

Galactic Imperialism in Arthur C. Clarke's novel '*Childhoods End*'

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Abstract

Science fiction deals with the exploration of space, alien encounter and encompasses imperial ways of dominance. Human beings have been very curious about the nature of universe. Hence man has developed fascination towards space and so he started influencing and exploring the space. Arthur C. Clarke's novel *Childhoods End* presents an encounter of human race with the advanced aliens. The ultimate aim of imperialism is the conquest of the nature. H.G. Wells in his novel *The War of the Worlds* portrays Martian invasion on earth. The galactic empire of the Overlords aim at dominance, conquest, expansion and evolution. They aim at autocracy to rule the galaxy by force and fear. Initially imperialist hide their agenda, identity, purpose and policies. However the intentions and motives of the Overlords are exposed but it brings the end to human civilization.

KEYWORDS: imperialism, galaxy, Overlords, galactic imperialism, dominance

Science Fiction as a new genre, existed at the beginning of the twentieth century with an American radio engineer and magazine editor Hugo Gernsback who labelled the term 'Scientification' in 1926 to characterize the content of magazine *Amazing Stories*. Later the term rechristened as 'Astounding Science Fiction' in 1938. It was only in 1950's or after World War II the science Fiction label was applied to paperback novels. Science fiction is a kind of amalgamation of certain aspects like fantasy, reality and vision. It is a literature of ideas which explores the consequences of scientific innovations. Science fiction is a working model of an alternative reality. It is a genre of fiction with imaginative but more or less plausible content such as settings in the future, futuristic science and technology, space travel, parallel universes, aliens and paranormal abilities. Quest of knowledge has played an important role in the advancement of human civilization. The journey from the Stone Age to Space Age reveals untiring and continuous efforts to unravel the unknown mysteries of nature and human life. Science fiction writers take ideas and fears that haunted the mind of their age and give credibility by realism to its setting. Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1818) is regarded as the precursor of the science fiction genre. But genealogies of science fiction can be found in Plato's *The Republic* (fourth century B.C.), Lucian's *satires* (Second Century A.D.), Thomas More's *Utopia* (1492) and Jonathan swift's *Gulliver Travels* (1726). The modern science fiction began with H.G.Wells who called it, 'Scientific Romances'. A major contribution in the mainstream literature is given by Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Anthony Burgess, Margaret Atwood and Doris Lessing and others. Several writers in the history of science fiction assume that this genre used to make comment on colonial experience, imperial past or memory of invasion. They present effects of imperialism through

alien encounter. They project imperialistic violence and brutal facts of establishing power. Wells, Heinlein, Stapledon, Clarke etc. presented space exploration and galactic imperialism. Arthur C. Clarke is the architect of some of the 20th century's most enduring mythology. He was born in Minehead, Somerset, England on the 16th of December 1917. A futurist and science fiction writer, Clarke has written over 600 articles and short stories as well as novels. His works has been translated in to over 30 languages and adapted on television and in Hollywood movies. His visionary tales about the possibilities of science and the wonders of space explorations has solidified his reputation as one of the modern masters of Science fiction. He is a British science fiction writer, inventor, under sea-explorer, television series host and a life-long proponent of space travel. He is inducted in to the 'Science Fiction Hall of Fame' in 1997. His works are optimistic propaganda for science with human problems, rather mechanically workout against a background of scientific discovery. Clarke attempts to find answers to human and social limitations in the space in his novels. In 1945, he proposed the idea of communication satellites in his article in 'Extra-terrestrial Relays'. He incorporated new ideas, concepts and theories in to his books. He focuses on technology, space exploration and metaphysical themes. He portrays celestial and terrestrial wonders of the universe through his works.

