

## Breaking the Illusion of Disembeddedness in Science Fiction Movies *Interstellar* and *The Martian*

- Mohan Dangaura

### Abstract

*This paper critically examines two Hollywood science fictions movies Interstellar and The Martian from the notion of environmental crisis and human's desperate effort to protect its serenity. Particularly, I am interested in exploring the issue of illusionistic anthropocentrism. I am interested in knowing why the feelings of superiority and self-sufficiency in human beings make them live with illusion of disembeddedness from nature. The major objective of this paper is to pinpoint the ecological crisis in future world and the invention of artificial habs or digital earth for survival through Hollywood films. The birth of the digital Earth ensures the doom of green earth and warns us to contemplate on our own earth instead lurking after space mission ignoring the nature's exploitation. For this, I have used ecocritical perspective. Especially, I have drawn upon Lynn Townsend White Jr. and Val Plumwood's notion of ecocriticism and environmental crisis. This study is going to be important because it will answer the roots of our current ecological crisis and environmental pollution.*

Keywords: space-fiction, eco-criticism, technology, environmental crisis, anthropocentrism, social ecology

### Introduction

*Interstellar* is a 2014 epic sci-fi movie directed and produced by Christopher Nolan. It stars Matthew McConaughey and Anne Hathaway in lead roles. Set in a tragic future where humankind is attempting to endure, the film follows a gathering of space explorers who travel through a wormhole close to Saturn looking for another home for humanity. Similarly, *The Martian* is a 2015 sci-fi movie directed by Ridley Scott and featuring Matt Damon. Drew Goddard penned the screenplay based on the 2011 novel *The Martian* by Andy Weir. The film portrays a space explorer's (Damon) solitary battle to make dew on Mars and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA) effort to safeguard and bring him home back to the Earth.

*Interstellar* and *The Martian* project the possibilities of man's future in space. *Interstellar* carries the theme of starvation, dry seasons, and debacles more strongly suggesting the need of immediate action towards the ecological crisis whereas *The Martian* presents the theme of conserving the planet 'Earth' instead of investing our much effort to find its alternative. *Interstellar* starts from the apocalyptic time of the Earth where finding the habitable planet in the distant universe becomes urgent to save human extinction on the Earth due to famine. But *The Martian* starts from the depiction of the barren Martian climate suggesting

us to preserve the unique Earth instead of destroying its resources and enduring capacity. Thus, both movies focus on preserving the ecological diversity of our planet, and assimilating the human and non-human interconnectedness.

### **Ecological Apocalypse and Science Fiction Movies**

A generally accepted fact about people is that they are the most amazing aspect of all animals, however current science contends that human-made machines are gradually assuming control over the regal crown of people. *Interstellar* and *The Martian* alert about the future doomsday that may come through human beings' irrational exploitation of nature. Both movies portend the reproduction of planetary ecologies and the planning of the human genome. The idea of human mastery over nature brings about the prevalence of people. The sensation of prevalence and independence evades individuals to accept that they are not weaved in nature. Such fallacious belief; seeing oneself as separate from nature is the concept of illusionistic disembeddedness in nature.

The creation of future earth for the preservation of future human race can be conceived in the portrayal of nature's annihilation in the both movies. Both movies predict the end of the natural resources in near future. The significance of lack of enough natural resources and their pursuit in other probable planets alert us about ecological crisis future decades. During the twenty-first century, A. O. Scott in his review reasons that crop curses and residue storms compromise humankind's endurance (para 2). She further states that the movie reveals on the urgency of saving our slow-motion environmental catastrophe. As shown in the movie, corn comes to reflect the last practical yield for our future survival. The world has advanced into a late capitalism era where more youthful ages will function on instructed thoughts. The ex-National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) pilot Joseph Cooper is presented as a rancher who is a father of a ten-year-old girl Murphy.

Similarly, *The Martian* is a 2015 sci-fi film that is set in 2035 to show the future endeavor of space science that needs more research and innovation for making life better on the Earth. It stars Matt Damon as Mark Whitney who battles to survive on the lonely and barren Mars after getting stuck behind in the Martian storm. He manages to build temporary home for himself naming it *Hab*. As quoted in *The Wiki Martian*; an online news article, The Hab, short for "The Mars Lander Habitat" (para 1), are a series of artificial living quarters that were constructed for manned mission to Mars. His prompt concern becomes to discover food and make dew water for survival till the rest of crew members reconnect and rescue him. He extemporizes a ranch inside the Hab using the Martian soil prepared with the human waste, and the water created by removing hydrogen from extra rocket fuel and potatoes.

