

Ecocritical Perspectives in Contemporary Japanese Science Fiction: A Case Study of *The Palace of the Flower Dragons**

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In the contemporary context of increasingly severe global ecological crises, literary works have gradually emerged as essential media through which humanity reflects on the relationship between the natural environment and human civilization. Within this trend, Japanese science fiction has produced a growing body of works that engage with ecological issues. Taking the Japanese science fiction novel *The Palace of the Flower Dragons* as a case study, this paper employs the theoretical framework of ecocriticism to examine the text across three dimensions—natural, social, and spiritual ecology. It investigates how the novel uses apocalyptic narrative strategies to explore the human–nature relationship and to articulate an ecological ethic of coexistence grounded in a non-anthropocentric worldview, thereby offering meaningful literary reference points for addressing real-world environmental crises.

Keywords: Japanese science fiction literature, non-anthropocentrism, Sayuri Ueda, ecocriticism

Introduction

As ecological crises intensify globally, science fiction's capacity for speculative foresight has established it as a vital medium for interrogating environmental challenges. Since its publication, Sayuri Ueda's *The Palace of the Flower Dragons* (Karyū no miya) has garnered significant critical acclaim, emerging as a landmark work in contemporary Japanese science fiction. Its powerful depiction of apocalyptic landscapes, alongside its nuanced exploration of human reconstruction and survival within such settings, embodies the author's profound ecological commitment. This study employs Ueda's novel as a critical lens to examine the ecological thought embedded in contemporary Japanese science fiction, with a particular focus on her representative works. This approach not only deepens our understanding of the development of eco-literature in East Asian contexts but also offers new perspectives for cross-cultural ecocritical studies.

Natural Ecological Thought: Reverence for Nature and Critique of Technology

Throughout the long course of civilization, humanity's attitude toward nature has evolved from primitive worship in early stages, to attempts to conquer it through technological power after the Industrial Revolution, and finally to the contemporary pursuit of harmonious coexistence. Science fiction literature, with its unique

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capacity to “prefigure the future”, has become an exceptional medium for exploring humanity’s relationship with nature. This is particularly true of apocalyptic speculative fiction, a subgenre that frequently conveys authors’ profound reflections on future ecological environments and human destiny, while also revealing their underlying environmental anxieties. Science fiction facilitates valuable and creative thought experiments by constructing uniquely expansive narrative spaces (Wu, 2011). By creating extreme scenarios, science fiction prompts readers to reconsider humanity’s relationship to nature.

The narrative of *The Palace of the Flower Dragons* is set on a future Earth devastated by an apocalyptic catastrophe. In the 25th century, violent tectonic shifts trigger earthquakes and tsunamis, raising sea levels by 260 meters. This submerges most landmasses, fundamentally alters the global ecosystem, and renders the remaining terrestrial and marine environments exceptionally hostile. Within this context, Sayuri Ueda introduces a core premise: biological modification and evolution. To survive in this radically transformed world, humanity, for the first time on a large scale, permits genetic engineering—including on itself. This central premise directly leads to the divergence of human forms and a reversal of the human-nature relationship.

Genetically altered humans are designated as the “sea-folk” (kaijō-min). Their descendants are always twins: One retains a human form, while the other develops into a massive marine creature measuring 20-30 meters in length, known as an “ichthynavis” (uobune). These Uobune serve as living vessels for their twins, coexisting symbiotically with the sea-folk in the ocean. Meanwhile, other humans who choose to inhabit regions like the Gobi Desert or high mountains evolve into “Bag People” (Fukurobito), whose bodies resemble large, black pupal sacs. They sustain themselves solely on sunlight, water, and vitamins, having completely diverged from the traditional human form.

In this post-apocalyptic setting, humanity, which once proclaimed itself the “master of nature”, is reduced to a passive adaptor. Although a minority clings to pre-catastrophe lifestyles in remnant land enclaves or floating cities, relying on technology and scarce resources, the environment and means to support such existence are critically limited. For the majority, survival demands altering their very biology to endure extreme conditions. Through this narrative framework, Ueda highlights human insignificance and vulnerability in the face of nature’s immense power, thereby subverting entrenched anthropocentric assumptions.

