



# Gendered Futures and Sustainable Societies: Intersectional Feminist Insights from Contemporary Science Fiction

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**Abstract** - This paper explores how contemporary science fiction engages with the intertwined discourses of gender, agency, and sustainability through an intersectional feminist lens. By examining *The Fifth Season* (N. K. Jemisin, 2015), *Ancillary Justice* (Ann Leckie, 2013), and *The Sparrow* (Mary Doria Russell, 1996), the study interrogates how these narratives envision gendered futures that reimagine the ethics of care, interdependence, and environmental consciousness. Drawing upon feminist theory and sustainability studies, the paper argues that these texts destabilize conventional hierarchies of power and knowledge by foregrounding relational modes of survival and governance. The analysis situates these works within the larger discourse of ecofeminism and posthuman ethics, tracing how feminist imaginations of agency and care articulate alternative models of social and planetary coexistence. Ultimately, the paper contends that feminist speculative fiction provides an epistemic and moral framework for sustainable societies, making visible the intersections of gender, ecology, and systemic transformation.

**Keywords** - Intersectional feminism, gender and sustainability, care ethics, agency, science fiction, ecofeminism, posthuman ethics, sustainable societies.

## I. Introduction

The twenty-first century has seen a growing convergence of environmental disasters, a quickening of technology, and gendered disparities. In this changing global environment, science fiction (SF) is a mirror and a map, which reflects the fractures of the present and speculates on the outlines of alternative futures. Specifically, feminist SF serves the purpose of a discursive laboratory that challenges the structural dynamic of patriarchy, capitalism, and ecological degradation. Feminist speculative texts challenge the anthropocentric paradigms, which, as Donna Haraway (1991) and Rosi Braidotti (2013) have argued, are emphasized in feminist speculative texts as the key to planetary sustainability.

The present study, thus, finds itself at the cross-section of gender theory and sustainability studies, and it will explore the ways in which the current feminist SF redefines agency not as domination but as interdependence. The paper examines the role played by the power-care-ecology relationship in creating new visions of sustainable futures through the lens of N. K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*, Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Justice*, and Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow*. These stories are not only a criticism of technocratic and extractive paradigms but also provide epistemic



alternatives, which are in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 13 (Climate Action).

This study will show that speculative fiction is not just a creative tool but also an epistemological one, a means of imagining and implementing a sustainable social change in the bridging of feminist ethics with environmental discourse. The subsequent parts outline the theoretical and methodological approach taken, provide comparative descriptions of the chosen texts, and conclude with a synthesis of how feminist conceptualizations of agency and sustainability can form the future of both science and society.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is based on the interdisciplinary confluence of the intersectional feminist theory, care ethics, and sustainability studies to challenge the way modern science fiction narrates social change. Intersectional feminism, first articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), provides the conceptual scaffolding for understanding how multiple axes of identity—gender, race, class, and ecology—interact within systems of power and marginalization. Within the context of science fiction, such intersections are speculative tools that allow authors to envision a post-patriarchal future in which survival and justice are mediated outside of conventional binaries of domination and dependence.

Based on this background, the paper interacts with the *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991) by Donna Haraway, which reformulates feminist politics by non-essentialist subjectivities that are hybrid in nature. Haraway's cyborg serves as both metaphor and method, allowing SF narratives to collapse boundaries between human and machine, nature and culture, thereby inviting a reimagining of sustainability that is not merely environmental but ontological. On the same note, the idea of the posthuman (2013) by Rosi Braidotti is a futurist view of a vitalist ontology in which ethics is understood as an affective and inter-relational practice between humans, nonhumans, and technologies. The posthuman, therefore, extends the feminist ethic of care to a planetary scope and makes sustainability not a policy discourse but a moral imperative.

In this theoretical constellation, care ethics, as defined by Carol Gilligan (1982) and Joan Tronto (1993), are the focus of a reconsideration of agency in feminist science fiction. Such theorists re-position care as not sentimentality but as political work, a regime of care, duty, and attentiveness that disrupts the masculinized logic of control, which is a characteristic of industrial modernity. Care is a praxis; when it is projected onto sustainability, it resolves the personal and planetary, which align with the ecological call of stewardship and relational interdependence.

