

Ecological Posthumanism in “Vaster than Empires and More Slow” by Ursula K. Le Guin*

Ursula K. Le Guin’in “Vaster than Empires and More Slow” Eserinde Ekolojik Posthümanizm

ASSIST. PROF. DR. DERYA BİDERCİ DİNÇ**

Abstract

This study presents a posthumanist reading of Ursula Le Guin’s speculative fiction “Vaster than Empires and More Slow” (1971) by situating it within current debates on ecological posthumanism. It approaches the story as a speculative meditation on the posthuman condition of being and more-than-human relationality. Ecological posthumanist framework challenges anthropocentric narratives by foregrounding ecological interconnectedness, nonhuman agency, and transformed subjectivities. Drawing on key concepts such as intra-action by Karen Barad and trans-corporality by Stacy Alaimo, the article explores how Le Guin’s speculative fiction blurs the boundary between human and nature, and reconfigures the relationship between human explorers and the sentient forest they encounter. The analysis focuses on the story’s representation of planetary awareness, in which sensitivity, agency, and cognition are presented as distributed across human and nonhuman actants. Le Guin destabilises the binary division between human and nonhuman and undermines human exceptionalism. In this context, cognition, affect, and co-constitution come up as a fundamental form of ecological relationality. The depiction of planetary awareness ultimately reflects a posthuman ontology grounded in entanglement and co-constitution. This study reveals that Le Guin’s narrative not only critiques anthropocentrism but also reimagines ecological futures grounded in relationality and shared becoming.

Keywords: ecological posthumanism, speculative fiction, Ursula Le Guin, anthropocentrism, intra-action

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** Assist. Prof. Dr., Istanbul Topkapı University, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, English Language and Literature, deriyabidercidinc@topkapi.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-9443-7136

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Öz

Bu çalışma, Ursula Le Guin'in "Vaster than Empires and More Slow" (1971) başlıklı spekülâtif kurgu eserini, ekolojik posthümanizm bağlamında posthümanist bir okuma çerçevesinde incelemektedir. Çalışma, hikayeyi posthüman varoluş durumu ve insan-dışı ile ilişkisel birliktelik üzerine spekülâtif bir düşünüm olarak ele alınmaktadır. Ekolojik posthümanist kuramsal çerçeve; ekolojik karşılıklı bağlılığı, insan-dışı etki biçimlerini ve dönüşüme uğramış öznellik anlayışlarını görünür kılarak antroposantrik anlatıları sorgular. Karen Barad'ın iç-ilişkisel edim kavramı ile Stacy Alaimo'nun bedenler arası geçişkenlik gibi temel yaklaşımından hareketle bu makale, Le Guin'in spekülâtif kurgusunun insan-doğa ikiliğini nasıl istikrarsızlaştırdığını ve insan kâşifler ile karşılaştıkları duyarlı orman arasındaki ilişkiyi nasıl yeniden yapılandırıdığını incelemektedir. Bu bağlamda, zekâ, duygulanım ve birlikte-oluşum, ekolojik ilişkilenenin temel kipleri olarak öne çıkarılmaktadır. Analiz, özellikle öyküdeki gezegensel bilinç temsiline ve sözel dile dayanmayan iletişim biçimlerine odaklanmakta; bu unsurların insan istisnacılığına ve sözel dilin tahakkümüne yönelik eleştirel bir işlev üstlendiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Gezegensel bilincin bu temsili, nihayetinde, dolaşıklık ve birlikte-kuruluş temelinde şekillenen posthüman bir ontolojiyi yansıtmaktadır. Çalışma, Le Guin'in anlatısının yalnızca antroposantrizmi eleştirmekle kalmadığını, aynı zamanda karşılıklı ilişkiler ve paylaşılan varoluş temelinde kurgulanan ekolojik geleceklere yeniden düşünmeye imkân tanıdığını ortaya çıkarır.

Anahtar kelimeler: ekolojik posthümanizm, spekülâtif kurgu, Ursula Le Guin, insan-merkezcilik, iç-ilişkisel edim

INTRODUCTION

Ursula K. Le Guin (1929-2018) began publishing speculative fiction in the early 1960s and is widely acknowledged as one of the most influential figures in modern speculative fiction. Her works explore feminist, ecological, and posthuman perspectives through recurring concerns with gender fluidity, anarchist and feminist critiques of power, non-hierarchical social structures, cultural relativism, the relationship between human and nature, sustainability, and alternative social systems. She extends the concept of domination beyond humans to include non-human and more-than-human entities. She is known for examining deep philosophical, social, and political issues through imaginative settings, including the Hainish Universe and Earthsea. In her Earthsea series, she reinterprets traditional hero myths by challenging gender norms and patriarchal narratives. In her Hainish cycle, including *The Dispossessed* (1974) and *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), she depicts societies where individuals have no fixed gender. As part of the Hainish cycle, "Vaster than Empires and More Slow" offers an interesting reflection on empathy, ecological consciousness, and the collapse of the human-non-human divide in modern speculative fiction.

Le Guin's short story recounts an encounter between a team of explorers and a planet covered by a sentient forest, resulting in ontological and emotional transformation. Le Guin's narrative sits at the crossroads of ecological and posthuman concerns, challenging anthropocentric power, subjectivity, and intelligence. Rather than suggesting didactic environmental messages, she creates a posthuman narrative that highlights the limits of human sovereignty, mastery, and agency and

blurs the boundary between human and nonhuman. She emphasises that survival and understanding depend on empathy, the ability to recognise other forms of life and consciousness, and to coexist with them. In her writing, she compels readers to move beyond the human/nonhuman binary and question their identity, i.e. who they are as a species. Her narrative draws on posthumanist discussions of posthuman subjectivity and species identity, particularly those expressed by scholars such as Rosi Braidotti and Cary Wolfe, which will be incorporated into the theoretical framework of this study. The protagonist Osden views nonhuman agents in the natural world through ecological posthuman entanglement and relationality. Osden's intra-action with the forest foregrounds a relational ontology in place of mechanistic and passive conceptions of nature. By examining Osden's affective vulnerability, intra-active embodiment, and relational reconfiguration of subjectivity, this study argues that Le Guin's narrative exemplifies ecological posthumanism not only as a critique of anthropocentrism, but also as an ethical and affective transformative process in which subjectivity emerges through relational exposure to nonhuman alterity, thus redefining species identity as dynamic and porous.

