of apocalypse and the imagining of the worst ends of humanity have been so present in the genre of SF written in English, that it has even given rise to the subgenre of ‘apocalyptic SF’. The evolution of this subgenre has been divided into four main periods where it has flourished: Firstly, in the nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth century “there developed what we call ‘Last Man literature’: poems, stories, and novels about the last man on earth” (Weiss 2012). Secondly, in the 1950s, when the works reflected the fears of nuclear war —and communism, in the case of many USA authors. Then, in the 1980s, reflecting the concerns about plagues and the dangers coming from outer space (Weiss). And finally, in the so-called ‘Golden Age’ of apocalyptic SF, covering from the year 2004 until the present, expressing our dread of “war, viruses, natural global disasters, genetically modified humans, computers run amok,” etc. (Weiss).

Contemporary SF is indeed abundant in narrations of global catastrophes, such as the novels *Parable of the Sower*, by Octavia Butler (1993), Emily St John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014), or Neal Stephenson’s *Seveneves* (2015). Apocalypse is also present in other literary genres, such as the Pulitzer Prize *The Road* (2006) by Cormac McCarthy, the collection of short stories by George Saunders, *The Tenth of December* (2013), or the non-fiction book *The Sixth Extinction* (2014) by Elizabeth Kolbert. But as stated above, it seems that SF is the preferred genre for the expression of this Romantic trope of destruction. As Susan Sontag stated in her essay “The Imagination of Disaster”: “[o]urs is indeed an age of extremity. We live under continual threat of two equally fearful [...] destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror” (Sontag 1966: 209). SF would “reflect world-wide anxieties” and serves “to allay them” (Sontag 1966: 210). As she further explained, “[s]cience fiction [is] about disaster, which is one of the oldest subjects of art” (Sontag 1966: 211). And, in this genre —which is usually “concerned with the aesthetics of destruction” (Sontag 1966: 211)—, disaster is usually “extensive”, allowing for fantasising “the destruction of humanity itself” (Sontag 1966: 211). However, SF is not only about fantasising, as Sontag stated; it can also lead to the thorough questioning of present-day reality and of the future. Its speculative mode can serve authors to explore the outcomes of human decisions and the possible evolutionary steps and potential futures.

As Scottish SF writer Ken MacLeod commented, “much of most popular SF is firmly within the Western liberal current: the historically very recent idea that the increase of human power over the rest of nature through the growth of knowledge and industry is possible and desirable” (MacLeod 2003: 231). However, many voices are also aware of the dangers of this colonialist thought and raise the question that nature might not be possible to be mastered. And SF is a fruitful field to express the fears of ‘existential risks’ —which are highly probable risks that threaten the future of the human species. Among these risks are cosmological or geological disasters, such as meteorite impacts or volcanism —which are generally considered to be not very probable—; other related to our use of weapons, such as nuclear annihilation or biological warfare —which would be considered ‘omnicide’—; and, among the most probable: global plagues and other pandemic agents involving viruses and bacteria, ecological collapse and climate change.

Apocalyptic plagues are one of the most feasible and terrifying subgenres, especially if we consider historical catastrophes such as the Black Death —which killed almost half of the European population in the 14th century, radically reducing the world population. Mary Shelley’s above-mentioned *The Last Man* (1826); Jack London’s *The Scarlet Plague* (1912); *Earth Abides* (1949) by George R. Stewart; Octavia E. Butler’s *Clay’s Ark* (1984); and the young-adult novel *Enclave* (2011) by Ann Aguirre, they all narrate the fatal risk or fall of civilisation caused by a deadly plague.

Environmental or ecological SF would precisely dig into the risk of ecological collapse. Examples of this subgenre would be Edgar Wallace’s “The Man Who Hated Earthworms” (1921); A. G. Street’s *Already Walks Tomorrow* (1938); Richard McKenna’s “Hunter, Come Home” (1963); Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* (1968); *Ecodeath* (1972) by William Jon Watkins; or *Nature’s End* (1986) by Whitley Strieber and James Kunetka, to cite just a few.

Among the most commonly found ‘existential risks’, the gradual or sudden loss of human fertility — due to chemicals, biology or some other unknown cause—, is not very often considered, despite the fact that infertility is commonly believed to be a rising problem, and that fertility treatments and assisted reproductive technology have become a common reality nowadays. Why is infertility seldomly tackled?

