

Fantasy in a dystopian multiverse in Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights*

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Abstract

This article explores the role of fantasy in a dystopian multiverse through an analysis of Philip Pullman's novel "Northern Lights". It delves into the growing prominence of young adult dystopian literature in the 21st century, particularly in response to technological and bioengineering advancements. Pullman's novel stands out in this genre by introducing magical elements into a dystopian world, including witches, angels, daemons, and the enigmatic Dust particle. These fantastical elements serve as crucial components in the story, aiding the young protagonist, Lyra, in her mission to challenge authority and change her world. The article examines the significance of daemons, which are physical manifestations of the human soul, and their ability to provide guidance and support to their counterparts. It also delves into the concept of dust, a conscious, invisible particle that represents both love and humanity's consciousness. The article discusses the Church's role in attempting to separate humans from their daemons, despite its contrary teaching of love and charity. It highlights the various magical entities in the novel, such as talking bears, witches, and angels and their struggles within the authoritarian regime. In conclusion, the article emphasizes how Pullman's imaginative world, while filled with fantasy, parallels real-world issues, ultimately offering hope through the actions of young heroes like Lyra

Keywords: *Dystopian literature; Fantasy; Philip Pullman; Northern Lights; Young adult literature; Daemons; Church; Magical entities.*

Introduction

Dystopian literature has long been a platform for critiquing politics, power, and culture while constructing imaginary worlds that mirror real-time problems. In the 21st century, young adult dystopian literature has risen in prominence, driven by societal changes influenced by information technology and bioengineering. In this landscape, Philip Pullman's 1995 novel "Northern Lights" takes center stage. Unlike many other authors in this genre, Pullman seamlessly integrates magical elements into his dystopian multiverse, creating a rich and complex world. This world includes a diverse array of characters, from witches and angels to daemons and humans, all converging to aid the young protagonist, Lyra, on her mission to defy authority and reshape her reality. One distinctive feature of Pullman's creation is the concept of daemons, which serve as the physical embodiment of a person's soul, taking on animal forms that reflect their human's nature. These daemons provide essential support and guidance, making them invaluable companions to their human counterparts. Pullman's daemons are not static; they can change shape, offering flexibility and adaptability. The novel also introduces readers to the enigmatic Dust, a conscious and invisible particle that plays a central role in the narrative. Dust is not just an abstract concept; it represents love and the source of humanity's consciousness. It attracts itself to adults, typically after their puberty, yet remains largely unnoticed by most. In the world of Pullman's novel, the Church views Dust as original sin, symbolizing the loss of innocence that comes with growing up. Lyra's journey is guided by the Alethiometer, a compass-like device that tells only the truth, and her deep connection with her daemon, Pantalaimon. Throughout her quest, Lyra navigates a world populated by talking animals, such as Iorek Byrnison, the talking bear, and powerful witches who possess the ability to fly, foresee the future, and remain eternally youthful. While "Northern Lights" is filled with fantastical elements, it does not shy away from addressing real-world issues. The authoritarian regime of the Church attempts to separate humans from their daemons, despite preaching love and charity, reflecting a hypocrisy that resonates with contemporary society.

Dystopian Literature offers a general critique of politics, power and culture. They construct an imaginary world reflecting the real time problems. Some of the dystopian works speculate the impending disasters. They either provide a solution or to radiate hope in the mind of readers. Young adult dystopian literature- the offshoot of dystopian literature is on the boom ever since the birth of this new millennium. Having observed the revolutions in the fields of information technology and bio engineering the young adult writers are able to foresee the consequences of it and how receptive we would be in terms of the technological advancements. They create a new world where the teenagers, in most of the situations try to set the wrong right, or fight against the authority for the benefit of the humanity. They enable the readership a fresh perspective of an existing problem.

Philip Pullman's young adult novel *Northern Lights* published in 1995 is set in a dystopian multiverse. Unlike other writers he incorporated magical elements in his dystopian empire. The world of witches, angels, Gods, humans and dead fused in one trilogy to make its fantasy fantastic. They all come to assist Lyra in her mission to save her friend Roger. Twelve-year-old Lyra stands against the authority and changed the world forever with the help of these elements. John and Marry Gribbin underscored

Lyra's feat thus:

That's why Lyra's quest is important, even though she seems like an insignificant child caught up between two powerful forces of the Authority on one side and Lord Asriel on the other. What she does has a huge effect on the worlds like a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil and changing the weather over London (John Gribbin and Mary Gribbin 88).