The title of the story is borrowed from the 17th-century metaphysical poem, "To His Coy Mistress" by Andrew Marvell. In the lines, "My vegetable should grow/Vaster than empires, and more slow" (Lines,11 and 12), the poet persona addresses his beloved, suggesting that if they had infinite time, he would love her more patiently and gradually, with a love that grows like a plant, expanding slowly, and naturally. Le Guin borrows the line and echoes this sentiment, reflecting the immense and slow-growing nature of understanding and empathy. The slowness of plant life reflects the gradual development of empathy between Osden, the human explorer, and the alien consciousness. This reference signals Le Guin's story's attention to slow, gradual and mutual circulation between human and non-human, suggesting that love, empathy and understanding can emerge in unusual, unexpected, and non-human ways.

This study comprises three main sections. The first section outlines the theoretical foundations of the study, which focuses on ecological posthuman thought. It discusses key concepts in ecological posthumanism, drawing particularly on the works of Rosi Braidotti, Cary Wolfe, and Karen Barad. It establishes how ecological posthumanist thought can be used to examine narratives that challenge anthropocentrism and foreground interrelatedness, entanglement, and relationality. Building on the theoretical framework, the second section presents a close reading of the story through the lens of ecological posthumanism. It explores how Le Guin depicts the nonhuman as active agents, how effective responses emerge through human and nonhuman encounters, and how the human and nonhuman binary is destabilised. It reflects how her narrative exemplifies posthuman ideas. The conclusion section summarises the study's main findings.

1. ECOLOGICAL POSTHUMANISM: BEYOND THE HUMAN

Posthumanism, often literally understood as "after" humanism, is frequently regarded as the end of humanism. Rather than rejecting the human, it redefines the concept of human and proposes a shift away from traditional humanist perspectives. As Cary Wolfe argues, posthumanism is "far from surpassing or rejecting the human, it actually enables us to describe the human and its characteristic modes of communication, interaction, meaning, social significance, and affective

investments with greater specificity once we have removed meaning from the ontologically closed domain of consciousness, reason, reflection" (2010, p.xxv). Posthumanism does not intend to surpass or abrogate the human; instead, it reconfigures the human, enabling a more precise understanding of human modes of communication, meaning, and interaction. It emerges through the decentering of anthropocentrism, transcending the presumed duality between humans and nonhumans. Similarly, posthumanism is depicted by Karen Barad as "the practice of accounting for the boundary-making practices by which the human and its others are differentially delineated and defined, refusing the anthropocentrism of humanism and anti-humanism" (2007, p.136). In view of this, posthumanism carefully destabilises the Enlightenment idea of the human as a rational, self-contained, and autonomous subject, as well as its privileged position in ethics, rights, political subjectivity and the universe. As Rosi Braidotti notes, "posthumanism provokes elation but also anxiety (Habermas, 2003) [within contemporary thought] about the possibility of a serious de-centring of 'Man', the former measure of all things" (Braidotti, 2023, pp.1-2).

One of the central assumptions unsettled by posthumanism is the long-standing philosophical binary oppositions through which agency and meaning have traditionally been constructed. By questioning the stability of these binary oppositions, particularly the division of human/non-human, posthumanism allows for relational and interconnected modes of existence that challenge anthropocentric hierarchies. Therefore, the human-non-human divide is no longer structured as a binary opposition but reimagined through an intra-active and relational perception, reflecting Braidotti's statement that posthuman subjectivity arises through the subversion of humanist binaries. "The binary opposition between the given and the constructed is currently being replaced by a non-dualistic understanding of nature-culture interaction. ... The boundaries between the categories of the natural and the cultural have been displaced ... blurred" (Braidotti, 2013, p.3). Her statement describes a posthuman transformation in which human is redefined and reconstructed through blurring the boundaries between human and non-human, the given and constructed, and what is independent of human interpretation and what is shaped by human intervention. This blurring suggests that natural and cultural categories are not stable. Rather than existing as separate entities, humans and nonhumans emerge through their interactions. Braidotti's statement that "the posthuman condition introduces a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet" (2013, pp.1-2) encapsulates a fundamental epistemic transformation from an anthropocentric view of the human, who is separated from others, to a networked ontology in which the human is understood in relation to others.

Within the posthumanist framework, in line with the critique of humanist binaries, human identity is reconsidered; it is no longer conceived as a stable, autonomous or independent essence but as a dynamic and relational formation shaped through processes of interspecies and technological entanglement. Posthumanism challenges the traditional view of humans as purely biological beings separate from other species, such as machines, animals, plants, and materials, highlighting instead that the anthropocentric perspective is no longer sufficient to conceptualise human subjectivity within the context of multi-species coexistence, biotechnological developments, digital networks, and environmental crises. As Braidotti argues, "the posthuman condition urges us

to think critically and creatively about who and what we are actually in the process of becoming" (2013, p.12). She intentionally uses interrogative pronouns: "who" and "what" to blur the boundary between human and non-human, animate and inanimate. Therefore, "we" requires alternative forms of subjectivity, agency and community; "we" becomes inclusive of more-than-human actors. It encompasses a broad spectrum of agents, including humans, animals, plants, and technologies, all of which are focal points of study. Humans and non-humans are collectively co-constructors of life, entangled in a process of becoming. This underlines the significance of diversity and inclusivity. All entities or organisms offer their own perspectives and experiences in understanding the world. Their creativity, ability, intelligence, and sentience make them partners in knowledge production. Thus, the posthuman condition necessitates a shift in perspective regarding how humans perceive themselves and their relationships with the world. Like Braidotti's articulation of the relational conception of identity, Cary Wolfe frames the human as a prosthetic creature, which similarly challenges humanist dualism and embraces the principles of unity and interrelatedness.

