

48-Ecocritical analysis of collective memory in *The Margarets* by Sheri S. Tepper

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Abstract

Recent studies on humanities put forward the idea that if the human population continues to grow, as it does now, without any restraint and environmental awareness, the whole world will be on the verge of an environmental catastrophe. Sheri Stewart Tepper, a science-fiction American writer, wrote her novel *The Margarets* (2007) from an ecofeminist point of view. In the dystopian future world of the novel, Margaret Bain, the female protagonist, undertakes the mission to save humankind from the danger of extinction. In order to this, she has to find a way to get back the stolen collective memory of humans since memory is the fundamental element in uniting humans, and ultimately making them perfect humans. Humans genetically are capable of learning from their past mistakes. They build a collective memory by learning from their previous mistakes and with this knowledge they continue their existence. Since the human population cannot continue living on Earth, people have to find other planets to live on. Margaret, the only child of her planet, creates six alternate selves, each taking different paths and living their own lives on different planets. When all of the Margarets come together sharing their experience and knowledge, they feel empathy towards the others and by this way they become perfect. Memory together with empathy unites the fragmented selves into a perfect whole. Only when people remember their past/history, then they are more aware of what is waiting for them in the future. By taking a comprehensive point of view and remembering the consequences of past actions, humans can help the healing of the Earth as a natural necessity. Only by this way, humankind and all other species will continue surviving in harmony. The purpose of this study is to analyse the novel from an ecocritical point of view, in terms of posthumanist approaches towards collective memory which may form the destiny of humanity.

Keywords: American novel, ecocriticism, collective memory, posthumanism, Sheri S. Tepper

Sheri S. Tepper'in *The Margarets* adlı eserinde kolektif hafızanın ekoeleştirel analizi

Öz

Beşeri bilimler üzerine yapılan son araştırmalar, insan nüfusu şu anda olduğu gibi, herhangi bir kısıtlama ve çevre bilinci gözetilmeksizin artmaya devam ederse, insanlığın bir çevre felaketinin eşiğinde olduğu fikrini ortaya koymaktadır. Amerikalı bilim kurgu yazarı Sheri Stewart Tepper, *The*

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Margarets (2007) romanını ekofeminist bir bakış açısıyla yazmıştır. Romanın distopik gelecek dünyasında, kadın başkahraman Margaret Bain, insanlığı yok olma tehlikesinden kurtarma görevini üstlenmektedir. Bunun için, insanların çalınan kolektif hafızasını geri almanın bir yolunu bulması gerekmektedir. Çünkü hafıza, insanları birleştirmenin ve nihayetinde onları mükemmel insanlar haline getirmenin temel unsurudur. İnsanlar genetik olarak geçmiş hatalarından ders çıkarma yetisine sahiptir. Önceki hatalarından ders çıkartarak kolektif bir hafıza oluştururlar ve bu bilgi ile varlıklarını sürdürürler. Romanda, insan nüfusu dünya üzerinde yaşamaya devam edemeyeceğinden, insanların kendilerine yaşayacakları başka gezegenler bulmaları gerekmektedir. Gezegeninin tek ve son çocuğu olan Margaret, her biri farklı yollar izleyen ve farklı gezegenlerde kendi hayatlarını yaşayan altı alternatif benlik yaratır. Yedi Margaret deneyimlerini ve bilgilerini paylaşarak bir araya geldiğinde, birbirlerine karşı empati kurarlar ve bu şekilde mükemmel hale gelirler. Empati ile birlikte hafıza, parçalanmış benlikleri mükemmel bir bütün halinde birleştirir. Ancak insanlar geçmişlerini/tarihlerini hatırladıklarında, gelecekte kendilerini neyin beklediğinin daha fazla farkına varırlar. İnsanlar, kapsamlı bir bakış açısıyla ve geçmiş eylemlerinin sonuçlarını hatırlayarak, doğal bir gereklilikle dünyanın iyileşmesine yardımcı olabilirler. Ancak bu şekilde insanlık ve diğer tüm canlı türleri uyum içinde yaşamaya devam edebilecektir. Bu çalışmada roman, insanlığın kaderini oluşturabilecek kolektif hafızaya yönelik post-hümanist yaklaşımlar göz önünde bulundurularak eko-eleştirel bir bakış açısıyla incelenmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Amerikan romanı, ekoeleştiri, kolektif hafıza, post-hümanizm, Sheri S. Tepper