The present paper is an attempt to study galactic imperialism in Clarke's novel *Childhoods End* (1953). Imperialism is a policy that involves a nation extending its power by the acquisition of lands by purchase, diplomacy or military force.¹ The word imperialism originated from the Latin word Imperium² which means supreme power and rule. The term was mainly applied to Western political and economic dominance, especially in Asia and Africa in 19th and 20th centuries. In west, exploration and discovery lead to imperialism. Edward Said uses the term more broadly to describe any system of domination and subordination organised with an imperial centre and a periphery.³ Political power grows from conquering and expanding lands. It influences cultural and economic development of the subject nation. Imperial expansion causes the division of the world in to developed and developing states. Edward Said argues that "Imperialism involved the practice, the theory and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory."⁴ According to Robert Young imperialism operates from the centre is a state policy and is developed for ideological as well as financial reasons.⁵ It is believed that imperialism provides stability, security and legal order for their subjects. They constrain the potentially savage ethnic group of people. The controversial aspect of imperialism is the defence and justification of empire building based on seemingly rational grounds. Jules Ferry in 1883 says that "superior races have a right, because they have a duty. They have a duty to civilize the inferior races."⁶ Imperialist have rationalized social, cultural, political and economic control of others. Imperialism explores the reality of relation between governing power (ruling class) and the subject class. However, Galactic Imperialism aims at the conquest of nature. The galactic empire is a fictional autocracy⁷ to rule the galaxy by force and fear. Galactic empire is a dictatorship based on rigid control of society that dissolved a previous democratic societies. Man has developed fascination towards space and so he started influencing and exploring the space. The galactic empire may be controlled by humanity or menaced by aliens. It may be an instrument of alien oppression threatening the Earth. The galactic empire aims at dominance, conquest, expansion and evolution. The imperial motives will decide human destiny as survivors or the extinguished race.

The novel portrays an evolutionary transformation in humanity due to first contact with aliens. The novel is an extended version of the short story *Guardians Angel* (1946). The novel is well received by most readers and critics.⁸ Two months after publication, all 210,000 copies of the first printing had been sold.⁹ Don Guzman of the *Los Angeles Times* admired the novel for its suspense, wisdom, and beauty. He compared Clarke's role as a writer with an artist "a master of sonorous language, a painter of pictures in futuristic colours, a Chesney Bonestell with words."¹⁰ The novel was nominated for the Retro Hugo Award for best novel in 2004. It is about the peaceful alien invasion of earth by mysterious overlords. In the exploration of Space, Clarke asserts that "in the long run, the prospect of meeting other forms of intelligence is perhaps the most exciting of all the possibilities revealed by astronautics."¹¹ He focuses on technology and space exploration as well as metaphysical themes. He projects children as a symbol of hope and aspirations of the future. His major thrust is the role and place of mankind in the universe. The novel is divided into three parts. The first part deals with the encounter between Earth and Overlords. The second part explores the utopian golden age which has resolved all world crisis and restored peace and prosperity on the earth. The third part reveals loss of all the children and the end of human civilisation.

The writer uses third person omniscient narrator to portray a comprehensive details of galactic imperialism. In the late 20th century, the United States and Soviet Union are competing to launch the first spaceship for military purposes. The vast alien spaceships position over major cities of the world. They exhibit power through their thirty kilometre wide spaceships. The overlords demonstrate the necessity and profitability of their rule and endeavour based on morality and noble mission to better human conditions. After one week, the aliens announce they are assuming supervision of international affairs to prevent humanity's extinction. Their intention is to bring peace and prosperity on earth. They control humanity by forcing their dominance. They restrict exploration of space by declaring that "The stars are not for Man".¹² So the space race is halted forever. They establish power structure for administration. Karellen is the mediator between Overlords and the inhabitants of the earth. He is reluctant servant of the Overmind who justifies every action for the betterment of society. Overlords claim that their interference will be limited. They interfere in human affairs as they diffuse nuclear attack, stop cruelty to animals and end racial discrimination in South Africa. After initial resistance, humanity accepts the rule of the overlords. Some human beings are suspicious of the Overlords intentions, as they never appear in physical form. Overlord Karellen, the supervisor for earth speaks directly with Stormgren, the UN Secretary General. Karellen tells Stormgren that the Overlords will reveal themselves in 50 years, when humanity will become used to their presence. The words and actions of the Overlords set the rule of imperialism. Alan Howes pointed out that "the Overlords represent the reasoning side of man, extracted from his other parts, purified and magnified many times."¹³ When Karellen is clarifying human objections to Overlords rule, he says "We represent reason and science and however confident they may be in their beliefs, they fear that we will overthrow their gods."¹⁴ They perceive human beings as irrational, degraded and different and Overlords as mature, rational, noble and dignified. They believe that people on the earth are accustomed with the structures of the government and they can be observed and controlled by indirect rule. The Overlords show sympathy and affection towards human beings. They initially serve the interest of mankind. They aim at a single unified and a global state. They are far superior to mankind in terms of

