

CHILDREN OF TIME: A POST-APOCALYPTIC STUDY IN WORLDBUILDING AND EVOLUTION OF A NON-HUMAN SPECIES

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Abstract

Children of time is a story that undertakes a herculean endeavor: a fascinating attempt at worldbuilding, creating a snapshot as it were of the evolution of a particular species from simple biological creatures to wise and sentient beings. Aside from being a cogent account of a new world order in which intelligent spiders are at the top of the food chain and humans are the belligerent outsiders and colonizers seeking to seize control from the intelligent arthropods, Adrian Tchaikovsky's novel also highlights the pertinent issue of ecological damage caused by anthropogenic activities which is rapidly taking the planet toward a cataclysmic event, the Sixth Extinction.

Keywords: *Post apocalypse, Worldbuilding, terraforming, God Complex, dystopia, Anthropocene, Xenophobia, Grotesque*



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As the story begins, the readers are introduced to a world where humans have made rapid progress in the field of science and technology. So much so, that they have become a space-faring species, finding new habitable worlds to colonize. But the quest for new worlds isn't just a matter of choice. It is essential to the survival of the human race, because in their quest for new worlds to colonize, they have destroyed the only home that they have ever known. Earth's atmosphere has become hostile to life. But the humans have no qualms about the devastation that they leave in their wake as they take the remaining members of their race, pack themselves in spaceships and venture out into the unknown in search of greener pastures, literally. As the humans wander about in space in their little spaceships, one can't help but feel that the colonizer himself has been relegated to little colonies, at the vagaries of the unknown. This is a price they pay for their insatiable hunger for unsustainable progress at the cost of all.

But have they learnt the lesson that mother nature has been trying to impart? The answer, it seems, is No.

In his essay, *Apocalyptic AI: Religion and the Promise of Artificial Intelligence*, Robert M. Geraci argues that apocalypticism devalues the present world order and the proponents of apocalypse hope that God will create a new world, where all the misguided values of the current world order will give way to meaningful life. Tchaikovsky's novel however presents a secular world where Avrana Kern, a revolutionary scientist, hopes to play God by undertaking an extremely ambitious and unprecedented project of terraforming an Earth like planet. But this isn't the sum total of her ambitions. In her megalomaniacal desire to play God, she plans to put a bunch of monkeys on the planet and infect them with an AI-enabled nano-virus that would so dramatically hasten the painstaking process of evolution, that these primates will achieve the sentience and understanding that took humans millions of years, in the span of just a couple millennia!

Why does she undertake this daunting task. In her own mind, it's because,

'We are Gods, and we are lonely, so we shall create.'

She hopes that once these monkeys gain sentience and become capable of pondering over the existential questions about their place in the cosmos and their creator, then she would descend from the heavens like a Goddess and let them meet their Maker. The thought of being greeted by a race of intelligent and obedient primate servants, who would worship her as their supreme deity fills her with immense pride. But the journey up until this point hasn't been easy for Kern. Her ambitious project met with a lot of hostilities and backlash back home as there were protests by several groups of people who saw this project as an abominable act against nature. One such group was *Non-Ultra Natura* (nothing above nature), which believed that humans had a unique place in the universe, and they fought fiercely against this attempt to create a sub species of humans, created in their own image, however smart. To Kern, such people are enemies of human progress, a bunch of luddites and troglodytes who would have preferred it if humans never left their cave dwelling.