Ongoing studies on humanities set forward the possibility that if the human population continues to increase, as it does now, with no limitation and ecological realization, the world will be on the verge of an environmental disaster. Sheri Stewart Tepper, a prolific author of science fiction, wrote her novel *The Margarets* from an ecofeminist point of view. Portraying her characters enchantingly and making amazingly detailed depiction of a dystopian setting, Tepper presents her readers the mission of Margaret Bain to save humankind from the danger of extinction by finding a way to get back the stolen memory of the humans. Humans genetically are capable of learning from past mistakes. They build a collective memory by learning from their previous mistakes and with this knowledge they continue to exist. Thus, memory is the fundamental element in uniting humans and ultimately forming the perfect human.

Sheri Tepper's work can be classified in the category of "critical dystopias" (Baccolini and Moylan, 2003) because it portrays the dark side of hope. A critical dystopia, with its loss and representations of worse realities, retains the possibility for alteration and pushes the society towards regeneration. Likewise, Tepper depicts an Earth which has been overpopulated and polluted, so humankind has to find other planets to live on. At the same time, humanity has been punished by an alien race known as Quaat. This alien species by using brain block rays have wiped out/stolen the memory of humans. According to a prophecy in the story, the humans have to walk seven roads at once to see the Keeper who may give their memory back.

In the novel, Interstellar Trade Organisation (ISTO) which helps to regulate the systems of the planets and living creatures, recognises four kinds of creatures; "civilized", "semicivilized", "barbarians" and "animals." Civilized people are described as people who "know about, care about, and protect their environments" whereas semi-civilized people are the ones who "know and care, but can't do anything" because they are prevented by factors such as public apathy, commercial interference, religious

opposition and government corruption. The barbarians are the ones who “know but don't care about their worlds” while the animals are people who “don't even know” (Tepper, 2007: 29). These four categories divide living things according to their ecological awareness.

Margaret Bain is the last human child living in a colony on Martian satellite Phobos. Due to her being the only child, she feels highly lonely and invents six fictional accomplice characters. In total, she becomes seven independent individuals. Each of them is an extension of her personality: the original Margaret is the linguist living on planet Tercis; her second self is a spy called Ongamar on planet Cantardene; her third self is Wilvia, a princess running away from the cruelty of the alien race Quatar on planet Hell; her fourth self is a healer called Gretamara on planet Chottem; her fifth self is Naomi on Thairy, a male warrior; her sixth self is Mar the telepath on Fajnard and her last seventh self is Murgy the shaman on B'yurngrad. They disappear when she is forced to go back to Earth. Margarets spread throughout the galaxy, and their creator is the one who can only bring them together. If she cannot gather the selves, humankind will never be able to reach the Keeper and get back their racial memory, and ultimately human beings will be doomed to annihilation.

The time for Margaret Bain's leaving the colony comes when she is mature. She is obliged to leave Phobos, a planet whose natural resources being consumed and depleted waits to die out, as Earth once did a long time ago. The only trading element for the powerful authorities is the human slaves. Alien races are eager to buy human slaves for either their labour work or to keep them as their domestic companions. The 2080's are depicted as difficult times in the novel: Humans have thoughtlessly used natural sources and have exploited the environment massively, thinking all the natural sources are created for them. Therefore, in the book, these attitudes have ensured the end of the human race. By the end of the twenty-first century, the majority of the human population is still unaware of the problem that over-population and environmental greed are unsustainable elements. Earth is occupied with too many “barbarians” who know that they were responsible to preserve their natural resources but they would rather not do anything. The people and governments are in constant denial: “Only when aliens arrived in starships to tell them the end had come did governments try to deal with the situation, and by then, it was too late” (Tepper, 2007: 108-9).

