

When the Future Affects the Present

“Watching Trees Grow”, “The Demon Trap” and How the Power Politics in Science Fiction Affects Reality

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Abstract

How will the future world look like? Science fiction is one genre perennially obsessed with this question. Our present today is irrevocably shaped by the colonial legacy of the world. Whether it is the erstwhile settler nations or the settled nations, colonization was the single biggest phenomenon—above the birth of Christianity in its potency—that has molded the world. It created new lands, changed maps, birthed new countries and governments in the settled nations. This is the phenomenon Spivak called worlding, creating new worlds just with one’s whims and fancies. The culture of the settler nations too was changed in this socio-economic transaction. Today, the world stands at the cusps of a breakout towards a new power structure where the global center of power may shift from the west to the east. Western civilization, arguably, is in steady decline and the eastern nations are rising as economic powerhouses. How does the western science fiction, in such situation, portray the future of the western world? And how that future power politics affects the socio-political situation today? This research analyzes two breathtaking short stories “Watching Trees Grow” and “The Demon Trap” to find some of the answers.

Key Words: Peter F Hamilton, Watching Trees Grow, The Demon Trap, Oligarchy, Civilization Project, Governmentality, Resistance, White Man’s Burden, Worlding

We are living in the period of transition. There was a time when Eliot and the postmodernists wrote their confusion of the ever-changing world into their works; when ‘the change is the only constant’ and such maxims were thrown at each other every day. Today, the times are different. The world didn’t really change the way it was expected to. We don’t live for two hundred years, we don’t have flying cars and half of the workforce in your office isn’t robotic. And yet, a lot has changed and is still changing. America is losing its hold of the world, people are increasingly aware of the pervasive capitalist system, the immigrants are unabashedly trying to seize the control of

the west, decentralized currencies like Bitcoin are created and people are increasingly going away from the city centers to live in small town and become digital nomads. The world feels kind of saturated with progress. And yet, it is only a matter of time before China, and the east along with it, emerges as a new power center of the world. When that happens, a lot of western ideas of the future—most of which are inspired by the imperialist ideology like the world government or intergalactic travel—aren’t going to turn into reality. If an eastern country really comes to control global political discourse, the world of the future will look nothing like it is imagined today.

Science fiction has single handedly dominated our imagination of the future. Most of the genre is penned by the western authors and has almost always portrayed one of a kind future society. Human beings are quasi-immortals, they mingle with the aliens, the government has gone from bad to worse, and the challenges are inter-galactic. Peter F. Hamilton (2 March 1960–), Britain's one of the most popular writers of space operas, also writes along the similar lines. Where does this vision of the future come from and how does it relate to the present?

Hamilton writes about the world where the individual countries have disintegrated and the world is united. Humanity has attained progress and made distinct planets inhabitable. The prosperity brought by "scientific industrialization" and the vanishing of borders has created a society that is quite close to the idea of Communist society. This hyperglobal and hyperconnected world is actually the extension of Colonial Enterprise that has ended in real world long ago.

While talking about his "Watching Trees Grow" (2000), the theme of entire earth governed from one center, all citizens being equal, the national boundaries vanishing and entire globe being ruled by one political organization isn't new to science fiction. What becomes problematic is the fact that the 'center' of this united world is always the Western World, the leader always a White Man, Hamilton goes one step further and shows the world where the Colonial Expansion attained absolute success and the entire earth is now under the control of a few Western Countries.

"Watching Trees Grow" is a whodunit that starts in the alternate imaginary past where the Rome never fell and the 1832 England had battery run cars. The murder mystery spans over two centuries, from 1832 to 2038, where equipped with advanced rejuvenation techniques, and taking help of the newly developing technology, the protagonist catches the murderer two hundred years after the murder is committed.