The depiction of the extreme post-disaster living environment in the work reproduces and exaggerates real-world ecological crises, serving as a warning. Moreover, the work presents the dual characteristics of “triggered by natural disasters and exacerbated by human errors”. In the world after the catastrophe, the sea is no longer its former blue; instead, it has been polluted into bizarre colors such as black, blue, and red. The water is filled with various mutated marine organisms and pathogenic bacteria, whose root cause lies in the industrial waste generated and left over from the previous era of human industrial civilization. The novel’s exaggerated scenes of ecological imbalance caused by human activities urge people to reflect on the long-term, irreversible damage that human behavior inflicts on the environment.

Beyond the direct impacts of industrial pollution, the work also exposes another hidden “human error”—the cascading ecological disasters triggered by the inappropriate application of technology. Through multiple cases in which human attempts to intervene in nature failed, even leading to more severe disasters, Ueda reveals the blindness inherent in humanity’s attempts to control nature. To alleviate soil salinization, humans planted genetically modified plants along the coast; however, these plants eventually spread inland, triggering the collapse of the terrestrial ecosystem. The oxygen-producing bacterium OX105, which humans released to repel

toxic jellyfish in the ocean, unexpectedly became a food source for the highly toxic Akashi sea urchins, resulting in the massive proliferation of this sea urchin species.

More ironically, researchers later discovered that the toxins found in the Akashi sea urchins originated from nanomachines manufactured by humans before the catastrophe. Researchers hypothesize that humans initially developed these nanomachines to control or eradicate another “harmful organism”—the ichthynavis that had mutated into “feranavis” (kemonobune). Nevertheless, the nanomachines not only failed to eliminate their intended target but also facilitated the continued mutation of the feranavis, leading to the emergence of toxin-bearing Akashi sea urchins. This development further destabilized marine ecosystems and ultimately endangered human survival itself. From a critical theory perspective, these scenarios demonstrate how technological rationality escalates ecological conflicts, as evidenced by widespread environmental pollution and wasteful resource practices (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2006).

Through its apocalyptic ecology and technology interventions, the novel explores ecological ethics. Ueda takes a balanced view of technology: Technology itself is not the problem, but rather the misuse and arrogance of humanity. The novel’s ecological ethic is evident: Humanity must let go of dominance over nature, accept technological limits, rediscover reverence for nature, and act with coexistence in mind. A dynamic balance is needed among humanity, technology, and nature.

Social Ecological Thought: Structural Imbalance and the Critique of Power

Within the social-ecological system that encompasses human communities and their surroundings (Lu, 2000), ecological crises arise from structural distortions in society that generate systems of domination whose inherent logic inevitably rationalizes and reinforces the exploitation of the natural world (Liu, 2009).

In contemporary society, systemic inequalities in identity and power lead to structural biases in resource distribution, risk exposure, and development opportunities. It is from this very context that ecocritical theory launches its critique, targeting the ecological exploitation and oppression that result. *The Palace of the Flower Dragons* uses a futuristic setting to make its central social argument: Technological monopolies and unequal resource distribution reflect and exaggerate current real-world inequalities. The conflict between land-folk and sea-folk is a metaphor for the persistent identity and class divisions that underpin the ecological crisis.

In the novel, land-folk have advanced technology and political power. They live relatively stable lives on land or in artificial cities. Sea-folk, genetically changed to survive at sea, face constant dangers. This leads to a strict hierarchy, with land-folk viewing sea-folk as outsiders. Their oppression appears both in ideology and in resource control. For example, land-folk control life-saving vaccines, using them to absorb sea-folk into their territory and keep power. This unequal access to medical resources mirrors fears about technological monopolies and ecological colonialism. Through this narrative, Ueda asks an important question: When resources and technology are controlled by a few, ecological crises become manifestations of social injustice rather than pure natural disasters. Under capitalism, profit drives overuse of resources and ecological colonization. This worsens environmental collapse and increases social division. The novel heightens this injustice. At first, only the elite have access to natural foods, while the lower classes compete for synthetic nutrients. After the catastrophe, sea-folk struggle to survive, while some land-folk use great resources to recreate pre-disaster conditions for luxury. A character notes, “Human desire knows no bounds. Money merely reveals one facet of it... The true sin lies hidden within the taste of this wine”.

By depicting the conflict between the land-folk and sea-folk, the novel argues that the ecological crisis stems not merely from superficial manifestations like pollution and technological failures, but from deep-seated drivers of unequal power structures and social hierarchies. Consequently, reforms limited to the technological sphere, without parallel transformation in the socio-ecological dimension, will prove inadequate for effectively mitigating the crisis.