Pullman held the attention of his readership with the help of magical entities such as talking bears, truth telling Alethiometer, invisible and flying witches, the Dust particle- the source of consciousness. Pullman brings in a farfetched imagination in the form of the Daemons.

Daemons are the physical manifestation of the human soul. In the world of Lyra- the protagonist, the soul lives in another body called Daemons. They take animal forms- a bird, reptile that match the innate temper of the human. Lyra has anermine as her daemon, Lord Asriel a cheetah, Mrs. Coulter a monkey, witches have bird daemons. Except Bolvangar bears all humans have daemon. But Iorek told Lyra that its armour is his soul or more like her Daemon. Claire asserts the ability of the witches as "However the witches can be separated from their daemons by a much greater physical distance than a human could possibly withstand" (Claire Squires 35). Daemon- in most cases is of opposite sex. Pullman extends the fantasy further by allowing the daemons to change its shape. "In childhood, the daemon can change its shape at will, but in puberty, the daemon settles into a determined shape" (Saga Bokne 6). Daemons can speak; they offer advice when necessary. Daemons -no more than condensed Dust, acquire shape upon solidification. Daemon gives human the power to think, they are made of conscious particle Dust. Hsien puts this view of daemons in his thesis as:

Essentially, they are high concentrated Dust from first to last and because of their functionality as the soul, they never have their own, accurate, original appearance, even if they become settled during their human hosts' adolescence. What they present in the physical world is a mask that they have borrowed as a pretense from other creatures. (Hsiao Hsien Hsu 231).

Lyra's Demon Pantalaimon gives her a deep insight into the problems she faces. She is away from her parents and guardians; the truth telling Alethiometer is beyond her comprehension. The mystery of Mrs. Coulter's apartment, friendly touch of the Egyptians appalls her. But for Pan, she would have confused and lost. Daemons are soul mates come at once to the rescue of the human.

As the Church of Lyra's World Views Dust as sin, it tries to separate human from their daemons. Church forms a team of scientists called as "experimental theologians" to perfect a method to separate daemons. Every time it proves to be a failure. The children under the experiment die a painful death. Saga Bokne in her article brings forth the merciless act of the Church as "Through 'intercision', as the operation is called, the researchers have not only 'saved' their victims from the loss of their innocence; they have also robbed them of that which made them human" (Saga Bokne 10). The Church despite its preaching love and charity, it works against its philosophy. The church hides behind the handy excuses like 'saving humanity from sin' and unscrupulously subject children to suffer. Jonathan and Kenneth in their analysis of the act of the Church say:

They tacitly endorse child abuse: The Church-sponsored testing station run by the General Oblation Board at Bolvangar severs children from their dæmons, for the ostensibly noble but contextually horrific purpose of researching a way to free humanity from being subject to Dust and the trappings of Original Sin (Jonathan Padley and Kenneth Padley 4).

Daemons are slave like companions of their host; they vanish as the human dies; they disperse to their original state- the Dust. Dust – though the word sounds familiar Dust of Pullman is a conscious, invisible ever pervading particle. Dust is the vital source of energy around which the events of the novel set. It is variously known as dark matter, Higgs Boson in the novel. Oxford English dictionary defines common dust as ‘earth or solid matter in a minute and fine state of subdivision, so that the particles are small and light enough to be easily raised and carried in a cloud by the wind; any substance comminuted or pulverized; powder’. The Dust of Pullman is represented in the novel with upper case ‘D’. The Dust is an invention by Pullman to replace Christian God. It is an invisible particle created by the fallen angels to gift humanity with consciousness. The angels who have the knowledge of the God’s original identity –no more than an angel are evicted from the heaven. They made the dark matter invisible to escape the dangers from the authority.