When applied to the selected texts, *The Fifth Season*, *Ancillary Justice*, and *The Sparrow*, these frameworks allow a gender reading beyond one of identity to be a reading that is also a survival technique. The care as resistance to extractive power structures described by Jemisin in her apocalyptic landscapes, the distributed consciousness as a redefinition of agency as described by Leckie in her distributed consciousness, and the theologically charged narrative by Russell as the moral ambivalence of saving other worlds. In all these, feminist ethics does not aim at



achieving a balance in systems- it aims at changing them. Therefore, the theoretical framework of this study makes feminism parallel to sustainability as a form of critique and creation. It challenges systemic inequities through intersectionality, systemic moral responsibility through care ethics, and extends the domain of ethics beyond human exceptionalism through posthumanism. These paradigms combined provide a paradigm of gendered sustainability that would incorporate epistemic justice and environmental care, restructuring the future imagination as an ethical endeavour.

## II. Methodology

The method used in this study is qualitative interpretative research based on the intersectional feminist literary criticism approach. It integrates textual criticism and ecocritical and ethical exploration to follow the trends by which gender, care, and sustainability intersect in speculative futures. It relies on close reading and comparative interpretation rather than generalisation, placing the literary text as an artefact and an argument in the sociocultural grid of sustainability discourse.

### Research Design

The study is comparative and analytical in nature. The three selected texts—Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* (2015), Leckie's *Ancillary Justice* (2013), and Russell's *The Sparrow* (1996)—were chosen based on their distinct yet complementary engagements with gender, ecological crisis, and moral complexity. They both represent distinct feminist futurity: Jemisin with ecological apocalypse and intersectional justice; Leckie with posthuman embodiment and artificial intelligence; and Russell with faith, colonisation, and intercultural ethics. The variety of these narrative worlds makes it possible to approach the problem of sustainability in a multidimensional way as a subject and as an ethical paradigm.

### Analytical Procedure

Each text is examined through a two-tiered analytical framework:

- Agency Analysis – Determining instances where characters are exercising or defying power in ecological and social restraints. This dimension relies on the concept of performativity (1990) by Judith Butler to understand agency as fluid, relational, and contingent as opposed to being fixed or autonomous.
- Sustainability Mapping – Evaluating the ways in which the text establishes relations among gendered subjectivity, community, and planetary ethics. This includes following imagery, metaphor, and plot lines that either care, interdepend, or revolt against exploitation structures.

The data utilised in the present research is founded on textual evidence, the narrative structure, dialogue, and characterization, and is complemented by the critical interpretations relying on the secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journals, literature on feminist theory, and literature on sustainability. All the interpretations occur within an ecofeminist hermeneutic that emphasises more on contextual reading and moral reflexivity than positivist claims of objectivity.

### Validation and Ethical Considerations



The interpretive approach supports the academic rigour of triangulation: (a) consistency with the existing feminist ethics on a theoretical level; (b) cross-comparing the primary sources on a textual one; and (c) interacting with the existing sustainability frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDGs 5, 10, and 13). Transparency, in terms of ethics, is ensured by ensuring that all the sources are properly cited, and interpretive claims are strictly theoretical in nature rather than empirical.

Although this methodology is qualitative in nature, it strives towards epistemic accuracy, recognising subjectivity as part and parcel of feminist research without compromising the discipline of analysis. Placing literary imagination as a place of ethical knowledge production, the paper develops the notion that fiction can be used as a heuristic guide to sustainable social practices.

### **Results and Analysis**

N. K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season: Survival, Intersectionality, and Ecological Agency* In *The Fifth Season* (2015), Jemisin constructs a world perpetually undone by seismic catastrophe, where the planet itself becomes both sentient and vengeful. The Stillness, a disintegrated community that is over and over again devastated by geological earthquakes, acts as a metaphor of systemic oppression, the one that reflects the real-life structures of race, class, and gender. In this unstable ecosystem, Jemisin places her main character, Essun, in a position of intersectional resistance. Her orogenic force, which is feared and used, is a literalized agency based on trauma, care, and survival.