It also insists that we attend to the specificity of the human—its ways of being in the world, its ways of knowing, observing, and describing—by (paradoxically, for humanism) acknowledging that it is fundamentally a prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically "not-human" and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is. (Wolfe, 2010, p.xxv)

Both Braidotti and Wolfe recognise diverse forms of becoming in the world; their focus is on humans' process of becoming through relational flows. Within this posthumanist framework, human beings are now redefined as more fluid and adaptable, encompassing a variety of organic species, technological artefacts, and material systems. Humans and nonhumans are inseparable and mutually dependent rather than opposing categories. Posthumanism thus moves beyond solely human interests by de-centring the human and redefining it by re-contextualising it within ecological, technological, and material systems.

The conceptual repertoire of posthumanism broadens as it intersects with various practices. Ecology is one of these practices and key drivers in the development of posthumanism. Posthumanism and ecology are closely interconnected through their shared challenge of human exceptionalism in anthropocentrism. Both emphasise relational ontologies that place humans within ecological networks. Ecology focuses on the interdependence of living organisms and their environments, and posthumanism extends this idea by critiquing hierarchical binaries and recognising nonhuman agency and relationality. Braidotti's following quotation highlights the role of ecology in posthumanism.

[A] different and powerful source of inspiration for contemporary reconfigurations of critical posthumanism is ecology and environmentalism. They rest on an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth' others. This practice of relating to others requires and is enhanced by the rejection of self-centred individualism. It produces a new way of combining self-interests with the well-being of an enlarged community, based on environmental interconnections. (Braidotti, 2013, pp.47-8)

As such, ecology extends the relations beyond humans to include non-human beings or "earth others," thus destabilising the anthropocentric perception of subjectivity. The formulation of the subject is materially relational, co-vulnerable with nonhuman others. This represents a shift in understanding the human and humans' relationship with the world. Within this convergence,

ecological posthumanism comes up as a critical perspective that rethinks ecological relations beyond objectifying and instrumentalising approaches.

The implicit critique of the humanist idealisation of the self-contained and independent human subject is coupled with ecological posthumanist critiques of species hierarchy (Braidotti,2013; Wolfe,2010). Ecological posthumanism calls for a reconfiguration of human identity, agency, and responsibility, by deconstructing the traditional binaries such as human-nonhuman, self-other, and culture-nature (Braidotti,2013; Barad, 2007). It foregrounds the idea that human is already part of more-than-human relational networks and material entanglements (Haraway,2008; Barad,2007).

Ecological posthumanism asks what it means to be human in a more-than-human world. The boundaries between human and nonhuman, self and other, subject and object, and culture and nature are no longer viewed as fixed and permanent; they are porous, permeable and mutually shaping one another. It underlines relationality, interdependency and responsibility, presenting human beings as immersed in dynamic networks that include ecological systems, nonhuman organisms, material environments and technologies. Humans and their lives are shaped through participation in these networks. From an ecological perspective, nature is not a background or a simple prop; it is an agent that continuously evolves a web of interdependencies.

This posthuman reconfiguration of relationality can be further clarified by Mark Smith's arguments on the posthuman notion of ecological community, which "emphasises the myriad ways that beings of all kinds, including human individuals and collectives, interact to create, sustain, and/or dissolve communities" (2013, p.27). He claims that, "The posthumanist inclusion of human activities with/in ecology is not an attempt to naturalise them, reducing them to just a matter of biology, but nor does it seek to separate certain (social and cultural) fields of human action as being entirely set apart from, or superior to, those characterising all other species (that is, it seeks to weaken exceptionalism)" (Smith, 2013, p.27). His claim aligns with posthumanist theories of distributed and relational subjectivity, particularly those articulated by Braidotti and Wolfe, which critique of humanist conception of the autonomous subject and displace the human from its privileged position. He conceptualizes the posthuman subject embedded within ecological communities shaped by interspecies entanglement rather than human sovereignty. Communities are understood not as human constructs but as formations shaped through the continuous multi-species interactions and ecological entanglements. Thus, communities are defined as an emergent network rather than a bounded structure. Therefore, he articulates the central claim of ecological posthumanism: The world is something that is sensed, shared, and inhabited across species. This suggests that ecological belonging is grounded in forms of sense-making that extend beyond human cognition and in the embodied and relational ways in which beings interact with their world.

From an ecological posthumanist perspective, this sensorial turn frames ecological relations as a shared process of understanding or making sense of life events and relationships beyond human control and perception. While calling for new ways of perceiving and connecting with the world, ecological posthumanism engages with concepts such as "vibrant matter," "actants," "intra-actions," mesh, co-evolution, symbiosis, and trans-corporality, etc., which are developed by scholars including Jane Bennett, Karen Barad, Timothy Morton, and Stacy Alaimo. Their ideas provide

interconnections between humans and non-humans, including “earth-others” (Braidotti, 2013, p.48) and a relational understanding of agency.

Among these theoretical contributions, feminist and posthumanist philosopher Karen Barad’s concept of “intra-action” provides an effective framework for ecological posthumanism. Her idea of intra-action which describes what happens when matter and discourse dynamically entangle, suggests that physical boundaries between humans and non-humans are not fixed. She states that,

Parts of the world are always intra-acting with other parts of the world, and it is through specific intra-actions that a differential sense of being-with boundaries, properties, cause, and effect is enacted in the ongoing ebb and flow of agency. There are no pre-existing, separately determinate entities called “humans” that are either detached spectators or necessary components of all intra-actions. (2007, p.338)

This quotation clearly articulates relational becoming through intra-action. Intra-action holds the humans and nonhumans together. It suggests that human beings are deeply entangled in the world’s ongoing intra-actions. In the universe, life, matter, and energy are accepted as co-constitutive and relational, and humans are not fixed or closed entities, but constantly intra-acting with other substances, environments, and corporal forms. Therefore, they possess no inherent privilege or control over the network of relations in which they are already entangled. Likewise, Barad argues that “ ‘Humans’ emerge as having a role to play in the constitution of specific phenomena; they do so as part of the larger material configuration, or rather the ongoing reconfiguring, of the world. Thus, no a priori privileged status is given to the human” (2007, p.338). Barad’s concept of intra-action, from an ecological posthumanist perspective, offering a shift to a non-dualistic view of the world, emphasises the entanglement of human and nonhuman. It conceptualises ecological interactions as a shared process of becoming.