It could be argued that most popular SF is not only colonialist, but also firmly masculine or even misogynist. Luckily, in the last decades there has been a pluralisation of ideologies in the genre of SF and we can encounter some feminist approaches to topics that have been considered classically male such as the conquest of outer space, time travel —or the mastering of time—, intergalactic conflict, extraplanetary trade expansion, etc. This feminist line is usually excluded from general classifications in the subgenre of apocalyptic SF, but despite this omission by some critics, it is very much present, as we shall see.

II. FEMINIST SF-LITERATURE AND FERTILITY

Traditionally, SF has focused on science and technology, as well as on the mastering of nature. Issues such as female sexuality and human (or interspecies) reproduction have not often been dealt with in androcentric SF. Considerations of gender are usually absent in SF; but, in fact, it has “functioned as an enormous fertile environment for the extrapolations of sociocultural understandings of gender”, as Helen Merrick has pointed out (Merrick 2003: 241).

There are of course exceptions to this statement about the absence of gender consideration, and after the boom of feminist SF in the 1970s, women writers have been publishing much more and getting more attention by critics. As Raffaella Baccolini contends, “the contribution of women writers such as C. L. Moore, Anne McCaffrey, Joanna Russ, Ursula K. Le Guin, Alice Sheldon (James Tiptree Jr.), Marge Piercy, and Octavia Butler —to name only a few”, has been of paramount importance to the development of the genre (Baccolini 2000: 16). They contributed to the genre by questioning “the masculinist discourses of traditional science fiction” and by breaking down “universalist assumptions about gendered identities” (Baccolini 2000: 16). According to Baccolini, the dialectic engagement with tradition that these authors establish creates new genres such as “‘open or critical dystopia,’ which seems to be the preferred genre of the 1980s and 1990s” (Baccolini 2000: 16).

Apart from tackling the issue of sexual reproduction, many of these works by female feminist writers usually question social aspects of gender by means of the portrayal of utopias and/or dystopias in which gender roles are different to the traditional ones and in which reproduction is also portrayed in different ways. Examples of this would be Margaret F. Rupert’s “Via the Hewitt Ray” (1930) —where a society of “breeding males” is dominated women—; John Wyndham’s “Consider Her Ways” (1956) —which presents “a future matriarchal society arising after men had been wiped out by a virus” (Merrick 2003: 245)— or Nicola’s Griffith’s *Ammonite* (1993) —taking place in a very similar all-female planet—; Theodore Sturgeon’s *Venus Plus X* (1960), Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left Heart of Darkness* (1969), and Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1975) —novels exploring biological and cultural androgyny—; Naomi Mitchison’s *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962) —which considers xenogenesis and inter-species breeding— and *Solution Three* (1975) — a novel that explores nonsexual reproduction.

Several feminist novels specifically focus on in/fertility, fe/male gestation and human reproduction, such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) —a dystopia where fertile women have become reproductive slaves of a totalitarian state—; Sheri S. Tepper's *Gate to Women's Country* (1988) and Pamela Sargent's *The Shore of Women* (1986) —which in contrast portray worlds in which artificial insemination is controlled by women, who develop a process of 'gynogenesis' (Merrick 2003: 25); or Helen Sedgwick's *The Growing Season* (2017) —which speculates on a present-day reality where pregnancy is (physically) shared between the sexes.

These novels would be examples of feminist SF dystopias and utopias that focus on fertility and reproductive issues. As Vassallo, Grech and Callus have explained, "[t]he sub-genre of feminist science fiction with an emphasis on fertility explores the roles of women and men by examining social constructions and the enforcement of gender roles with particular reference to the inequalities of personal and political power that are dictated by one's gender" (Vassallo 2017: 4).

The next section will focus on the above-mentioned novel by P. D. James's *The Children of Men* (1992), which is part of this subgenre of 'open or critical' feminist dystopia that portrays the end of humanity caused by global human infertility.

III. P.D. JAMES AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF REPRODUCTION

Phyllis Dorothy James was born on Oxford in 1920, and she is author of eighteen mystery novels, two short-story collections, three non-fiction works, and the dystopian novel *The Children of Men*, which was adapted in 2006 for the big screen by Mexican film director Alfonso Cuarón as *Children of Men*.