However, things don't go as Dr. Kern had planned as her mission is sabotaged and the pod carrying monkeys and the nano-virus is lost. Kern hopes against hope that the monkeys would have survived the violent landing but fate has other plans. Even though the monkeys die, the nano virus survives and starts infecting another aboriginal life form, a species of Spider called *Portia Labiata*. The artificially-enhanced virus works wonders with the infected spiders as they evolve rapidly, both physically and mentally. Originally, barely a few millimeters long,

in a few generations they grow up to the size of small rocks. But their mental evolution is far more drastic. Over a period of a couple of thousands of years, several generations of these spiders evolve to form colonies of their own, have trade amongst each other, exchange shared knowledge, (which they refer to as Understandings), develop primitive tools and weapons, domesticate ants to do household chores, create an elaborate transport network made of strong spider webs, create their own metropolis and have a society that would rival their human counterparts' ancient societies of Mesopotamia and Mohenjodaro. This incredible progress of a non-human species is amazing to witness as Tchaikovsky takes painstaking effort to slowly and steadily build a complex world that is both veritable and beautiful because it mirrors the evolution of our own species from a race of hunter-gatherers to the creators of the complex modern anthropocentric world that we live in today. In the words of Peter F Hamilton, *Children of Time* is,

'a refreshingly new take on post-dystopia civilizations, with the smartest evolutionary worldbuilding you'll ever read'

However, that is where the similarities between the two species end. The story has been told from two perspectives. The first one, from the point of view of the men in the outer space moving towards the new planet, or Kern's planet. And the second through the perspective of the spiders. As a reader, one gets the uneasy feeling that the meeting of the two races will end up in a brutal conflict and the more technologically advanced race will crush the lesser advanced one. Men in their pursuit of power have done this throughout the history of human race. They have found newer territories, and plundered, pillaged and massacred people in hordes to take what is not theirs. And this brutality they did to weaker people of their own race, people who were scarcely different from themselves in matters of skin color, language, culture or religion. And they did it without any prick of conscience. Men throughout history have been xenophobic. What they can't understand, they fear and what frightens them fills them with hatred. Blinded by their rage, men have committed atrocious acts of hate crime.

Greg Grewell, in his paper, *Colonizing the Universe: Science Fictions Then, Now, and in the (Imagined) Future*, makes a mention of an essay that George S Wilson, First Lieutenant of the Twelfth U.S. Infantry, wrote in 1882. The title of the essay being, *'How shall the American savage be civilized'*, Wilson's solution is *'colonize or be colonized.'* Greg Grewell argues in his paper that according to Lieutenant Wilson, there are three courses that beings of a "superior race" may take when confronted by beings of a barbarous and inferior race, "exterminate the savages," "let them alone," or "accept them as dependents of the government."

In my view, all three of these approaches are coloured with imperialistic hue, that can only make one view an alien body as something inferior to themselves, something to be suspicious of and something to be conquered. This attitude Greg refers to as the Eurocentric bias against the oriental people.

In the eyes of these men, the spiders have usurped power that wasn't meant for them and are hoarding over a planet that was supposed to be their paradise. Why should one expect them to show any scruples of conscience for a race of arthropods. To the humans, the spiders are not just aliens, but grotesque and hideous. What is more, they have become the accidental beneficiaries of an intelligence that mankind only reserves for itself. It is interesting to see how the spiders view the humans who are alien to them. To them, humans are the outsiders, the aliens. And the spiders are the native, the aboriginals. Equipped with a rational and intelligent mind, an intelligence akin to humans, will they view these humans with the same suspicions and xenophobic hatred?

To answer that question, we need to understand a few things about the way these spiders have evolved over generations. When one first meets *Portia Labiata*, she is a female of her species used to hunting alone. She is about to go for a kill but realizes that her prey is much too big for her. While she struggles with the 'fight or flight' instinct, she comes across another male of her own species. She could have easily killed the male and fed herself, as the male spiders are weaker than the female of their own species. Instead, *Portia* is struck with a wonderful idea. For the first time she looks at a male of her species and sees more than a prey or a mate. She sees an 'ally' in him, one whose help she can take in killing the much bigger prey. This is the effect of the nanovirus changing her neurochemistry and making her rethink her most primal instincts. Over several generations of *Portias*, the species becomes so advanced that they invent a written language of their own. These writing are knots made from silk over spider webs. Once they acquire written language, they are able to store information and transfer their own knowledge and understanding of the world to their progeny, thereby accelerating the pace of their progress. Some more time passes and now they have healers, priestesses and chemists in their society. They live in close knit communities and have intellectual debates amongst each other. They have domesticated ants through the use of a chemical compound concocted by the chemists in their community. These ants are used for two purposes. Some are bred for food, so that the spiders always have a ready supply of one of their staple diets. The other use these ants are put to is as foot soldiers in wars or conflicts. However, here it is important to note that the spiders always try to avoid going to war and believe in finding a