The story is not comparable to the real world timeline as we know it. It starts in the world where Imperialism started at least thousand years before it started in the actual world and unlike our world, it never ended. The period of Imperial regime was in fact so long that it is divided in the "First Imperial Era" (the time when Roman empire was at its peak), "Second Imperial Era", and so on. It can be deduced that when the story starts in 1832 AD, it is the Third Imperial Era. It is the world where the Rome never fell, Roman civilization became hyper-advanced by the nineteenth century and along with the English civilization, it encapsulated the world. It's the world in which the Colonial Power is absolute. Entire earth is under the control of a few western countries that are not controlled by the government or the monarchy as was the case with England but by a few influential families. It is an advanced concept of Oligarchy where a few families control a few countries that later control all other countries in the world. This Colonial expansion on the earth and beyond is called the "Sport of Emperors" (13) by the narrator protagonist Edward. These families have their headquarters in their origin cities. "Southampton is our city, in the same way

Rome belongs to Caesars, or London to the Percys.” (35)

Portrayal of such absolute power seems like romanticism on the author’s part, especially because he is writing of the successful Colonial Enterprise long after it failed in the actual world. The most interesting thing is that these things are nowhere mentioned explicitly in the story but this is what reader slowly garners while going through the eighty-six page story page by page. The only oblique reference to colonialism comes when Edward mentions his “family wealth coming from a long tradition of seafaring and merchanting” (35). Another subtle reference comes when a character speaks of coffee beans coming from “the family’s estate in the Caribbean” (53). Colonialism is the absent presence of the story. The entire technologically advanced empire that story shows is built by colonial expansion and later by “scientific industrialization” (21).

In 1832 when the story opens, the Civilization Project of the Empire is so successful that the entire world is united under the British Rule and has become ‘civilized’ so much so that there is absolutely no crime in this New World for last hundreds of years and this murder is a gruesome, inhuman aberration. The protagonist believes that as the world is too civilized now to indulge in such inhuman crime; it must have been performed by some relic from the pre-civilized, pre-colonial world, a “pre-Empire savage” (2) who somehow managed to remain uncivilized. The protagonist is sure that the murderer cannot be “one of ours” and must be from the colonies.

The entire world governed by Oligarchy represents, in a way, the zenith of Capitalism where the concept of the state or the government as the authority has ended and instead of exerting control through lobbying, the rich families themselves are the government. The Law is obsolete to such an extent that Edward, the protagonist who investigates the murder of his family member isn’t a police but a ‘legal representative’ of his family. He, Francis and the ones like him are the lawyers, the detectives, the ambassadors and the bureaucrats who also solve the disputes that the Oligarchic families have among themselves arising due to the right of ownership. That is not all; this Oligarchic control is so absolute that the families are now expanding their reach beyond earth. They are sending their spaceships and scientists on distant planets and claiming them as their own, hoping to exploit their natural resources.

The world creation in the story is so precise and immaculate, there are so much efforts in getting the fictitious details right and making them plausible, that it makes one wonder whether there are actually people in England who mourn the demise of Imperial rule and still have faith in the civilization mission they once embarked upon. The story reads like the ultimate colonial wish-fulfillment fantasy. And yet, this version of the future is alluring.

Despite this, there are fissures in the perfect-world narrative of the story. As whole world is now one and the concept of countries has almost disintegrated, it can be expected for everyone to have free mobility all over the globe and yet, “Watching Trees Grow” has no representative who is black, Asian or Arabic. All characters in the story are

white, belonging to aristocracy or oligarchic families and the only mention of anyone from non-White world is referred to as a “Short”, as a murder suspect. (“The only other suspect I can think of is a Short. They don’t value life as much as we do.” (13)) There is a scene where Edward feels that the murderer might be one of victim’s White friends after all and then he tells a detective to collect blood samples of all those, hoping to find evidence of intoxication, so that he can justify it to himself that no White person would have committed such heinous act without being ‘under influence’.

Edward is very conscious of the ‘greatness’ of his civilization. He is a proud British citizen. At one point he refers to the fact that “the overseas branches of the family were contemplating motions for greater autonomy” (35). This might be a reference to the historical struggle of American colonies for freedom and Edward shows his disapproval to this saying “I found it hard to believe that they’d want to abandon their roots” (35).