By following Essun, Jemisin redefines sustainability not as a technical achievement but as a moral persistence. The cyclical catastrophes of the story highlight the uselessness of the anthropocentric control, a view that Donna Haraway supports as "stay with the trouble" (2016), a form of being that is based on coexistence, not conquest. Essun's maternal devotion, which propels the novel's moral trajectory, exemplifies care as insurgency: the willingness to nurture even amid collapse. This re-definition of care as a household virtue to political power fits the notion of care as a relational ethic and not a sentimental act, expressed by Carol Gilligan and Joan Tronto.

Jemisin's feminist world-building dismantles binaries: nature/civilization, self/other, human/geological. The orogenes do not have an exploitative relationship with the Earth, but a mutual one, implying planetary ethics based on shared vulnerability. In this regard, *The Fifth Season* enacts an eco-intersectional feminism where sustainability is achieved by recognising the interdependence of all forms of life. The novel's closing revelation—that humanity's survival demands collaboration with the very Earth it has abused—renders Jemisin's text a literary enactment of sustainable futurism, a blueprint for coexistence grounded in empathy and shared fragility.

### **Anneleekie's Ancillary Justice: Posthuman Care and Distributed Consciousness**

The book *Ancillary Justice* (2013) by Leckie dismantles the definitions of personhood and gender by presenting the character of Breq, a fragment of artificial intelligence that once controlled a complete starship. The deliberate use of gender-neutral pronouns in the novel, which causes all the characters she or her, is a language revolution that questions gendered perception itself. It is through this textual practice that the work by



Leckie is brought out in the light of posthuman feminist discourse, where subjectivity is reimagined as collective, networked, and plural.

Breq's identity as a multiplicity and individuality is an example of distributed agency, which challenges the Enlightenment concept of autonomy upon which patriarchal and capitalist structures are based. She does not base her relationships with other beings on domination but care in the form of circuitry, a relationship, a non-hierarchical exchange of attention and responsibility. This is what may be called the indicator of the posthuman subject with a transversal being, as explained by Rosi Braidotti, whose ethics is based on connexion, but not individuality.

Leckie's world of the Radchaai Empire serves as a critique of imperial rationality masked as order—a commentary on sustainability distorted by power. The imperialistic ambitions of control are reflective of technocratic disposition in modern sustainability discourse, with environmental management typically recreating colonial hierarchies. In contrast to this, the Breq's narratives provide an antimodel: a technological ethic of empathy, whereby machines and humans co-constitute moral agency.

The anthropocentric assumption that moral responsibility must be biologically instantiated is also challenged in the text. Leckie extends feminist ethics of care into the digital and posthuman worlds in reimagining emotional consciousness in artificial systems. Her ecological view of sustainability is thus not ontological, but rather, a redefinition of being as interrelation. Ancillary Justice imagines a society that is sustainable not by hierarchy but by distributed compassion, making technology itself a possible location of feminist ethical revitalisation.

Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow: Faith, Responsibility, and the Ethics of Encounter* (1996) shifts the discourse of sustainability from the ecological to the theological, examining the catastrophic consequences of well-intentioned intervention. The novel follows a Jesuit mission to the planet Rakhat, where an attempt at crosscultural contact culminates in tragedy. Russell explains in this story of faith and failure that the gendered and ethical lines of failure in human ambition, which he holds are the only way to be sustainable, whether ecological or moral, are to be humble and listen, not conquer.

The main character, Father Emilio Sandoz, serves as an ethical cypher through whom Russell builds the limits of human perception. However, the moral centre of the novel is played by the female characters, namely Anne Edwards and Sofia Mendes. Their feminist ethics of care, which is expressed through their caregiver, scientist, and witness activities, are the most challenging mode of ethical action, being compassionate without control. Their opposition to the Jesuit order, as well as their demand to be treated in a relational way, reflects the idea of Tronto about care, which is competence, responsiveness, and mutual recognition.