*Interstellar* and *The Martian* show the urgency to preserve nature for future generation. Both of them embroil the subject of the indistinguishability of individuals from nature. They set up the way that human life without nature cannot sustain. *Interstellar's* motive of looking for a tenable planet in a distant universe in the state of grievous lack of food crops on Earth justifies the human embeddedness into nature. Dick Cavet in his review writes that *Interstellar* follows a team of NASA astronauts searching the stars for another planet where humans might be able to relocate, after climate change has made Earth almost uninhabitable (quoted in Scot para 1). This cautions the human's haphazard destruction of nature's innate fertility power.

Likewise, *The Martian* presents an abandoned cosmonaut's mission to survive on Mars. In his initial days at Mars he grows potatoes by his scientific innovation. Producing potatoes inside the hab establishes an eco-friendly climate that triggers and breaks the sense of nature's indistinguishable value over human life. Due to the easy availability of resources, we did not concern much to appraise nature in the past. However, when we realized its scarcity, we felt the urgency to use it sustainably. In *The Martian*, Mark Whitney; the lead character re-stirs the feeling of our reliance on nature. Thus, both movies make us deeply ponder about our present attitude towards the nature's exploitation. Our illogical use of nature has already shown its some of the dire consequences.

The cosmonaut's exploration for a tenable planet clarifies our negligence in preserving nature. This coldhearted disposition towards Earth gets expelled by both of these movies. Both movies show us the innovatively progressed countries' space race for exploring the livable planets. The likelihood of the Earth's option gets constantly investigated going past the restriction of time. They presage us against the predictable catastrophic destruction that may swipe the earth in future. Modern human progress speeding from the misuse of natural resources should be controlled in time. Hence, the introduction of modern habs signify the future human imprisonment within artificial concrete and iron sanctuary.

Remi Shaul Thompson in her online article "The Martian Invaders: An Ecocriticism of Science Fiction" writes, "Analyzing Sci-Fi through an eco-critical perspective isn't uncomplicated. Nature is a vast subject, it cannot be generalized cross-culturally" (naslit.com). She focuses the deep and serious need to understand the threat of nature's peril through the serious metaphors of science fictions. We should acclaim the way of writer's blending of message of unjust realities of climate change and environmental destruction. The issue of environmental justice and crises should be interpreted through the authorial symbols. Space fiction movies always ignite the urgency of finding earth's alternatives. Earth's alternative means alternative habitat for human beings. However, it not only means finding alternative home for humans, it also means finding suitable land for flora and

fauna. In both movies, survival of the fittest in the alien territory implores to preserve Earth's greenery. *Interstellar* and *The Martian* establish the fact that life without plants appears impossible on the extraterrestrial planet.

Both movies show the disaster if the earth becomes desert in future. The green life emergency on earth performs as a distinctive theme in both. *Interstellar* projects the theme of nature and green life scarcity by showing small portion of cultivable land on which corns are grown. In *Interstellar*, the soil dirt drifting around the farmhouse and city where the lead character Joseph Cooper and his daughter live shows the transformation of the cultivable land into uninhabitable planet due to over exploitation of land and nature. It reflects the besmirching of the cultivable land due to over production.

Both movies demonstrate that the Earth's produces are fizzling because of the human activities intended more towards profit than subsistence. Humans at modern time hardly think about their dependency and loyalty towards the Earth. Additionally, *The Martian* presents the human attempt to change the infertile place in a barren Mars into fertile land. Mark Watney gets abandoned on Mars when a huge storm makes his five friends abandon their Mars exploration leaving him alone. However, when he gains consciousness and finds himself alive, he figures out the methods to condense water dew for surviving on Mars. He even manages to grow few potatoes with his biochemical knowledge. The challenges and hardships to grow potatoes on Martian land actually infer the difficulty to retain the Earth's productive power once we lose it after it will turn into the barren land.

Cheryll Glotfelty in her essay "Literary Studies in an age of Environmental Crisis" states, "Eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (87). She tries to elaborate eco-criticism as a perspective that takes an earth centered approach to literary studies. Thus, from her analysis of eco-criticism, she basically promotes sense of place in place in new critical dimension of literary studies. In the same introductory part, she connects the human world with non-human world. She bases fundamental notion of ecological criticism by stating that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it (88). She writes despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Set in the near future, *Interstellar's* action seems to be motivated from the exhaustion of an Earth that is rapidly turning into a polluted dust-bowl incapable of sustaining its slowly starving and increasingly ill population.