Complementing Barad’s intra-action and relationality, Jane Bennett develops ecological posthumanism through the concept of vital materialism, which emphasises the vitality and agency of nonhuman materialities. She draws on the concepts of actant and network, employing the Deleuzian notion of assemblage to conceptualise the human and nonhuman as dynamically entangled and mutually affecting actants. She states, “While the smallest or simplest body or bit may indeed express a vital impetus ... an actant never really acts alone. Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces” (2010, p.21). She emphasises that organic or inorganic material forms have the capabilities to influence and be influenced. The actant, including human, nonhuman, objects, forces and technologies, cannot act alone; the actant’s value or agency depends on interactive interference. Nonhuman entities are not constructed as human discursive products; they are responsive and generative actants that take part in world-making. “A lot happens to the concept of agency once nonhuman things are figured less as social constructions and more as actors, and once humans themselves are assessed not as autonomous but as vital materialities” (Bennet, 2010, p.21). This contributes to the shift in the understanding of agency. Agency is no longer seen as a human capacity but distributed across humans and non-humans. It is reframed as a collective achievement of assemblages. In addition to undoing the fixed stability of materiality, the autonomous human subject is destabilised; humans and nonhumans operate within a broader mesh of human and

nonhuman actants. This view is central to ecological posthumanism that accepts humans and nonhumans as active participants in world-making and relational agency.

Similarly, Morton offers an ecological insight, arguing that the boundaries between human and nonhuman are illusory. She highlights that human beings and nonhuman entities retain distinct identities within this interconnectedness while emphasising that they are enmeshed in dynamic networks. As Morton views, “Ecological awareness gives you a world in which everything is relevant to everything else, but is also really unique and vivid and distinct at the very same time. In this world, everything you think and feel is relevant” (2018, p.66). Moreover, material ecocritics Alaimo and Hekman further emphasise that “the co-extensive materiality of humans and non-humans offers multiple possibilities for forging new environmental paths” (2008, p. 9). In these pathways, human beings and non-human entities mutually shape each other, participating in an entangled process that constitutes shared futures. Westling complements this perspective, pointing out that human beings “are no longer alone as transcendent Minds locked in decaying bodies on an Earth where we don’t belong, and separate from the myriad creatures around us. Now we can see ourselves as vibrant bodies pulsing in harmony with our whole environment” (2006, p.36). Building on these ideas, ecological posthumanism recognises the intricate interdependencies of all entities. It reconceptualises human and nonhumans’ relational ways of existing within the ecosystem. Human beings are part of a larger ecosystem of life in which humans and non-humans are mutually constitutive, intra-active and interrelated.

2. ECOLOGICAL POSTHUMANISM AND POSTHUMAN SUBJECTIVITIES IN “VASTER THAN EMPIRES AND MORE SLOW”

Ursula Le Guin’s speculative fiction, “Vaster than Empires and More Slow,” offers a compelling site to explore ecological posthumanist ideas by reimagining human subjectivity, intelligence, and relationships with nonhuman entities. The narrative shifts the focus from an anthropocentric view of human exceptionalism to a more relational ontology, presenting an argument for the interrelations of humans and non-humans. The story foregrounds an ecological posthuman vision in which humans and nonhumans are mutually constituted and co-evolve within complex systems, thereby realising the unity of all entities. It follows the crew of the spaceship Gum, who are tasked with surveying a distant planet, World 4470. It is framed by the idea of a confrontation with “the other,” mutual affective responses, and boundary crossings. The encounter between the crew and the planet represents the challenge of facing radical alterity and a confrontation between anthropocentric perception and ecological posthuman consciousness. When the crew begins field analyses, they discover that the planet World 4470 is entirely covered in vegetation.

All life-forms were photosynthesising or saprophagous, living off light or death, not off life. Plants: infinite plants, not one species known to the visitors from the house of Man. Infinite shades and intensities of green, violet, purple, brown, and red. Infinite silences. Only the wind moved, swaying leaves and fronds, a warm soughing wind laden with spores and pollens, blowing the sweet pale-green dust over prairies of great grasses, heaths that bore no heather, flowerless forests where no foot had ever walked, no eye had ever looked. (Le Guin, 1975, p.12)

This scene portrays a fully autonomous, self-organising, self-forming, self-generating, non-hierarchical ecosystem that exists outside anthropocentric categories. The planet appears as a pure photosphere, with all life forms photosynthesising and saprophagous. Life is sustained by light and decay, by the circulation and transformation of energy rather than by the consumption of living bodies. This circulation and transformation of energy show that the continuous intra-action drives life, not human forces. The emphasis on energy circulation, photosynthesis and decay suggests an entangled form of life in which plants, light, spores, wind, and decay are primary active agents rather than passive background matter. Ecological life on the planet functions independently of human recognition, domination, authority, or presence; the infinite plants are neither crops nor resources, nor do they serve as backdrops for human extraction and animal life. The repetition of the word “infinite” underlines the planet’s fertility.

The crew initially views the planet through anthropocentric assumptions, approaching nature as ‘the other,’ a separate, external domain and an inert object to be analysed and studied. Their reliance on scientific observation, exploration, taxonomy, and the logic of control constrains their ability to recognise and interpret nature on its own terms. Having lost their sense of embeddedness and interconnectedness with the natural world, they fail to perceive themselves as participants in the planetary environment, instead viewing themselves as detached observers or explorers. This aligns with Morton’s following statement, “Your scientific view of things ... doesn’t mean you’re ‘seeing’ nature; you are still interpreting it with human tools and a human’s touch. Thinking ecologically means letting go of this idea of nature” (Morton, 2018, p.26).