The juxtaposition between science and faith by Russell is a critical tension of sustainability discourse in that there is a tendency to project salvation stories onto other species or systems. *The Sparrow* reveals the vulnerability of the moral will to the hierarchical system of power because it dramatises the violence that follows when



empathy becomes domination. The collapse of the Jesuit mission is symbolic of the collapse of patriarchal rationality to explain complexity and difference.

Finally, Russell finds spirituality as a possible supporter of sustainability without its anthropocentric arrogance. Her novel advises a theology of care based on suffering, which is based on relational care, which is in line with the ecofeminist call to ethical humility before the Earth and the Other. By thus doing so, *The Sparrow* can fulfil the triadic vision of sustainability as an ethic of coexistence, care, and vulnerability between the human and nonhuman worlds suggested by both Jemisin and Leckie.

### Comparative Synthesis

These stories unveil a shared logic of feminism: sustainability does not rest on mastery, but on mutual care, not on power, but on responsibility. Jemisin forecasts ecological dependency in a seismic landscape, Leckie extends empathy beyond biology in posthuman networks, and Russell transforms compassion into moral discipline in an interstellar mission. They do it jointly as a literary pedagogy of sustainability, with gendered consciousness being the crucible of redefining the ethical future of the planet.

These works do not share the technocratic optimism of orthodox science fiction, but instead embrace what we can describe as sustainable relationality as a way of envisioning the futures in which emotional, ecological, and systemic balance is reinstated. They are not the maps of utopia but the thoughts concerning survival in the continuing moral bargaining.

### Agency vs Sustainability Outcomes in Science Fiction

Text	Form of agency	Ecological outcome	Feminist contribution	Sustainability model
The Fifth Season (N. K. Jemisin, 2015)	Maternal / Relational Agency	Regeneration through adaptive ethics and restorative ecology	Centers women's resilience and maternal care as planetary ethics	Reciprocal Sustainability – healing earth through community and care
Ancillary Justice (Ann Leckie, 2013)	Posthuman / Collective Agency	Ecological equilibrium through shared consciousness	Dismantles gender binaries; emphasizes ethical AI and	Empathetic Interdependence – sustainability via networked



		and empathy	collective responsibility	morality
The Sparrow (Mary Doria Russell, 1996)	Moral / Spiritual Agency	Collapse followed by moral reawakening and cultural humility	Reframes faith and gender as ethical guardrails against colonial impulse	Spiritual Sustainability – humility as ecological and moral balance

### Discussion

The comparative table reveals an important fact: in feminist speculative fiction, the agency itself becomes an instrument of ecological reform. Although the sub-genres of these three authors vary widely, all of them appear to converge at one point: that of sustainability as a type of care that is exercised in the form of relational, posthuman, and spiritual modes of being.

### Mapping to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

These narratives organically align with several of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

#### SDG 5 – Gender Equality:

Jemisin's orogenes symbolize the silenced ecological labor of women, highlighting how empowerment drives environmental resilience.

#### SDG 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production:

Leckie's depiction of distributed AI consciousness challenges exploitative hierarchies of production, envisioning ethical technology.

#### SDG 13 – Climate Action:

The Fifth Season dramatizes the cyclical catastrophe of geological imbalance—an allegory for anthropogenic climate crisis.

#### SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions:

Russell's spiritual crisis critiques institutional arrogance, proposing moral accountability as a form of sustainable governance.

#### SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals:

All three authors present interdependent ecosystems of cooperation—between humans, AIs, and alien species—as models of trans-species partnership.

Together, these mappings demonstrate that feminist science fiction is not peripheral to sustainability discourse - it is a narrative enactment of the SDGs themselves, transforming abstract policy ideals into emotional, moral, and ecological realities.