In the novel, Earth has been facing a catastrophe for years, but still, people do not think that they have done anything wrong. From the eyes of Margaret, we see that nobody around her really wants to be involved in caring for the environment. She seeks answers to her questions about her environment. For instance, when she brings up the issue of water rationing her parents answer recklessly as, “Oh sweetheart, you don't want to talk about that. Let's not spoil the day” or, “Honeybun, I just don't think about it” since they believe that “measuring it doesn't help anything” (Tepper, 2007: 28). Although people see that they are headed in a very dangerous direction, they not only deny their role in the process but also are hesitant to take any action.

As Margaret grows up in-to adulthood, one by one, her created alternate selves take different life paths from her and live their own lives. In each traumatic moment or the sudden changes happening around her, a part of herself separates and walks off to live her own life in another place. In total, six different selves separate and move to different planets living totally different lives from each other; “They are seven people and one person; all Margarets vary emotionally, mentally, and physically” (Clarke and Vint, 2008). As the wise Gardener mentions: “many children have such selves, harbouring all kinds of possibilities within themselves. Each person contains the seeds of several persons” (Tepper, 2007: 84). They are the hidden characters that Margaret could have.

Each Margaret represents a feature of a human, and all seven together, form a person who is capable enough to save humanity and the world. The first Margaret, the linguist, understands all languages and is able to communicate with everyone. She is the embodiment of all the people who are world citizens and maintain communication without national boundaries. Naumi, the warrior Margaret, an emblem of duty, responsibility, and initiative, leads the tribe through many critical troubles. Her life can be described as a life of service, a life spent to duty and obligation. It is a kind of an adulthood exam that resembles the experience that men have during military service. She gets an education that encourages teamwork, a way of seeing things from many viewpoints as possible. She stands for the people who don't hesitate to take responsibility for the sake of society while respecting other people's perspectives at the same time. Pet/ domestic companion Margaret, called Ongamar, is adopted by a Quaatara named K'famira Adille. This alien race organises sacrificing ceremonies. In the beginning small animals were used in these ceremonies. Later, however, seeing humanity as an inferior and lacking race, the Quaatara decided to torture humans as their pets. Ongamar's difficult life as a pet companion to the alien race stands for human sacrifice which is a kind of obsession with blood and pain. Her pain can be a reference to religion which demands cruelty and sacrifices in the name of religion (Tepper, 2007: 175). The telepath Margaret, known as Mar-agern, has the duty to take care of the animals on a farm. Her role is to see the hearts of other species especially to contact animal species. By communicating with animals, she develops insight and ecological awareness. She represents the need to listen since she understands the language of nature by communicating with animals. According to her, people should be respectful towards animals' needs. The queen Margaret, called Wilvia, tries to be an inspirational and wise leader: her duty is to govern her citizens and be fair. She represents the ideal governor, who cares and gives equal justice to all. The healer Margaret, called Gretamara, learns to make elixirs and medicines to cure people desperately in need. The shaman Margaret, called Murgi, explores ways to trap the evil parasites. Her role is to send her spirit away to explore faraway places.

All Margarets come together and by complementing each other's life experiences they become the embodiment of the solution to humanity. As depicted in Naumi's education period, the best way to find a solution to a problem is to involve the whole group in solving that problem (Tepper, 2007: 144). People should gather around the problem of healing the Earth, as represented in the uniting of the seven Margarets at the end of the story. To save humanity, people should be open to communication, do their duty in the teamwork, which means living in harmony with other species on earth and making sacrifices, even sometimes sacrificing their own selves or deprive oneself, listen to and care for other species' wellbeing, govern other people wisely and fairly, adapt to different life conditions and make use of whatever is given to them wisely. All Margarets, who are apt in disguising and camouflaging, listen carefully and gather up information from different events. Ready to explore and benefit from their diverse experience, all seven selves are able to adapt to new life conditions easily. Only in this way, by embracing all species and accepting all aspects of life -the good and the bad, can people maintain and, thus, restore the stolen memory of humanity.