American Environmental Historian Donald Worster explains, "We are facing a global crisis today no because of how ecosystems function but rather because

of how our ethical systems function” (Glotfelty 21). To surpass the crisis, we need to apprehend our influence on nature; we need to understand how our ethics function. Since, environmental crisis is the consequences of human actions; we need to focus on improving the destructive anthropogenic activities upon nature. Humanity should not be the cause for fall of our ecosystem, but rather it should be conscious of the dual existence. Glotfelty interprets Glen A. Love’s “Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism” where Love argues that nature-oriented literature can redirects us from ego-consciousness to eco-consciousness. *Interstellar* through the dust and blight and *The Martian* through the red sands of Mars akin to Eliot’s wasteland connote civilization’s doom in the wake of an apocalypse triggered by the effects of advanced technology. Both movies project the picture of dying Earth.

Arne Naess in his eco-critical essay “The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects” while explaining the deep ecology’s approach to population growth writes, “The pressure stemming from industrial societies is a major factor, and population reduction must have a high priority in those societies as well as in developing countries” (54). The boost of corporate science and technology has paced the materialist greed in human beings. Though, human beings know this, they consciously tend to go on emptying the natural resources because of material greed. Despite the fact that natural ecosystems have financial values as well, their importance should never be interpreted from shallow perspectives.

Scott Russel Sanders in “Speaking a Word for Nature” argues for the place of nature’s tale in modern literary fictions. He traces the history of nature writing in American fiction writers and interprets them as being loaded with human centric notions. He argues, “a deep awareness of nature has been largely excluded from ‘main-stream’ fiction which is a reason of the narrowing and trivialization of that fashionable current” (192). Readers must be pulled in favor of nature’s dynamic range and gothic beauty that could amaze readers while they stroll through the pages. He further evaluates the non-biotic contemporary lifestyle and argues that the boxes that shut us off from nature have become more perfect, more powerful, from all-electric mansions in the suburbs to glass towers in the city, from space shuttles to shopping malls (152). Artificial enclosed lifestyle has become glamorously more dominant. Our daily movements are like in an artificial plastic and metal box which has completely segregated us even from the touch of nature.

### **The Segregation of Human and Non-human Entity**

Nature has always been in its natural course. However, humans meddling turns it to be destructive. Changing nature isn't the consequence of changing the environment from Earth's own geo-synthetic structure but due to human impedance. Nature was from the earliest starting point challenge to human. Humans could not have survived if they had not invented some useful tools. The

first tools must have been as portrayed by the history; sticks, stones, animal skins and flora, fauna bodies. The primitive human won over the harshness of nature by the use of his most modern equipment. He stood against the winter and summer with the help of his contemporary utensil. Had technology not been there, he would not have survived the nature.

Val Plumwood in her essay, “The Blindspots of Centrism and Human Self-enclosure” argue, “Human-centeredness promotes various damaging forms of epistemic remoteness, for by walling ourselves off from nature in order to exploit it, we also lose certain abilities to situate ourselves as part of it” (98). Ethnocentrism and eurocentrism (racism) dominates the experience of subordinate groups. The marginalized race and their values and norms are always considered of less importance. Eurocentric view helps us to gain insights into human’s subjugation of non-human entities. Thus, Plumwood argues that living with the illusion of disembeddedness means repudiating the activity of nature. Our self-enclosed outlook has dissociated us from nature and ecology. We have lost our intimacy with nature because of our parochial perspective regarding nature’s creation and functions. We have radically excluded ourselves as an inherent part of our ecology due to our lay understanding of nature. This hyper-separation has affected our self-being. Underestimating the existence of other being diminishes the recognition of bio-diversity.

The human-centered framework of rationality is fallacious since it endorses grave denial of dependency, stimulating nature’s essentiality as secondary. Plumwood establishes the judgment of nature’s divinity and writes, “The old anthropocentric model that binds our relationship with nature within the logic of the One and the Other prevents us from moving on to the new mutuality and communicative models we now so urgently need to develop for both our own and nature’s survival in an age of ecological limits” (192). She opposes the binary division of human and non-human world by establishing the fact that human beings consider themselves as the primary privilege holders over all other non-human creatures on the Earth. The culture of perceiving oneself as the master of non-human entities projects human’s oppressive attitude.