Whether Hamilton really believes that if Imperialism had started about thousand years ago the world would be as developed in 1832 as his story shows is a question of debate, but the story is so steeped in colonialism and capitalism that it stops being ridiculous and starts to amaze. It makes one wonder if majority of people failed to interpret Marx’s idea of Communism after all and if this is what real Communism would be like. If we ignore the fact that the Oligarchy has replaced the State, which is a Capitalist expansion, everything else is almost like the Communist idea of Marx. There seldom seems any mention of the private property, the State is extremely powerful,

technology has grown to such extent that humans are quasi immortals and don’t need to work anymore to feed themselves. Those like Bethany Maria Caesar (the antagonist and the member of the Caesar Family, one of the ruling families of the world) and Edward Raleigh (the representative of the Raleigh family, another ruling family) who do work, work not for personal gain or salary but for their dream, passion and the advancement of humanity. Everyone’s basic needs are met without having to work for money and those who work, do so willingly. This is the closest representation a sci-fi story can give of Marx’s vision of Communism. When Marx said that Communism would be attained only after full blown Capitalism, maybe this is what he meant. The Capitalism never ends, it assumes the function of the State and exerts absolute control. And yet, this vision of blissful future achieved by means of “scientific industrialization”—as Hamilton calls it, is seductive. So the narrative is, if the colonialism had never ended, it would be a magnificent world.

“The Demon Trap” (2011) is similar to “Watching Trees Grow” in the sense it is set in an advanced future civilization where the Imperial reach is beyond earth and a few powerful families (called Dynasties) enjoy a sociopolitical control over earth and other inhabitable planets. The only thing different here is, “The Demon Trap” is not a story of Imperial expansion but of resistance to it. “The Demon Trap” is disguised as a detective story. Although the criminal is caught in the end and the Empire is saved—perhaps creating a narrative that resistance is bad, almost villainous, and will be meted with appropriate punishment—it becomes an

important story for it puts forward the other side, the side of those who are resisting the Colonial expansion and rampant Capitalism.

Colonialism gives an agency to Capitalism. If it weren't for monetary interest, seafaring would never start and the British would never stay in India under the name of 'civilization mission'. In the story, the system is like post-Colonial Feudalism. It is a hybrid social system where the conquered countries run their own governments but pay taxes to their owner countries that are ruled by the Dynasties. The young members of the Dynasties have grown into spoiled adults on taxpayers' money and they aren't taking interest into administration and spend their time enjoying lavish parties and fornication. Their splurge is such that when they go on a distant planet for a vacation, they first make the planet look pleasing to the eyes by artificially constructing beaches, planting trees, building resorts etc. They travel with a huge fleet of limousines and chauffeurs and girls for the entertainment. It is their game to go to new planets, make them party-able, make merry, and come back. With deteriorating economy of the 'vassal countries', the citizen are enraged and one day the plane of the Dynasty members is crashed by firing a missile from the ground, killing everyone on board. The story tracks the investigation of the protagonist Paula Myo and the point of view of the 'vassal states' is on the foreground. Even though the criminal is caught in the end, the story comes as a major subaltern resistance against oppression. And still, the infantilizing attitude of the Colonizers towards colonies becomes obvious from the tone of the

story. The revolt of the colonies is made to look like that of a petulant child who is upset because he didn't get parental attention. It feels like if the Dynasty members were good rulers, the 'vassal-countries' would have been happy being ruled. Also, the resistance isn't to the rule itself, but to the fact that the new generation members aren't the good rulers and have become self-indulgent merrymakers. The story creates a narrative that in the real world future, there will be such rule and the vassal countries would need it, rather they would look forward to it. The white countries would serve as a guiding hand. It is yet another version of the White Man's Burden. The west is already creating such rule by giving huge loans to the Asian and African countries, essentially enslaving them for the centuries to come.