scientific and technological advancement. Overlords are immortal, able to travel at speed of light, need no sleep and can manipulate fabric of time. They are the defenders of the weak and guardians of justice. They never inflict punishment, they make the tyrants to suffer the pains of their own acts. They project an imperialistic view that the advanced and superior race of Overlords have to civilize the primitive human race on moral grounds. They intentionally hide their real identity and present themselves as the saviour of mankind. The Overlords contradict human aspirations to conquer space and vastness of the cosmos. When Stormgern asks a question “Can you deny that the Overlords have brought security, peace and prosperity to the world?”¹⁵ The response to it is “But they have taken our liberty....Freedom to control our own lives, under God’s guidance.”¹⁶ The human race have sacrificed individual freedom at the stake of security.

In the second part of the novel, humankind enters in to a golden age of prosperity. Ignorance, disease, poverty and fear have virtually ceased to exist. The factories of robots are opened and the production becomes automatic. They also abolish adventure and armed forces. It almost doubled the world’s wealth and increased standard of living of the people across the world. The Overlords mission to save humanity from destructive use of science have completed. As promised earlier, five decades after their arrival the Overlord appear for the first time, they resemble the traditional images of demons- large bipeds with leathery wings, horns and tails. The Overlords are interested in psychic and paranormal research. A prolific book collector on the subject of anthropological studies, Rupert Boyce, allows one of the Overlord Rashaverak to study these books. Boyce uses Ouija board in the party. Jan Rodericks, an astrophysicist and Rupert’s brother in law asks the identity of the Overlord’s home star. George Greggson’s wife Jean faints as the Ouija board reveals a star catalog number consistent with the direction in which Overlord supply ship appear and disappear. With the help of an Oceanographer friend Jan Rodericks hides himself on overlord’s ship travels 40 light years to their home planet. He arranges himself in drug induced hibernation. In the third part humanity and the overlords have peaceful relations but it hampers human creativity and innovations. The human culture becomes stagnant. One of the groups establish New Athens an island colony in the middle of the Pacific Ocean aim at creative arts. George and Jean join the society to nurture the spirit of creativity. The Overlords conceal a special interest in George and Jean’s children. They save the life of Jeffrey from tsunami. The Overlords have been watching them since the incident with the Ouija board. It signals the hidden transformation within Jean. Sixty years after the Overlords arrival, human children start displaying telekinetic powers. Karellen reveals the Overlords purpose. They serve for the Overmind, a vast cosmic intelligence, born of amalgamated ancient civilisations and freed from the limitations of material existence. Karellen becomes jealous of the human beings as Overlords are unable to join the Overmind. The reactions of the people are “It was a tribute to Overlords psychology, and to their carefully years of preparation, that only a few people fainted. Yet there could have been fewer still, anywhere in the world, who did not feel the ancient terror brush for one awful instance against their minds before reason banished it forever.”¹⁷

It brings end to the human race because no human child are born. It brings futility and absurdity to mankind. Many parents die of grief or commit suicide. The people of New Athens choose to destroy themselves with a nuclear bomb. “It was the end of civilisation, the end of all the men had striven for since the beginning of time. In the space of a few days, humanity had lost its future, for the heart of any race is

destroyed, and its will to survive is utterly broken, when its children are taken from it. There was no panic, as there would have been a century before. The world was numbed, the great cities stilled and silent. Only the vital industries continued to function. It was as though the planet was in mourning, lamenting all that could never be.”¹⁸

Conclusion: -Clarke uses the alien invasion to criticize European colonial practices. The Overlords show utopian dream of golden age where all world crisis will be settled down and social problems will end. Initially they save humanity from the perils of technology but at the end work against human interests. Their policy and agenda clearly represent imperialistic outlook. The Overlords uses the trick of deception which makes them more powerful. They resolve social, political, religious, ethical issues through correct use of power. The submission of human race has taken away the sense of purpose in human life. Clarke identifies the Overlords with European colonialist and the humanity seem as the burden of Overlords. Finally, Overmind not only eliminate mankind but also destroy Earth.

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¹⁸ *Ibid.*179