Recently, numerous scholarly debates and discussions have been organized on deep ecological concerns for preserving ecological crisis. *The Martian* explores such relevant human effort to change the barren land into habitable planet through Mars expedition. In the movie, Mark’s friend abandon him to dodge the accident of their satellite in the *Martian* tempest. However, because of human tendency to innovate the technology Mark successfully survives and leaves the message to not interfere with nature.

Timothy W. Luke in his essay “Community and Ecology: Bookchin on the

Poetics of Ecocommunities and Ecotechnology” asserts that the global economy is booming whereas social ecology is degrading. He proposes the cycles of global trade as the root cause of ecological degradation. The corporate class of the world dominates the world economy. He writes, “Maximizing mobility for people, goods, services, and technology rather than ensuring sustainability is their major operative logic. Environmental inputs are not used on a sustainable scale appropriate each bioregional setting” (180). By infusing the fear of economic crisis, the new (corporate) class is indirectly leading ecological crisis. High powerful posts are occupied by elite class. Global network business has emerged as the root cause for denial of environment pollution. Thus, he concentrates that the developed nations should be forewarned for wasteful expenditure of scarce non-renewable energy.

The failed conquest of Mars has been elicited in *The Martian* aesthetically. The delayed mission to bring Mark back from Mars echoes the result of human indifference to individual suffering with the surge of technology. His crew member would never have initiated rescue mission unless Mark had constantly attempted to connect with his crew members in the international space station. He survives waiting and attempting different ideas to get out of the Martian land with the help of the Rover (Robert cum vehicle). In his last day, Mark leaves clip note before boarding to the shuttle praising the Rover as nurturing mother since he managed to survive keeping him warm inside it. He writes, “Whoever finds this, take care of this Rover, she saved my life on Mars” (1:56: 10). He attributes feminine identity to the Rover which saves his life in the barren surface of Mars. Mark’s survival on the barren land warn us about the lurking ecological-crisis because of the human indifference to non-human entities.

Both movies expect the catastrophes of doomsday if the earth turns infertile and the resources get exhausted. The green life crisis on earth emerges as the prominent motif in both movies. *Interstellar* floats around the dustbowl throughout the whole movie to signify the barrenness caused by the immense exploitation of nature. The dust flying around the farm house and the city where Cooper and his daughter live demonstrates the wasteland resulted due to unchecked amount of pollution and destruction on the Earth. The technocratic orientation and love towards the development of artificial architecture has degraded the greenery and health of the Earth. The use of technology for the discovery of probable suitable planets in the infinite universe actually neglects the present eco-critical crisis of the Earth. In *Interstellar*, the alien land with high tides occurring in frequent interval signifies the nature’s wrath in the form of hurricanes and tsunamis on Earth.

For the current global ecological crisis, Murray Bookchin promotes ecofriendly technology. For him, “Ecotechnology must be seen as social ensemble of

techniques, bioregion and communal productivity” (quoted in Luke 193). Ecotechnology would use the inexhaustible energy capacities of nature- the sun and wind, the tides and waterways, the temperature, differentials of the earth and the abundance of hydrogen around us as fuels. It promises to provide the ecocommunity with non-polluting materials or wastes that could be recycled easily. Bookchin believes that use of technology should not be for dominating nature rather it should be for harmonizing human’s relationship with nature (quoted in Luke 193). Thus, for him technology should enhance human creativity, productivity and resistant power to ecological crisis.

Space science ought to focus more on the global warming and ecological crisis rather investing huge amount of capital in space exploration. In his essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," Lynn White argues that those who embrace the Judaeo-Christian religions are taught to treat nature as commodity and that natural resources are to be used to meet the goals of human prosperity and propagation” (313). Technology centered approach to make the human life better ignoring the nature’s vitality points out the major flaw in our approach to reduce ecological crisis. He further explains that science could be viewed as a root cause of environmental deterioration in a sense that it casts nature as an object to be analyzed and manipulated together with providing the means to exploit nature more radically than was possible by premodern means.

Along with this, environmentalists are aware that the social legitimation of environmental politics and their own insights into the state of nature centrally depend on science. In ecocriticism, this ambivalence has been translated into divergent perceptions of how the sciences should inform cultural inquiry (qtd in Ursula K Heise 509). Plumwood writes, “Nature is seen in the cultural phenomenon of ecological denial which refuses to admit the reality and seriousness of the ecological crisis” (81). She further explains that appropriate bulk of the social effort and energy is not put into dealing with crises such as global warming but rather into denying that a problem exists or into giving it an extremely low priority.