Life on the planet lacks animal-like mobility and visible signs of organized forms, which leads the crew to interpret the absence of animal life as a deficiency rather than an alternative form of existence. As one observer points out, “There were no lights on nightside, on the continents, none of the lines and clots made by animals who build” (Le Guin, 1975, 10), The absence of such signs leads them to describe the planet as lacking life. This perspective is reinforced by the depiction of the planet: “not one species known to the visitors from the house of Man” (Le Guin, 1975, 12). They look for mobility and familiar forms that share biological similarities with human beings. They overlook the possibility of vegetal sentience on the planet and fail to see the forest as a self-aware and responsive life form. This reflects the crew’s belief that sentience can exist only within biological forms that resemble the human body. However, the forest’s disturbed awareness is described in detail:

Sentience without senses. Blind, deaf, nerveless, moveless. Some irritability, response to touch. Response to sun, to light, to water, and chemicals in the earth around the roots. Nothing comprehensible to an animal mind. Presence without mind. Awareness of being, without object or subject. Nirvana. (Le Guin, 1975, 26)

The expression “Not ‘it’ ... There is no being, no huge creature, no person! There could at most be only a function—” (Le Guin, 1975, 26) emphasizes that sentience exists as a networked function rather than animal-like being. As Benford claims, “the closed, anthropocentric system of the Hainish universe allows for a narrow definition of sentience, because it is founded on the principle of the ‘anthropocentric alien’” (qtd. in Benczik, 2025, p. 87). This exemplifies how anthropocentric perceptions overshadow nonhuman modes of intelligence and awareness.

Alongside their scientific assumptions, the crew approaches the planet covered in vegetation through a romantic aesthetic framework. They view it as wilderness and interpret it through the lens of romantic abstraction or the sublime, defining it as “a warm, sad world, sad and serene” (Le Guin, 1975, p.175). Within romantic thought, wilderness is viewed as a privileged space where the purest and most intense feelings are experienced, and sublimity is conjured, dispelling the classical ideals of orderly, serene, pristine landscapes. Beauty is found in vast, wild, excessive, and chaotic scenery. Nevertheless, this romantic sublime constructs the wilderness as a pure and autonomous entity, separate from humanity and unblemished by human civilisation. Such a framework creates a problematic binary that imagines nature as existing only in the absence of humans. Hence, the planet’s vast, fertile, and wild plant life is reduced to an aesthetic spectacle—beautiful, bewildering, picturesque, sublime, and overwhelming—for the observers. By imagining themselves as detached observers in the presence of something other, their sense of separation from the natural world is further reinforced. This view of the planet resonates with William Cronon’s critique of the romantic view of the wilderness. He states that wilderness is “Far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, it is quite profoundly a human creation—indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history” (1995, p.7). Building on Cronon’s critique of wilderness as a culturally constructed ideal rather than an untouched space outside human history, Le Guin’s narrative reveals how the romantic view of wilderness reproduces a human-centred binary. The crew’s romanticised vision of the planet as wilderness similarly intensifies their sense of separation from nature. The planet’s vast, fertile vegetation appears to them as an overwhelming spectacle, leaving them bewildered and fearful in its presence.

This perception of nature aligns with Morton’s critique of romantic naturalism, which sustains the illusion of nature as an observable aesthetic object, existing at a safe distance from human life. Morton emphasises that both aesthetic observation and scientific research reproduce this separateness by locating humans as spectators rather than participants within ecological systems. As he comments, “Ecological facts are about us, about how we are and what we do and how we act, they are hard to see from a distance—getting perspective about yourself, interrogating your way of doing and seeing, is one of the hardest things to do—and difficult to swallow, intrinsically” (Morton, 2018, p.27). In the story, however, detachment is enacted through the crew’s scientific measurements, observations, and classification practices, which present the planet as an object of knowledge rather than a relational environment. Consequently, they remain detached from the forest and fail to perceive ecological entanglement. Morton explores ecological awareness, which is rooted in coexistence, entanglement, and uncertainty. They argue that living ecologically means not merely navigating in the mesh and managing, but rather acknowledging that humans already inhabit a more-than-human world. In this way, Morton’s statement that ecological thinking requires the rejection of romantic detachment and acceptance of a relation with nonhuman life is enacted in the story through the crew’s initial perception of the planet as an external, sublime object.

In the story, nature is configured as a living system and active agent capable of perceiving, reacting and acting on human presence and disturbance rather than appearing as an object to be studied, classified and controlled, a picturesque backdrop or a sublime spectacle. The narrative, adopting a planetary perspective, describes the forest’s unsettlement by the sudden intrusion of

mobile human bodies. The crew are not only scientific explorers but also disturbances within a peaceful, self-sustaining ecology. Their presence and movement across this unknown place are compared to those of picnickers wandering through a familiar place. As Le Guin observes, “they knew their voices broke a silence of a thousand million years, the silence of wind and leaves, leaves and wind, blowing and ceasing and blowing again” (Le Guin, 1975, p.12). Despite sounding soft and gentle on the surface of the planet, their voices interrupt planetary time and rupture the planet’s deep and incredible silence. Their intrusion on the planet’s silence becomes a symbol of the imposition of human semiotic systems upon the non-human world. Significantly, three surveyors are compared to “three viruses twitching minutely on the hide of an unmoving giant” (Le Guin, 1975, p.176), a metaphor that presents human presence as parasitic and radically other. From the perspective of planetary sentience, the arrival of the human explorers represents an invasion of the planet’s corporeal integrity, highlighting the violence inherent in anthropocentric forms of exploration and knowledge production.

The unusual encounter between the human explorers and the planet generates a cycle of negative affect that manifests itself as fear, latent aggression, and disorientation. These effects can be read as symptoms of an ecological disturbance triggered by the disruption of the forest’s ancient silence through the invasive, rapid movements of human bodies. Rather than presenting emotion as an internal psychological state, the narrative frames it as an effective response emerging from a fractured human-nonhuman relationship. The plants’ response to the human footprint on the planet, conveyed through a form of empathic noise, induces fear among the crew. Notably, they fail to identify the source of this fear because they are unaware of vegetal consciousness. Drawing on Morton’s concept of ecological awareness, the illusion of nature as something external to and disconnected from human subjects limit their identification of the source of their fear. Although the crew unconsciously receive empathic noise, they can only articulate it as an impression of a vast and shifting presence. Their repeated reference to plant consciousness as “something” reveals the failure of anthropocentric perception and the limits of human language. Porlock, the Hard Scientist on exploration team says,

Someting—in the forest. ... Something big. Moving behind me. ...It came at me. As if it was swinging down out of the trees. Behind me. ... A—an—I don’t know what it could have been. Something self-moving. In the trees, the arboriformes, whatever you call ’em. ... Someting. Moving with purpose. (Le Guin, 1975, p.15)

Porlock’s fragmented depiction of “something” shows human beings’ failure to depict the other, the unknown, or the nonhuman through familiar knowledge and a semiotic framework.