P. D. James's *The Children of Men* is set in a depopulating England in the year 2021 and deals with the topic of mass infertility, which will eventually lead to human extinction. As Avril Horner has noted, the novel "represents some of the dominant anxieties of the early 1990s: the burden of an increasingly ageing population [... and]; a concern that the use of modern chemicals in everyday life might be causing fertility problems" (Horner 2014: 37). The novel is structured in two parts: Book One, Omega —narrated in the period from January 2021 until March 2021—, and Book Two, Alpha —covering October 2021. Some of the chapters, especially in the first part, are written in the form of diary, with a homodiegetic first-person narrator: Theodore Faron, a middle-aged English man. And the rest of the chapters have a heterodiegetic third-person narration, and the actions are focalised through the eyes of Theodore. The novel's plot is simple: in the first part, we have a description of the infertile tendency starting in the "Year Omega" (James 2010: 7), 1995, that has led the world to a state of serious depression, and very close to entropic death and human extinction due to (unexplained) global human infertility. As the narrator recalls in the year 2021, in 1995 the last human pregnancy took place on planet Earth, and, in 1996, the last baby —who dies at the very beginning of the novel at the age of 27— was born. At that time, "the world was already half convinced that our species had lost for ever the power to reproduce" (James 2010: 5).

In the 1990s, people believed that the reasons for universal infertility were "a result of more liberal attitudes to birth control and abortion, the postponement of pregnancy by professional women pursuing their careers, the wish of families for a higher standard of living" (James 2010: 10). But the reason was other: men where no longer fertile, and "even the frozen sperm stored for experiment and artificial insemination had lost its potency" (James 2010: 11). First, less breeding was welcomed, as overpopulation and pollution started to decrease. But later, as the effects of the falling population become too evident, nations realised that they could not maintain their economic structures (James 2010: 11). Despite the prolongation of life expectancy, people were getting older and there were no young people who could substitute them or compensate this ageing of world population. Naturally, the gradual biological extinction naturally also led to cultural extinction. As the character-narrator observes, "[t]he world's greatest libraries will in forty years' time at most be darkened and sealed" (James 2010: 4).

People were firstly demoralised because "Western science and Western medicine haven't prepared us for the magnitude and humiliation of this ultimate failure" to discover the cause of infertility (James 2010: 6). Then, once assumed, depression and decay continued, simply because "the human race had lost its power to breed" (James 2010: 11), and people knew they would become extinct quite soon. A great part of the novel deals with "impending decay" (James 2010: 198), "impotence, [...] impending disaster" (James 2010: 199). Places are abandoned, and "without any children, playgrounds look like small mass graves" (James 2010: 13). And people are "without enthusiasm, almost without interest" (James 2010: 200). As the character-narrator expresses, "without the assurance that we being dead yet alive, all pleasures of the mind and senses [...] seem to me no more than pathetic and crumbling defences shored up against our ruin" (James 2010: 13). Actually, the old often commit mass suicides —called the "Quietus" (James 2010: 67)— and other times the State forces them to do so by 'help' of "the soldiers" (James 2010: 106). "After Omega, [...] the country sunk in apathy, no one wanting to work, services almost at a stop, crime uncontrollable, all hope and ambition lost for ever" (James 2010: 215).

Then, the State decides to take control of the critical situation by examining and supervising people's bodies in order to try to find some hope, some fertile individuals. Every six months, "all healthy females" were subjected to "humiliating re-examinations" to decide whether they should be "on the list of women from whom the new race would be bred if ever a fertile male was discovered" (James 2010: 65). Healthy undeformed men were also subjected to strict controls, and "had been observed, studied" (James 2010: 78) in the vain hope to find a fertile male to save humanity from extinction.