In *The Martian*, Mark grows some potato with the help of his botanical intelligence and technological assistant. He manages to survive on the Mars until rescue team connects with him. But the end of movie signifies that Mark saves himself through his knowledge of science and technology. He transgresses his helpless state and successfully ejects himself from the barren land into the space station. Thus, he saves his life based on his rational intelligence. However, our rationality should never be used to pollute environment. He communicates to NASA officials and his friends on satellite with the help of computers of that Rover. He saves himself by maintaining the temperature inside that Rover. Rover has been personified in the film as the caretaker or the nurse who feeds and warms him

during his isolation. Rover works as his mother and friend. The women in the form of technology saves his life on Mars and coincidentally, the women at the end of film saves him bringing back in the spacecraft. Machines themselves never inflict evil on us but their use should never be against the green Earth.

Both films support preservation of ecology. *Interstellar* has recurring motif of 'corn fields' whereas *The Martian* has 'Martian potato field'. *The Martian* becomes problematic when Mark devastatingly loses his intra hab potato field due to storm blow. This adds the insurgency of doing something for green life-cycle. The end of movie shows the zoom out picture of tiny plant under Mark's feet while he sits on rest-bench in front of campus garden. This image symbolized at the end of movie sturdily implicates our urgency to preserve nature and environment.

The notion of ecoshperical egalitarianism can be induced from the plots of these two movies. Both movies decipher an incredible message to individuals for not saving our only planet where life exists. The profit making activities appear careless about fundamental human necessities. Both movies signify the interconnectedness of human and non-human biota. Our self sustains due to its interconnectedness with the rest of the non-human beings. Human beings should work on technology to ease the human life and preserve the diversity of the ecology. The unintended consequences can be countered in time if we rationalize the use of natural resources. Therefore, the notion of the Earth as the never-exhausting resource must be refuted. The ecology must be exploited rationally and on the basis of primary needs. Hence, the biocentric treatment of each living and the non-living creatures appears essential from the perspective of ecocriticism.

### Works Cited

- "The Martian." The Wiki Martian, 2 Oct. 2015, [https://the-martian.fandom.com/wiki/The\\_Martian\\_Wikia](https://the-martian.fandom.com/wiki/The_Martian_Wikia).
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. Routledge, 2004.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll. "Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press, 1996, pp. 23-48.
- Hannigan, John. *Environmental Sociology*. Reprint. Routledge, 2008.
- Heise, Ursula K. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of Global*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Innterstellar*. Written and Directed by Christopher Nolan, Performances by

- Matthew McConaughey, Anne Hathaway, Jessica Chastain, Bill Irwin, Ellen Burstyn, and Michael Caine, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2014.
- Luke, Timothy W. "Community and Ecology: Bookchin on the Politics of Ecocommunities and Ecotechnology." *Ecocritique: Contesting the Politics of Nature, Economy, and Culture*, 1997, pp. 219-235.
- Morton Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetic*. Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Naess, Arne. "The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects." *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader*. Edited by Ken Hiltner, Routledge, 2014, pp. 49-64.
- Pierce, J. Jeffrey. P. Aarne Vesilind and Ruth F. Weiner. *Environmental Pollution and Control*. Elsevier Science and Technology Books, 1997.
- Plumwood, Val. "The Blindspots of Centrism and Human Self-enclosure." *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. Psychology Press, 2002, pp. 79-105.
- Sanders, Scott Russel. "Speaking a Word for Nature." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press, 1996, pp. 65-78.
- Scott A.O. "Off to the Stars, With Grief, Dread and Regret." *The New York Times*, 21 Nov. 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/05/movies/interstellar-christopher-nolans-search-for-a-new-planet.html>.
- The Martian*. Directed by Ridley Scott, Performances by Matt Damon, Jessica Chastain, Kristen Wiig, 20th Century Fox, 2015.
- Thompson, Remi Shaull. "The Martian Invaders Are Driving Oil Rigs?: An Ecocriticism of Science Fiction." Oct 14, 2017, <https://nasslit.com/the-martian-invaders-are-driving-oil-rigs-an-ecocriticism-of-science-fiction-76961ddeb56>,