Spiritual Ecology: Reconstructing the Consciousness of a Community of Life

While industrial capitalist civilization has improved human living conditions, it has also generated ethical dilemmas and spiritual crises, disrupting humanity's understanding of existence and meaning and contributing to ecological imbalance. As a response, spiritual ecology has emerged as a field exploring the underlying causes of environmental crises and emphasizing the importance of human psychological integrity and healthy development. *The Palace of the Flower Dragons* explores human spiritual ecology by challenging entrenched anthropocentrism and re-examining humanity's place within the web of life.

This reflection begins with redefining the boundaries of humanity and non-human life. When genetic engineering produces new life forms—such as the feranavis and the Bag People—that deviate from traditional notions of humanity, a fundamental question arises: Do these entities still count as “human”? The Bag People's chrysalis-like existence transcends biological categorization, while the symbiotic relationship between the sea-folk and the ichtynavis blurs distinctions between “human” and “animal”. Such dissolutions of identity boundaries undermine humanity's self-perceived status as the “crown of creation”, revealing Ueda's core belief: The value of life should not be determined by form, origin, or species. Each life form possesses inherent meaning and legitimacy. This recognition of life's equality aligns with ecological holism and manifests in the narrative as a critique of humanity's habitual tendency to “eliminate the other”.

Confronted with threats, the land-folk often resort to extermination. Toxic Akashi sea urchins and genetically modified feranavis containing human genes become targets of wholesale slaughter. Ueda challenges this response through character dialogues: “Is this truly the right way?” An alternative is embodied by the sea-folk, who respect the feranavis's right to exist, refraining from slaughter and avoiding interference with the land-folk's defensive actions. When considering how to deal with the Akashi sea urchin, Dr. Yōwa asserts: “No matter how different their ways of thinking, no matter how dangerous the creature, if they live on the same planet, they have the right to exist”. The novel, through the contrasting attitudes of the land-folk and the sea-folk, reveals a confrontation between two forms of spiritual ecology. The choices of the land-folk embody the arrogance produced by anthropocentrism, whereas the practices of the sea-folk demonstrate greater inclusiveness and reflect a non-anthropocentric perspective. The former represents a manifestation of the spiritual-ecological crisis visible in reality. At the same time, the latter constitutes an attempt at spiritual-ecological restoration—an effort to regard other forms of life through an understanding of the community of shared life.

Besides, Ueda's vision of a “community of life” further includes artificial intelligence. In the novel, AI assistants learn continuously through long-term coexistence with land-folk, forming an inseparable “human-machine symbiosis”. This interdependence mirrors the relationship between the sea-folk and the ichtynavis. By portraying AI as an integral part of the ecological web, Ueda expands the boundaries of the life community: Whether carbon-based or artificial, any entity capable of interaction and reciprocal influence within an ecosystem becomes part of the network of life.

Ueda's narrative extends beyond portraying human struggles in an ecological crisis. Embedded in the apocalyptic scenario is a vision of a "symbiosis among all life" and a community of living beings. At the core of this vision lies an attempt to reshape humanity's spiritual ecology. Ueda suggests that only by discarding the arrogance of anthropocentrism, recognizing the equal value of all life, and embracing "non-humans" as members of this community in our self-awareness can the relationships between humans and themselves, others, and nature be truly restored. This plot construction, grounded in a non-anthropocentric worldview, serves not only as a response to the spiritual crisis triggered by industrial capitalist civilization but also as a source of significant intellectual resources for addressing ecological dilemmas and rebuilding a healthy spiritual ecology in the real world.

Conclusion

Through its exploration of natural, social, and spiritual dimensions, *The Palace of the Flower Dragons* constructs a comprehensive ecological apocalypse. While presenting a world on the brink of collapse, the novel moves from exposing symptoms to interrogating deeper causes. At the natural level, it critiques the destruction of ecological balance caused by technological abuse; at the social level, it exposes the distortion of resource distribution driven by power structures; at the spiritual level, it confronts the moral limitations of anthropocentrism. These three layers intertwine, converging on a central proposition: Resolving ecological crises requires the coordinated advancement of technological governance, social transformation, and value reconstruction.

Humanity may never fully escape anthropocentric constraints. However, Ueda's *The Palace of the Flower Dragons* offers a perspective that transcends these limitations, urging us to exist as responsible members of the biosphere. Only by humbly rebuilding an ethic of coexistence with all living beings can human civilization locate a sustainable future within nature's vast forces and the enduring resilience of life.

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