Like "Watching Trees Grow", this story shows rampant Colonialism where man has Colonized other planets and some of them, like America's struggle for independence, are trying to form ideologically and economically free states by refusing the Dynasty rule. Striking down the Dynasty plane is a part of this revolt. A message sent by these freedom fighters reads:

We urge all Dynasty members to exert your influence and compel your leaders to negotiate with our government. Failure to comply with our request of freedom and dignity will result in the future elimination of your worthless kind. We will no longer tolerate our taxes being spent to uphold your decadent lifestyle.
(147)

This reads like a terrorist message sent by ISIS to the United States after killing their reporters. The freedom fighters are portrayed like Naxalites. Hamilton, being a British, indeed sides the Colonizers as it is a story of violent Naxalite like movement and of how a smart detective nails the criminals. The political party fighting for the independence of their planet is derisively called a Nationalist Party, and also as terrorists:

We negotiated the terms of isolation with new Nationalist Party that sprung up on Merioneth. The terrorists stop their attacks, and in a couple of years we close the wormhole. They'll be on their own. Forever. (177)

This is the way the British prepared to leave India, or more like how the Portuguese prepared to leave Goa. When they were leaving, they planted bombs on bridges and other infrastructure they had built so that the Goans wouldn't be benefited anymore by what they had built. Closing of the wormhole means no supply of technology for the distant colony that didn't have a research facility of its own. It means it would wither away in a few hundred years. The west has created a kind of dependence to which there is no viable alternative.

Hamilton proposes the concept of Commonwealth here in a greater sense. All connected countries and worlds united under the Dynasty rule are the part of the Commonwealth. The word shows their Colonial bondage. Although it is like a feudal system, Hamilton writes about this like a great ideal of uniting entire world and making all equal, wiping out differences, 'civilizing the uncivilized',

carrying the 'White Man's burden' with dignity. In the tone of the story is mourning for the Colonial children trying to break away from their Father Nation.

A newspaper article by Girish Kuber written for a Marathi daily *Loksatta* of Saturday Feb 20, 2016 talks of the modern problems arising due to Colonialism. The Rhodes wing of the Oriel College, Oxford has a statue of Cecil Rhodes—the alumnus of the college, who was the mining industrialist and a politician. He ran his mining operations in South Africa and was a Prime Minister of the Cape Colony from 1890 to 1896. Cecil Rhodes is a great leader of the Empire for the Britain, but on the other hand, an embodiment of all the oppression for the South Africans. The African students in the Oriel College have taken an agenda to demolish Cecil Rhodes' statue as it reminds them of their oppressive past. Intelligentsia in Britain is divided over this—one group says the statue should remain and the other that says it should go. This latter group has the majority of Africans, Indians and Chinese. The interesting thing is, the leader of the student group who started this agitation is an African who came to England on a Fulbright Rhodes scholarship. Most of the students in this agitation are beneficiaries of the Rhodes scholarship. This is how the Colonialism digs its own grave. It creates its own 'other'.

When science fiction as an ideological state apparatus peddles one sided narrative of the future with mesmerizing technology and utopian luxuries, the fact that it is not an equitable world but a world controlled by the west has become apparent very recently. This realization is poignant today. Although the sci-fi vision of the future has helped to align a generation'

dreams and aspirations in the direction of achieving the future of western technological capitalism and world control—why else do the intellectuals from the Asia and Africa do go to the west and contribute to this future?—there is acute awareness among the citizen of the rest of the world that they are playing someone else's game with the rules that are rigged against them. Hence the countries like China have blockaded western social media or any of the instruments of cultural capitalism, Japan has struck off on their own line of technological advancement, other countries like India and the Middle-East consciously tries to avoids American model of growth, South Korea is a world on its own, African countries are trying to protect their culture and their values, and a few Muslim nations are openly dissing America as the villain. The conscience of the world is changing from pro-west to anti-west. It would be a stretch to say that

this is an observable reaction to the propagandist science fiction. But the facts that science fiction is pro-colonial, its future vision had entranced last two generations of the world, and now there is a reaction against it are true. The consensus today is against what even the most recent sci-fi shows about the future. Not to mention, there is a rise of a new subgenre of Postcolonial science fiction from the non-white countries and even the white sci-fi is portraying increasingly dystopian version of the future. As shown above, even the pro-colonization sci-fi texts couldn't hide the fissures in their narratives; they couldn't suppress their anxieties. This entire vision of the future was built on a precarious assumption that a few non-western countries would willingly help the west create the future where the west owns the world. That hope is shot. The power has created its own gravediggers.

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