Currently, MAHB—the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere is a newly established organization, dedicated “to mobilizing and uniting all the disparate forces of civil society trying to steer human cultural evolution in the right direction—to solve the environmental crisis” (Ehrlich Paul R. et. al, 2014). MAHB's goals include uniting efforts in the social sciences, humanities, and arts with those of the natural sciences, and working to coordinate institutions with wisdom. It mainly draws attention to the necessity of human population control. In the book, *Third Order of the Sisterhood*, which warns humans about the necessity of depopulation for Earth's survival, can be regarded as the embodiment

of MAHB. The Sisterhood helps the Margarets to gather and find the Keeper. Humans are given two options by the authorities: the first option is to do nothing and wait for the enemy alien races to kill ninety percent of all the people living on Earth while the second option is the sterilization of majority of the Earth's population with a planetary sterilant (Tepper, 2007: 109):

If the human race is to survive, we needed seven of you with a broad variety of experiences. Some were slaved, some were sovereign, some labored, some thought, some were hidden, some were put in unexpected places, some were left out in plain sight to see if anyone showed undue interest. You were camouflaged. (Tepper, 2007: 469)

Thereby, out of all the seven selves there would be one person who would know everything. As indicated in the novel, “. . . walking seven roads that are one road, all at the same time” (Tepper, 2007: 469) is the only alternative left for mankind; for it is only through uniting the different but kindred experiences of the seven selves can Margaret meet the Keeper and retrieve the memory that humanity has lost.

As discussed in Lonnie W. Aarssen's article “Will Empathy Save Us?,” recent studies have brought up the theory that broadening human empathy ability to a global extent would be saviour of a civilization (2013: 211). Empathy can lead to cultural evolution to solve the problems of society, in ways that will broaden the potential and impact of our empathic human nature to a global scale. It is hinted in the article that Darwin believes the coming age of humanity will span its social instincts and sympathetic impulses (Aarssen,2013: 211). The new humans will become more tender and sensitive beings. Therefore, humanity should act together since we are “walking the same tightrope,” and we need to “maintain the balance together” (Aarssen, 2013: 212). In the book, human beings are described as “incapable of learning anything outside their own lifetimes!” (Tepper, 2007: 112). Actually, humans can reach a civilized status very easily. They must first learn how to put themselves in the shoes of others. Only through empathy can society be kept in balance.

Rosi Braidotti claims that subjectivity is highly significant “to match the profound transformations that we are undergoing” as humanity. She offers the idea that we should “think differently about ourselves” (2013: 12). The posthuman condition makes people to “think critically and creatively about who and what they are actually in the process of becoming” (Braidotti, 2013: 12). According to her, the concept of human has altered due to the pressure of contemporary scientific advances and global economic concerns. It is stated that the posthuman “provokes delight but also anxiety about the possibility of a serious de-centring of ‘Man,’ the former measure of all things” (Braidotti, 2013: 2). Ecological posthumanists have a comprehensive point of view and defend the healing of the Earth for natural necessity, and living of the species in harmony (Braidotti, 2013: 48).

Similarly, Spinoza's “monastic universe,” a concept that defends the idea that “the world and humans are not dualistic entities structured according to principles of internal and external opposition” (qtd in Braidotti, 2013: 56), also gives priority to the “unity” of all elements and living beings. This monastic basis is fundamental to the posthuman theory of subjectivity. The unity of living is supported by “an updated scientific understanding of the self-organizing or ‘smart’ structure of living matter” (Braidotti, 2013: 57). Leading thinkers and critics like Habermas, Fukuyama, Sloterdijk, elaborating on the subject, put forward their concerns: “The posthuman turn is a concern for the status of human with the fear of displacement of the centrality of human and creates moral and cognitive panic condemning technological developments for this” (Braidotti, 2013: 64). In *The Margarets*, the human is no more at the centre of the universe due to his recklessness and lack of action in preserving his environment. The

status of human has changed, humans have become trading elements for other races in the universe. This portrays what most of the thinkers are afraid about the posthuman turn: “the displacement of man” (Braidotti, 2013: 67). Furthermore, another new perception of posthuman subjectivity raises ethical conflicts: “A posthuman notion of the enfleshed and extended, relational self keeps the techno-hype in check by a sustainable ethics of transformation” (Braidotti, 2013: 90). The idea of “the contempt for the flesh and the trans-humanist fantasy of escape from the finite materiality of the enfleshed self” (Braidotti, 2013: 91), can be resembled to Margaret’s inventing imaginary selves and escaping from her body/real self to live the other possible experiences of life. Her alternate selves enable her unlimited life chances, in this way, she embraces various perspectives.