Northern Lights centers on this sentient elementary particle. The Magisterium, the authoritative body that governs the world of Lyra, involves many researchers to study Dust. This is largely responsible for the consciousness of the humanity of Pullman’s World. Dust is largely attracted to adults than children. It starts settling on humans only after their puberty. It is extremely minute and escapes notice or to be felt. Mary and John Gribbon defines dust as “The only way these Cold Dark Matter particles affect atoms is by gravity, and the gravity of a single particle (or even a clump of them) is much too small to notice” (Marry and John Gribbon 29). The contact with the Dust is considered by the Church of Pullman’s world as original sin. Dust is considered as experience - lack of innocence of childhood. As humans grow up they gain some experience of the true self where their innocence vanish. Saga Bokne in her article relates the properties of Dust, as:

The difference between adults and children is intimately related to the nature of Dust. Dust, it turns out, is a wholly benevolent power. Furthermore, it is the ultimate source of conscious thought, and none can exist without it. It is attracted to all conscious creatures, as well as to things constructed or shaped by them (Saga Bokne 18).

Lord Asriel’s photogram proves that the grownups are more attracted to Dust than the children. He says that Dust enters the world of Lyra through a hole in the North Pole. Pullman presents Dust as a symbol of Love and humanness. Being a sentient particle it gives consciousness to all living beings. Mulefa, the animals can speak and be aware of the present-ness only after the advent of the Dust in their world. It is the life power not only to humans but to the instruments like Alethiometer which is operated by the Dust.

Alethiometer is a compass like instrument given as a gift to Lyra by the Master of Jordan College. This device can tell neither good nor bad but the truth. It has needles and carved symbols on it. There is a separate study to learn operate and derive messages from the alethiometer. Many Jordan scholars involved for years to master this symbol reading. But Lyra acquired it with great ease. Lyra sets out of Jordan College for the North to find her missing friend Roger. Though she does not know its operations in the beginning she learns it gradually. Lyra plays the central role with the help of the alethiometer.

Iorek Byrnison the talking Bear restored to its throne with the help of this alethiometer. Talking animals are fascinating elements in *Northern Lights*. Byrnison was sent in exile for murdering its fellow bear. Lyra is in need of Iorek for he is the only one who can take them to the North. On its back she rides through North Pole to find her father Lord asriel.

Pullman presents clans of Witches with abilities to fly, vanish, stay young, prophesize. Witches of *Northern Lights* are fantastic women they die only when the wish to. They stay away from the civil society- live in Northern woods. They can fly great distance at one stretch.,Hsiao HsienHsu explores the world of witches as:

Witches don't lose their immortality or change their understanding of time even if married to human beings; they can bear children through human intercourse and the action will not change their nature. Pekkala, for example, proclaimed that she had had a human baby forty years ago. She didn't ignore the different lifespan between humans and witches; it evidently shows that witches are very well aware of the difference and can even calculate it in human way (Hsu,Hsiao Hsien 69).

Pullman profusely fills his *Northern Lights* with magical entities like harpies, elves, angels, witches, armoured bears, talking animals and so on... The fantastic world is not away from the cruel clutches of authority. Witches are living in a human centered world. They are marginalized; their life is under threat; their habitat is bombed and many witches burnt alive. Armoured bear besides its muscle power and knowledge over metals it was sent in exile. Iorek lived a life of slave till Lyra comes and releases. The bear was deceived by Mrs. Coulter who wants to place Raknison another bear-her puppet. There is a never ending war in the world of angels. Dust, the benevolent particle oozes out of the world through the cuts in the sky. The world of Lyra, though rich in fantasy it resembles the real issues we face now. Lord Asriel sees the parallel world beyond the world he lives, through the hole in the Northern part that is North Pole. This reminds us of the hole caused by ozone depletion. The theocracy in the world of Pullman tries to establish innocence in the humans at the cost of cutting their freewill. This world of fantasy, bound by the authoritative theocracy –a dystopian regime still enthralls us by the hope radiated by the youth like Lyra.

Conclusion

The story is a poignant reminder that even in a world of fantasy, the struggles against authority and the pursuit of hope are ever-present, embodied by young heroes like Lyra. In conclusion, Philip Pullman's "Northern Lights" combines elements of fantasy within a dystopian multiverse, offering readers a captivating narrative that also serves as a reflection of our own world's complexities. It underscores the significance of hope and resilience, embodied by young protagonists, in the face of authoritarian rule and challenges to individual freedom and consciousness.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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