The crew recast the plants into lurking shapes and spectral figures, interpreting the vivid, fertile, and self-sustaining ecosystem as threatening, hostile, and haunted. This misrecognition stems from their limited human-centred perspective, which ignores the possibility of sentient and self-aware life forms beyond humans. “The difficulties the Survey Team have in identifying the sentience of World 4470 illustrate the linguistic and conceptual difficulties one faces when assigning sentience, bound to an anthropocentric model of individualism, to entities like plants that are simultaneously one and many, whole and part” (Dobrzynski, 2022, p.52). This reflects how the crew’s

anthropocentric views make them fail to recognize vegetal intelligence, supporting the claim that sentience cannot be assessed only according to human animal standards.

In the story, the planet is sensitive to the crew's emotional states, reflecting their fear back to them. Its fear is not antecedent; rather, it emerges through its encounter with human explorers and senses their fear. The telepathic background noise serves as a channel through which the planet receives the crew's fear and transmits this emotion back into their minds. Osden's experience reflects this,

I was in the ground. Sunk into it, part of it. I knew I was between two trees even though I never saw them. I suppose I could feel the roots...I felt the fear. It kept growing. As if they'd finally known I was there, lying on them there, under them, among them, the thing they feared, and yet part of their fear itself. I couldn't stop sending the fear back. (Le Guin, 1975, p.22)

This quotation shows how fear is transmitted between the crew and the forest, underscoring an understanding of the planet's sentience through Barad's conception of intra-action, in which human and nonhuman beings are not pre-existing but take shape through relational encounters. "Bodies ... are not simply situated in, or located in, particular environments. Rather, "environments" and "bodies" are intra-actively co-constituted. Bodies ("human," "environmental," or otherwise) are integral "parts" of, or dynamic reconfiguring of, what is" (Barad, 2007, p.170). Barad's statement that humans and nature co-constitute one another within an ongoing reconfiguration and Dobryzski's discussion of anthropocentric limits offer a lens for explaining how fear in the story is generated through encounter and the failure to recognise nonhuman forms of agency.

By building on the intra-action or relational approach discussed above, it becomes clear that the planet is not depicted as a passive background for human endeavours, a peaceful external existence that humans observe, or a resource to be exploited for profit. It is an active and responsive actor in the assemblage. The story fictionally enacts a study documenting, "trees can communicate with one another, both through the motions of their branches, spreading chemical messages aboveground, and through a web of intertwined roots and fungal mycelia belowground" (Haupt, 2021, p.23). The entire planet constitutes a single conscious organism, a kind of massive, vegetal mind; the plants have the capacity to feel and communicate through a form of language. The plants to which cognitive ability is attributed respond to human emotions. Kathrine Hayles's construction of posthuman subjectivity foregrounds the notion of disturbed cognition. She describes the distributed cognitive system as a whole "in which 'thinking' is done by both human and nonhuman actors. Thinking consists of bringing these structures into coordination so they can shape and be shaped by one another" (1999, p.290). The crew's failure to comprehend the planetary sentience exemplifies an epistemic boundary, which is the inability to perceive distributed agency and acknowledge the relational formation of subjectivity. The ecological system beyond their control makes the crew confront their embeddedness. The crew and the planet's intelligence, emotions and affective states shape one another through their intra-action. This intra-action reveals a key idea in ecological posthumanism: agency is not restricted to the human subject but is distributed across both human and nonhuman actants. The sentient vegetation reverses an anthropocentric perception of consciousness, which restricts awareness to the human brain. In the study, consciousness, which is distributed to vegetal life, operates through the planet's vast scale and slow temporal rhythm. The

planet's consciousness discloses itself through its relation with the crew, especially through the main character Osden. Osden has a significant role in this process; his hypersensitivity enables him to receive the planet's affective state: fear.

Osden's capacity for "wide-range bioempathic receptivity" enables him to receive "emotion or sentience from anything that felt"; he can "share lust with a white rat, pain with a squashed cockroach, and phototropy with a moth" (Le Guin, 1975, p.9). Therefore, assigned as "the team's Sensor" (Le Guin, 1975, p.9), he becomes responsible for detecting the planetary sentience. "On an alien world, the Authority had decided, it would be useful to know if anything nearby is sentient, and if so, what its feelings towards you are" (Le Guin, 1975, p.9). These relational and distributed types of consciousness become visible through Osden's embodied experience. His pain, fear and aggression are not only psychological states located within the human mind, but are also reconfigured through what is around him, through the mutual effects of body and environment. His radical empathy renders him an intra-active body. This reveals the entanglement of human and non-human consciousness, disrupting the illusion of an autonomous human being. When the crew say that "something" attacks you in the forest, Osden, who has "a supernormal empathic capacity" (Le Guin, 1975, p.6), states that there is no external enemy; there is "Something sentient?" in the forest. However, the others who do not believe in sentience in the forest insist on defining the threat as something, as an object. When they ask him to specify what kind of thing it might be, he answers: "The fear" (Le Guin, 1975, p.21). Osden's radical empathic abilities enable him to feel, absorb and unconsciously echo the intense fear projected by the planet itself. In such a process, the planet's fear takes bodily form in him. He both receives and transmits the planetary affect. He says, "I felt the fear. It kept growing. ... I couldn't stop sending the fear back, and it kept growing, and I couldn't move ... and then the fear would bring me to again" (Le Guin, 1975, p.22). This exchange of fear soon turns into a cycle of escalating anxiety; the crew's unease and anxiety are transformed into terror. They develop symptoms of extreme mental agitation, which reveals the limits of human-centred perception when faced with radical others.