Our past, present, and future are closely related to our memory. Current researches have suggested that our brain that helps us to remember things, also helps us to think about the future and its possibilities. In *The Moral Demands of Memory* (2008), Jeffrey Blustein examines and tries to find answers to the questions about the moral demands of memory. Remembering is an important element of personal and social life (Blustein, 2008: 5). He explains why people are responsible for their past and elaborates on the importance of taking this responsibility, since it is “a way of preserving the past for current and future generations” (Blustein, 2008: 176-177). His central idea can be summarized as: being a moral person means not only remembering but also taking the responsibility for one’s own past. A responsible moral person both holds on to memory and having sensitivity towards the future. He portrays Nietzsche’s challenge that “happiness and effective moral agency require the strong capacity to forget the past, to feel *unhistorically* as well as historically in appropriate measure” (Blustein, 2008: 6).

According to Blustein, a responsible person’s past behaviours form a basis for his present and future behaviours.

Human happiness requires both the capacity to forget and the capacity to remember, because human beings cannot live without forgetting any more than they can live without remembering. Or rather it requires, in Nietzsche’s view, the intricate balancing of living *unhistorically* and remembering. (2008: 7)

When the Keeper asks the Margarets how they could manage to accomplish the impossible by walking seven roads at the same time, they answer as follows:

Wilvia answered “only through great sacrifice”, M’urgi: by “Patience”, Mar-agern: by “labor”, Ongamar: by “torment”, Naumi: by “doing our duty”, Gretamara: by “heal(ing) people”. Gretamara said, “We are imperfect... we are lacking. We have no memory of what we were, and thus no reach toward what we may become. We desperately need to know our past, but in all the universe only the Keeper has the racial memory of mankind”. (Tepper, 2007: 493)

As indicated from this quotation, people are “imperfect” and “lacking” without a racial memory (Tepper, 2007: 493). In their review of the novel, Nic Clarke and Sherryl Vint (2008) also indicate that it is the absence of “race memory” that leads to the destruction of Earth:

The reason why humanity is a flawed species, the novel suggests, is that it destroys its environment is that [sic] it lacks a race memory, an attribute of civilised people with moral systems, which was stolen from them. We can cognitively learn that overpopulation and depletion of resources are unwise but cannot feel ‘in our bones’; through experience, this truth. (Clarke and Vint, 2008:1)

When all of the Margarets come together sharing their experience and knowledge, they feel empathy towards the others and this understanding makes them perfect. Memory unites the elements that

make the perfect human. Only when people remember their past can they take responsibility of their present and plan a better future.

In conclusion, “the Posthuman condition” requires the need to think again and to think intensely about the place of humans. Margarets come together to explore their function in the destiny of humanity throughout the novel. All Margarets have been split up for their well-being and safety, aiming to practice various ways of life and methods of determining answers to problems, and looking at things from different viewpoints. In brief, Margaret creates alternative selves of her to find alternative solutions to the problems that humanity has initiated. By following the paths of Margarets in finding their identity, we come to the understanding of human identity. The ultimate solution Tepper offers relies not on technology but on the alteration to the attitudes of human beings. As philosopher Spinoza (qtd in Braidotti, 2013: 57) suggests, people need to update their scientific understanding and employ a “smarter” way of living, and as Blustein (2008: 176-177) stresses: people need to remember their past experiences and take responsibility for them. People need to be open to interaction with not only other humans but also other living species on Earth. Furthermore, people should listen to the warnings of nature and be ecologically respectful and aware. By taking a comprehensive point of view, remembering and taking responsibility for the consequences of past harmful actions, humans can help the healing of the Earth as a natural necessity. Only in this way, humankind and all other species will continue surviving in harmony.

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