peaceful resolution to their problems because over the passing of a few generations, the spiders have understood a crucial lesson that humans couldn't learn in several millennia, i.e. the cost of war far outweighs the most extravagant peaceful means to resolve any conflict.

In their society the males are concerned inferior to females as they are physically weaker to the female spiders. They are used for menial jobs, physical labor and for mating. It is a common phenomenon in the arthropod species that the females often kill their mates after mating with them. The male spiders have also grown in intelligence over time and begrudge the brutality of this gratuitous violence meted out to the members of their sex. They come together in solidarity and speak up against this heinous injustice against them. While there are some female spiders who sympathize with their cause, there are others who see this as a part of their natural instinct and are reluctant to give up this practice which gives them power over the males. However, after much deliberation and debate, the female spiders are able to see the error of their ways and the gratuitous killing of male spiders after the act of mating is forbidden in across their species. Yet again, the spiders have shown that they can curb their beastly impulses, no matter how ingrained a part it is of their nature. In our own world, women have been oppressed since before we became civilized, and while it is true that the modern world has made a lot of progress in championing the rights of women, there are still several countries in today's world where women are treated as commodity and are treated as less than equal to men. The spiders in Tchaikovsky's world seem more inclined and determined to create an egalitarian world order than we humans are in our own world. It begs the question of how they will view the situation of being attacked by an alien human race. Will they share Wilson's view of '*colonize or be colonized*' or will they act differently?

Tchaikovsky answers this question brilliantly through the final showdown between the native spiders and the invading humans in their fight for this brave new world. When the humans make first contact with Kern's planet armed with their superior weapons, the spiders are more than ready to put up a fight equipped with their own potent chemical weapons. But while the humans wish to annihilate the spiders completely, whom they view as illegal occupants of the planet meant solely for them, the spiders have a more compassionate and accommodating view of their adversary. Before the humans could begin the carnage that could have led to the obliteration of an entire species, (something that the humans are all too good at and have done time and again with several species of flora and fauna on earth) the spiders manage to subdue them with the help of the chemical anesthetic, a concoction prepared by the chemist spiders that contains traces of the nano virus mixed with the spiders' own

Understandings of their world view which they have distilled in chemical form to help the humans understand their point of view. The nano virus gets to work quickly and when the men regain consciousness, they find themselves prisoners of the spiders. However, the spiders do not torture or maim them. Instead, they wait for the nano virus to do its work. The nano virus helps the humans understand that the spiders are not vicious, dumb brutes but intelligent, thinking and compassionate creatures who do not wish to harm the humans and are more than willing to share their world with the outsiders, not because they have no other option, but because to them it is the just thing to do. To them, all life is precious and should coexist in harmony.

It is heart-warming and refreshing to see a species of non-human creatures display such a sagacious understanding and respect for life in all forms. Once again, they have managed to avoid war and arrive at a peaceful and satisfactory solution, one that is conducive to both sides. For once xenophobia has been trumped by xenophilia. Tchaikovsky's *Children of Time* holds a mirror to the entire human race, a species that is trigger happy, filled with war-mongers, and views itself as the sole beneficiary of all that mother Earth has to offer, with no regard to the irreparable damage that we as a species have caused and are still causing to the planet. We can learn a thing or two about being fair and compassionate from Tchaikovsky's spiders. Unfortunately, there is no nano virus that can teach us to value all life around us and treasure the world we live in. Humanity will have to learn this lesson on its own and hopefully before it's too late.

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