Some people, "dissidents", having lost all hope, want to end the "semen testing programme" (James 2010: 82) and the "gynaecological examinations" (James 2010: 83), which they consider degrading, and they also want to close "State porn shops" (James 2010: 141). As the character-narrator explains, sex had "become among the least important of man's sensory pleasures" (James 2010: 164). Therefore, the Government sponsors porn shops and fosters explicit pornographic literature "to stimulate desire" (James 2010: 164), but none of it works. From a feminist perspective, this failure should not be a surprise, as linking State-fostered porn-induced desire with biological fertility issues seems shocking, if not absurd. By establishing this link, the novel raises the question about the different roles of porn, desire and reproduction, which can only be answered individually by readers—as our attitudes towards these issues are also very personal. However, James's *The Children of Men* suggests—as other feminist novels such as Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*—that these issues are not identical and interchangeable, as the patriarchal State in the novel seems to believe.

When Theo suddenly discovers that "Julian is pregnant" and that she is "going to have a child" (James 2010: 208), they all know that this could mean a new beginning for human life (James 2010: 208). "This changes everything, changes not only for you [the mother] but for the whole world" (James 2010: 218). However, the male and female attitudes towards this same miraculous event is very different. For, Rolf, who believes to be the father of the child, or Xan, the head of the Council, Warden of England, male reproduction equals power; and for Julian, the mother, or for Miriam, a midwife who helps her, female reproduction equals hope and also, and most importantly, freedom. Men seem to embody patriarchal thought and believe that bodies, and thus sexual reproduction, can be owned and controlled. Moreover, they also seem to believe that the only fertile man will become "the new Adam, begetter of the new race, the saviour of mankind" (James 2010: 234). And, of course, Rolf agrees with this thought and desires the power he will be given: he wants to become the new "Warden of England" (James 2010: 235). In contrast, women in the novel defend the liberty of both bodies and selves. As Miriam explains referring to the yet-unborn baby: "The child belongs to herself, but her mother is Julian. Until she's born and for a time after the birth, the baby and her mother are one. Julian has the right to say where she will give birth" (James 2010: 220). Reproduction, despite being necessary for us as a species, should be something eligible. As feminist thinking defends, motherhood must be chosen—"My body, my choice".

Julian—who has a masculine name given by mistake, breaking gender conventions—, represents the people who have been discarded, the ones who have been used by the State; she is "a reject" (James 2010: 265), and she is wary of power. She also knows—after the real father, Luke, who had also been a reject, sacrifices himself to save Julian and the baby—that if her child "is a boy, and he's fertile" (James 2010: 235–236), he will be used by the State to breed more children as soon as he can produce fertile sperm, and he will therefore become a slave. And she will do anything to prevent it and to protect her child's freedom. Rolf, in contrast, is blinded by his thirst of power and naively believes he will get everything he wants, ignoring the possibility that if the State would find out that he is fertile, he would "be a breeding, experimental animal for the rest of [his] life" (James 2010: 235). As Theo tells him: "They may need your sperm, but they can get possession of enough of that to populate England and half of the world, and then decide that you're expandable" (James 2010: 237). Needless to say, the novel exposes attitudes like the one held by Rolf and Xan as patriarchal and destructive; and, despite the gloomy and even desperate tone of the whole novel, freedom is still fought for.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, critical feminist apocalyptic SF offers new questions to the ones traditionally raised by male apocalyptic SF and urges to find answers to gendered social constructions, as well as to state-controlled breeding, patriarchal attitudes towards male and female bodies and the desire to master them, and personal freedom regarding reproduction. P. D. James's *The Children of Men* (1992) points out the extreme importance of reproduction for the sustainable development of States, as well as for the of the survival and well-being of the human race. In the context of the 1990s,—and I would say this still applies in the 2010s and probably in the 2020s— one might wonder if States in the world are aware of this vital significance of reproduction, and if women's bodies, desires and wishes are respected worldwide. As recent events like the global protests that have taken place in August 2018 to support the legal right to abortion in Argentina show, there is still a long way to march in order to achieve this feminist claim. Moreover, one might wonder if medical services still hold nowadays the patriarchal attitudes described in the novel, and if what Julian is afraid of—"the high sterile bed, the banks of machines to meet every possible medical emergency, the distinguished obstetricians" (James 2010: 217–218)— is really what is best for childbirth. Lastly, if children are the future of mankind and if they bring

the joy to us as a community, as a global society—as happens in the novel—, we might start assuming that they will inherit the planet and we might begin working towards leaving a better, fairer and cleaner place for them.

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