Following Osden's experience of planetary fear, the crew begin to argue about what they have encountered. Their following exchanges reveal different ways of understanding the story's primary concerns: the encounter with the other, the nature of consciousness and interrelatedness. The crew's encounter with radical vegetal otherness disrupts their human-centred perception and drives them to think about how consciousness functions beyond familiar biological forms. After sensing the forest's fear, they attempt to understand a unified planetary consciousness. As they try to interpret the planetary fear, their argument shifts from emotional disturbance to disagreement about scientific knowledge. Harfex, the team's xenobiologist, rejects the idea of the plant's ability to communicate, alluring to the traditional scientific criteria, he argues that the trees cannot communicate, just like the plants of the Hainish Descent on Earth, as "They have no more nervous system" (Le Guin, 1975, p.25). In contrast, Osden describes the forest's echoing human fear back. Mannon adds to his view by shifting focus from isolated structures to interconnected organisation, detailing that "They are, indubitably, connections. Connections among the trees" (Le Guin, 1975, p.25). He states that if a scientist examines only "one axon, or one detached glial cell" (Le Guin, 1975, p.25), he cannot claim that the tiny piece belongs to a sentient brain. Mannon's statements propose that consciousness can

originate from connections, so he invites the reader to consider intelligence beyond conventional definitions to a posthuman reading of intelligence based on relationality rather than individual sensibility. “Mannon’s comparison between a brain and a forest does not state with any certainty that the forest is literally a brain, but that a forest and a brain share ‘connectedness’ in an analogous way” (Dobrzynski, 2022, p.53). His comparison illustrates why Le Guin portrays a sentient forest to critique the limitations of scientific assumptions rooted in individualism. Harfex’s response, “No...A single cell is capable of mechanical response to stimulus” (Le Guin, 1975, p.25), is framed with scepticism. Harfex, who supports an anthropocentric scientific worldview, does not accept any form of intelligence that is not grounded in the neural structures of humans and animals. She says, “It’s not just the trees; the grasses too. ... But we’re twelve thousand kilos from where we were this morning, we left it on the other side of the planet” (Le Guin, 1975, p.29). Harfex, who offers a scientific hypothesis from a botanist or xenobiologist’s perspective, does not believe that plants and grasses can sense, they can react to stimuli, and therefore considering them components of a larger sentient is absurd.

Harfex depicts the planet as “merely a network of processes. The branches, the epiphytic growths, the roots with those nodal junctures between individuals, ... transmitting electrochemical impulses” (Le Guin, 1975, p.29). His scientific and mechanistic description of the planet as a network of electrochemical transmission closely similar to mental signals described as “the sequence of electrochemical pulses streaming up the axons of neurons” (Dennett, 1991, p.49) in the brain. While Harfex recognises these connections between human nervous system and the forest, he refuses to extend this similarity to cognition and consciousness. His words reveal a human-centred tendency to recognise consciousness only when it mirrors human cognition. For him, the forest is cognitively restricted, organised around a central nervous system. This anthropocentric perspective reduces the forest to autonomous or mechanical biology. From a posthuman perspective, this is controversial to the idea of rhizome, which “is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple ... it is motion itself” (Herbrechter, 2022, p.217). Thus, while identifying the forest as a network that resembles a rhizome, he ignores the possibility of planetary communication and consciousness that such a structure can enable. He claims that the forest cannot think as human beings do; he acknowledges biological interconnections without cognition.

From an ecological posthuman perspective, the exchanges between Harfex and Osden point out the inability of anthropocentric science to imagine intelligence beyond the human brain. While Harfex accepts biological interconnectedness, Osden acknowledges that sentience can arise from it. Osden’s perspective resonates with ecological holism and posthuman theories of the extended mind. When he portrays the forest as “all one” (Le Guin, 1975, p. 29), he suggests that the forest does not merely exist as a biological system but has sentience and the ability to react. The roots of trees create and transmit information throughout the planetary organism, like nerves and synapses; therefore, Osden accepts the planet as “one big green thought” (Le Guin, 1975, p. 194), comparing planetary consciousness to signals moving through the human brain. Therefore, he repels the anthropocentric mode of cognition. He describes the forest as an emotionally imbued space in which fear circulates across species boundaries. The crew’s growing anxiety originates from their immersion in the forest. In this sense, Le Guin implies an ecological posthuman sensibility in which cognition is distributed

and entangled, and all life forms, human and nonhuman, are not autonomous or disconnected from shared emotional and mental states. This can be seen when Tomiko, one of the few members of the survey team who try to understand Osden's radical empathy, urges Osden to "Send out a message, We are harmless, we are friendly" to the forest. She recognizes that the forest "has, or is, some sort of affect that translates into what we feel as emotion, can't you translate back?" (Le Guin, 1975, 27) Emotion here operates within a shared ecological network.

Osden engages with the planet in its full and obscure otherness. Osden's insight reveals that the planetary mind, with its unity and vastness, has long existed alone. The arrival of human beings introduces an unknown category: the other. He explains that the forest's fear does not originate from human violence but from difference, "Isolated, ... That's it! That's the fear. It isn't that we're motile, or destructive... We are other. There has never been any other" (Le Guin, 1975, p.29). The planet's fear of humans mirrors the crew's uneasiness with the forests' sentience. This mutual alienation is explored through the narrative's attention to communication across radical difference. The crew, who initially dismiss the forest's capacity for consciousness, emotional response, and communication, discover that the forest is not only a collection of individual organisms or plants, but it appears as a planetary sentience—one living and feeling entity—as the narrative unfolds. The forest, a nonhuman form of subjectivity, poses a radical challenge to their invasive presence within the vast vegetation. In view of this, the forest appears as a "vibrant matter" (Bennett, 2010, p.viii). It is an actant, a source of action, whose affective force directly takes part in shaping events and emotions. Its vitality, which is "the capacity of things ... not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi-agents or forces with trajectories, propensities or tendencies of their own" (Bennett, 2010, p. viii), impacts the crew's physical and psychological state.

In a similar vein, Timothy Morton's concept of ecological mesh places human beings, nonhuman beings, agency, and culture within a vast mesh of relational processes (2018, p.65). This framework explains how the illusion of nature as an external separate realm becomes a part of the unstable entanglement of the ecological mesh. By exposing the falsely constructed boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, Morton's ecological mesh contextualises the crew's entanglement with the planetary network, underlining the radical openness and interconnectedness in which humans are immersed.

