



BOOK REVIEW:

*The Human Race Vs. the Minorities: Racism, anti-racism, and intelligent non-humans in the world architecture of speculative fiction*

*Smita Dhantal*

Wanberg, Nicholas. *The Human Race Vs. the Minorities: Racism, anti-racism, and intelligent non-humans in the world architecture of speculative fiction*. Tampere University, 2023. ISBN 978-952-03-2949-5.

Despite being heavily dependent on imagination and fantastic elements, speculative fiction has always been considered to entail reflection on, or critique of, real-world problems. Nicholas Wanberg's research for his doctoral dissertation is a timely and important commentary on the different layers and meanings of racism in social and diegetic contexts. After a thorough review of existing research on concepts of racism and the role of non-humans in speculative fiction, he weaves a connection between the two. He finds that previous studies have not examined "how racism encodes at the level of the world's architecture" (35) and aims to bridge this gap by analysing both written and cinematic works: J.R.R. Tolkien's novels *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, the seven books of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, and the original cinematic trilogy of George Lucas's *Star Wars*.

Wanberg clearly defines his key terms, such as "non-intelligent humans," "world architecture," and different approaches to "anti-racism." It is noteworthy that he distinguishes world architecture from world-building. While world-building is the "practice or process whereby imaginary worlds form in the minds of authors and readers," world architecture is "the collection of all details about the world that can be confirmed by appealing to the text, emphasizing the relationships between details" (52). Wanberg extensively reviews relevant literature related to the above key concepts and examines how racism evolves in the selected works in relation to examples of real-world

racism – whether this is through the use of particular vocabulary or the juxtaposition of being politically correct in public spaces whilst tolerating casual racism in informal settings. He then draws examples from the text to prove how societal hierarchies in speculative fiction mimic those of the real world. The humans of speculative fiction are compared with white supremacy groups in the real world, wherein a white male transcends all racial markers, and overrides others in leadership qualities and moral superiority.

After tracing relevant elements of racism historically in the initial chapters, Wanberg focuses on its symbolic characteristics in his final chapters. He discusses concepts such as color-coding, morality, sexuality, and reproduction with reference to the position of BIPOC characters (Black Indigenous Person/People of Color) in the world architecture, compared with the *white* men on the social hierarchy. Wanberg also discusses works of speculative fiction which try to break away from these patterns by creating characters who deliberately counter such norms of color-coding and hierarchy. In doing so, he argues that such works reinforce the presence of whiteness that corresponds with real-world stereotypes.

Finally, Wanberg notes that while racism and resistance to racism have always coexisted, the term “anti-racism” and its various forms emerged only in the mid-twentieth century. As the select texts have already been used to study anti-racist themes in previous research, Wanberg makes way for alternative readings that enable discussion of how the selected texts are commentaries on racism in the contexts of relativism, universalism and practice-oriented anti-racism. Wanberg uses this research to argue that relativism and practice-oriented anti-racism can co-exist harmoniously. He employs John Fiske’s concept of guerilla reading which helps readers validate their perspective by being selective about the examples they encode in their analysis, giving way to alternative interpretations. Similarly, accepting the differences between social groups and races can help people to co-exist peacefully. Wanberg’s dissertation not only contributes to the discourse on racism and anti-racism in the world-building that takes place in speculative fiction, but it also sheds light on these concepts as seen in the real world. Such discussions are important academically as they affect young minds who will move forward in academia and in the world with an enduring, responsible, and accepting mind-set.

*Biography:* Smita Dhantal, PhD, is a Secondary School Teacher at RYAN International School, Mumbai. Her research interests include fantasy fiction, children’s fiction and young adult fiction, character study, disability theory, and gender studies. She recently defended her thesis at Christ University, Bengaluru (India), where she presented a socio-psychological perspective of analysing complex characters. She is currently working on developing the method into a theory.