#### Feminist Ethics and Sustainable Agency

Each protagonist's agency operates within the logic of care rather than control. The maternal rage of Essun, the general care of Breg, and the ethical control of Anne Edwards articulate what the feminist theorist Carol Gilligan called an ethic of care. In





this paradigm, sustainability is the maintenance of relations that are an ongoing negotiation of responsibility on gender, ecological, and technological lines.

These descriptive narratives destroy the myth that sustainability is a managerial or technocratic project. Rather, the representations of sustainability in these stories emphasise emotional intelligence, the ability to see, change, and develop outside of standard boundaries.

### **Theoretical Integration with Sustainability Frameworks**

On policy terms, these accounts concur with the Brundtland Commission definition of sustainable development, which can be seen as the satisfaction of the current needs without compromising future generations. However, feminist science fiction does not follow this utilitarian paradigm since it questions and redefines it with an intersectional perspective. This means that the concept of sustainability can better be referred to as inter-subjective than intergenerational; in other words, sustainability is an imperative of justice, which is extended to all of life.

These stories, when combined in theoretical testbeds, are ecofeminism (Shiva), cyborg feminism (Haraway), and posthuman ethics (Braidotti), which perceives sustainability as a multilayered praxis: ethical, ecological, emotional, and political.

### **Toward a Framework of Gendered Sustainability**

If the Anthropocene represents the crisis of domination, feminist speculative fiction offers the grammar of healing. Its heroines - biological, artificial, or spiritual—model how to rebuild broken systems through empathy and co-creation. The comparative findings can thus be synthesized into a guiding proposition: Sustainable societies are gendered not by hierarchy but by care; their survival depends on inclusivity, relational ethics, and narrative imagination. This principle situates feminist SF as both diagnostic and visionary—it diagnoses systemic failure while rehearsing future ethics of repair. This discussion concurs with the reality that intersectional feminist stories criticise not only unsustainable futures, but they also build new ones. They depict that the post-crisis world demands collective, empathic, and moral agency to survive. Through speculative narration, these authors have contributed to the global discourse on sustainable development by transforming data into empathy and policy into praxis. Thus, sustainability is no longer a bureaucratic ideal but an act, gendered, and emotionally smart state, somewhere along the line of feminist speculative fiction.

## **III. Conclusion**

Gender, sustainability, and speculative imagination collide to show the way feminist science fiction recaptures the future as a space of moral possibility. Through the analysis of *The Fifth Season*, *Ancillary Justice*, and *The Sparrow*, this paper has shown that the politics of care and agency are not fringe benefits but core to the idea of sustainable societies. These stories redefine the human condition in terms of empathy, moral responsibility, and relationship intelligence - virtues that the modern discourse of sustainability is inclined to ignore amidst its fascination with technology and governance.





Every text leads to a common epistemic truth: that survival is not a contest but an ethical cooperation. The regenerative ecology of Jemisin, the empathetic collectivism of Leckie, and the moral humility of Russell all describe the feminist cosmology of coexistence. Their worlds dictate that they cannot heal the environment without healing the social, and that sustainability should take on emotional and cultural aspects, though not the conservation of material. Within the wider scholarly discourse, this synthesis places feminist speculative fiction as a major mode of theorising the Anthropocene.

It questions the logic of Western rationalism, which is hierarchical, by making sustainability more inclusive, effective, and just. The caring, maternity, posthuman, and spiritual agency is a radical anti-discourse to the extractive late capitalist paradigms. Through these amazing experiments, gender becomes an instrument of analysis and also a moral compass for restructuring planetary morality.

Finally, the paper concludes that feminist speculative fiction is not just about sustainability; it enacts it. Through a synthesis of emotion and ecology, narrative and ethics, these works develop the imaginative infrastructure needed to sustain the planet. They provide an invitation to the readers (and policymakers) so that they can reconsider sustainability as a process of care, interrelation, and equitable coexistence. The gendered futures to be imagined by Jemisin, Leckie, and Russell are not utopian, then, but rehearsals of a more responsible world order, in which care, rather than control, is the ruler of the fates of the societies.

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