The narrative depicts humans and nonhumans through a posthuman framework of distributed agency, boundary crossing, mutual entanglement, and ecological interconnectedness. Rather than perceiving agency as a stable feature of human subjects, it highlights the creativity of the intra-active relationships between humans and nonhumans in reshaping the conception of agency. In the story, humans and plants are portrayed to mutually shape one another's perceptual and affective states, proposing that agency appears through entanglement. Karen Barad's redefinition of agency as a dynamic process rather than an attribute that human beings possess provides a critical configuration. In Barad's conceptualisation, "Agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfiguring of the world. The universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming" (2007, 141). Within this framework, agency can be understood as emerging through relational becoming. Within an entangled existence, humans extend responsibility to nonhuman beings, thereby destabilising the notion of human exceptionalism. Le Guin's presentation of agency as intra-active

existence thus exceeds the bounded notions of being and inspires posthuman becoming. Osden's cross-species intra-active exchange figures this type of engagement and stimulates posthuman knowledge based on entanglement and mutual responses.

In dialogue with posthuman scholars such as Jane Bennet, Timothy Morton, Rosi Braidotti, and Hayles—whose ideas configure posthuman subjectivities through material and relational entanglements between humans and non-humans—Le Guin's fiction not only disrupts anthropocentric ideas but also places human subjectivity within broader ecological and interspecies assemblages. Westling's argument that "Conscious thought ... is only a tiny winking of self-reflective light in this symbiotic community of our body. ... [T]he individual human agent is not the queen of her fate or the master navigator of his life's course" (2006, p.37) echoes the posthumanist critique of the autonomous subject. From a posthumanist perspective, consciousness is no longer a property of the human mind; it originates from the intra-action of human and nonhuman actants in an assemblage. Westling's comparison of consciousness to a tiny spark within a larger ecology reveals the dispersed nature of agency and underlines that human action depends on ecological and interspecies systems.

As Osden gradually becomes attuned to the forest's sentience, nomadic subjectivity is exemplified in the story. He notices that the forest has a meaningful communication that is neither symbolic nor reliant on human verbal context. Although its communication is different from human verbal language, it can perceive and understand the forest. From an ecological posthumanist perspective, this communication articulates a relational sense of being in which meaning is encapsulated through sensory transformation. Osden's ability to receive the forest's signals and entwine with the planet's awareness shows the fragility of humanist subject- understood as autonomous, bounded, and fixed. This fragility signals the instability of human-nonhuman divisions. In this sense, he embodies the flexibility of posthuman subjectivity. His subjectivity receives affective and cognitive influences that exceed the individual mind so he cultivates a sense of connectedness and oneness with nature, destabilising the division of human and nonhuman. This destabilisation recalls Katherine Hayles's notion of posthuman subjectivity as "distributed cognition" in which awareness and intelligence are not confined to a single brain but originate from entanglement. Hayles claims that,

The presumption that there is an agency, desire, or will belonging to the self and clearly distinguished from the "wills of others" is undercut in the posthuman, for the posthuman's collective heterogeneous quality implies a distributed cognition located in disparate parts that may be in only tenuous communication with one another. ... [T]he distributed cognition of the posthuman complicates individual agency. (1999, pp.3-4)

Osden's interaction with material and discursive elements is an unfolding process of becoming. Ecological posthumanism underlines that human bodies are not closed, fixed, or autonomous entities but are continually shaped through interactions with other bodies, substances, and environments. Stacy Alaimo conceptualises this type of existence as trans-corporeality, which "suggests that humans are interconnected not only with one another but also with the material interchanges between body, substance, and place. Trans-corporeality casts the human as post-human" (2016, p.77). Much of this trans-corporeal entanglement functions beneath conscious awareness in the story: The crew are not merely observers; they are psychologically and physically

affected by the planet. This exemplifies Alaimo's statement that "the subject, the knower, is never separate from the world that she seeks to know" (Alaimo, 2016, p.77). Unlike the rest of the crew, Osden, who is more sensory, discovers the possibility of reaching out into the mind, feelings and existence of the plants. Osden's posthuman subjectivity lies in transcending the limits of his own humanity by escaping into an entangled life. Upon finding a constant presence of living energy in the planet, he assumes a mediating role in the flow of unfiltered transference of fear between human and nonhuman, the crew and the planet. Therefore, he enables the rest of the crew to go safely back by soothing the planet, making it experience peace and love. Osden voluntarily decides to remain on it while the rest of the crew go on their journey. Although the de-centring of humans arouses terror, the story ends with a posthuman ethic that realises humans and the ecosystem are interrelated. Osden appreciates the sensation of inhabiting the physical space together with the plants. He admires them for sharing their feelings. Osden's being one with the forest becomes a symbol of the subjectivity's becoming relational.

Le Guin explores the possibility of communication and interaction between self and the other, between human and nonhuman species across cultural and biological divides to the point of entanglement. She offers a hopeful vision of future co-existence, cultivating an awareness of the interrelatedness between humans and non-humans. In this context, posthuman agency emerges at levels where species co-existence fosters ethical and relational possibilities, offers a vision of hope for mutual existence. According to Braidotti (2013), survival and ethical responsibility depend on attuning to the agency of nonhuman others, highlighting the relational entanglement between human and nonhuman.

CONCLUSION

This study has analysed "Vaster than Empires and More Slow" by Ursula K. Le Guin from the perspective of ecological posthumanism in order to reconsider how Le Guin reconfigures subjectivity, agency and interspecies relations. This analysis has shown that rather than merely depicting an encounter between human and an alien planet, the narrative presents a gradual undoing of anthropocentric assumptions about mind, consciousness and communication. The forest is not reduced to biological mechanism, nor romanticized as exotic otherness, it is presented as a form of planetary sentience that compels the human characters to experience a profound ontological shift toward acknowledging the interrelatedness of all life forms and the role of nonhuman agents in the process of becoming. Le Guin's narrative is not simply recognition of the inherent agency of more-than-human actors, but destabilization of the autonomous human subject. Through Osden's radical empathy and his gradual attunement to the planet, subjectivity is proven to be flexible and relational. The boundaries between human and nonhuman are rendered unstable. Within this framework, the planetary awareness represents the possibilities of interrelated forms of posthuman existence, challenging the assumption that places humans at a central position in the world.

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