On Social Utopia Reflected in *Out of Africa*

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Baroness K. Blixen-Finecke published her novel *Out of Africa* in 1937 which won her worldwide reputation. The story unfolds the natural peace of African land by spreading a picture of harmony and unusual experiences of the heroine—Karen Blixen. In this story, the author knits the plot from multipoint views to reveal a picture of a community with the characteristics of social utopia, an ideal place escaping man’s disturbance. The present paper, first of all, introduces the plot of the story briefly. Then, it mainly discusses the features of social utopian community located on the African land from three aspects: Karen Blixen is a person who advocates to protect the harmony of social utopian land in Africa; Africans are the practitioners to pursue freedom on their native land; and the westerners are the dominators in the social utopian community who almost destroy equality on African land.

*Keywords*: social utopia, equality, freedom, friendship

**Introduction**

Almost none of modern literary critics and scholars were familiar with the name of Baroness K. Blixen-Finecke before the fiction *Out of Africa* was published in 1937, which astonishingly arose the great attention of the readers throughout the whole world. The author unfolded a picturesque scene on the African land which took on a peaceful and harmonious beauty all the time. The story began in 1913 in Denmark, a wealthy and single woman, Karen Dinesen, asked her friend Baron Bror Blixen to enter into a marriage of convenience with her. After moving to British East Africa, Karen Dinesen became Baroness Blixen. In a brief wedding ceremony, Baroness Blixen befriended various other colonial residents of the country. Then, very soon, Bror used her money to purchase a coffee plantation and hired natives to work there. When the First World War was drawing to an end, they got divorced. In the meanwhile, she made up her mind to open a school for the local African tribal children to teach reading, writing, maths, and some European customs. The plantation finally harvested at long last, but unfortunately, a devastating fire burnt everything so that the crops and all of the factory equipment were destroyed. After financially broke, her relationship with her lover Denys broke up, Karen left Africa to return home to Denmark.

The story represented not only the feature of ecological utopia, but also that of social utopia from the perspective of Bror Blixen and native Africans. The word “utopia” comes from the Greek which means “no-place”, and strictly describes any non-existent society. However, in standard usage, the word’s meaning has narrowed and now usually describes “a non-existent society that is intended to be viewed as considerably better
than contemporary society” (Ernst, 2000, p. 97). During the 16th century, Thomas More proposed an ideal society of the same name in his book *Utopia*. “Some readers, including utopian socialists, have chosen to accept this imaginary society as the realistic blueprint for a working nation, while others have postulated that More intended nothing of the sort” (Lyman, 2003, p. 103). Since then, utopia was divided into different categories including “ecological utopia, religious utopia, scientific and technological utopias, and social utopia” (Ernst, 2000, p. 78). In a social utopian community, there existed no slavery, exploitation, and discrimination, instead, it was an imaginary land of idleness with equality and freedom.

This paper aims to discuss the features of social utopian community reflected in the novel from three perspectives: Karen Blixen can be regarded as an advocator who pursues social equality between whites and blacks; native Africans can be viewed as the practitioners of social utopia; and western people acted as dominators to devastate the harmony in the utopian land.

**Advocator of Social Utopia Reflected by Blixen**

In *Out of Africa*, it seemed to Blixen that a social utopia represented an ideal society where there was no slavery, exploitation, and discrimination but freedom, equality, and friendship. Though in those days, Blixen owned a large piece of land on which the native Africans toiled for her, she never belittled the black workers. Instead, she naturally treated them as beloved friends so that she established a strong emotional association with them. Moreover, she learned a lot from the natives, thus, she cherished the precious relationship all the more. The intimacy between them could be well reflected from the three aspects, such as, Blixen’s respect to Africans’ survival way, Blixen’s devotion to the natives, and their respect and love for Blixen.

The moment Blixen set foot on the land for the first time, she fell in love with it because the mysterious and gorgeous African land was her dream place. She greatly admired the handicraft of the natives and burst out a strong affection for them. However, when she learned that it was a challenge for her to understand how the local people felt and thought, conversely, they could exactly know her feelings and thoughts, she was greatly amazed. She wrote about her staff and workers, “We were good friends”, “I reconciled myself to the fact that while I should never quite know or understand them, they knew me through and through” (Blixen, 2000, p. 52). However, Blixen did understand the differences between the culture of the Kikuyu who worked in her farm and who raised and traded their own sheep and cattle, and that of the Maasai, a volatile warrior culture of nomadic cattle-drovers who lived on a designated tribal reservation south of the farm’s property. Blixen also described in some details the lives of the Somali Muslims who immigrated south from Somaliland to work in Kenya, and a few members of the substantial Indian merchant minority which played a larger role in the colony’s early development.

Actually, it deserved doubts that utopia—an inexistent place—would never come true. On the other hand, people got used to comparing their ideal to utopia. For example, many literary giants like “Plato, Thomas More, and William Morris had drawn the picturesque utopia in their masterpieces” (Kumar, 1991, p. 38). The ultimate goals in religions—a Paradise of Christianity, Elysium of Buddhism, and Fairland of Taoist—were the equal final part of utopia. In the meanwhile, utopia inspired people to yearn for it and struggle for it so that it threw people for a loss because as for its dogma, people were willing to endure ugly, tribulation, and unfairness in reality before their ultimate aim came true. For the sake of fulfillment of utopia, people exerted all their energy and even spared no great efforts to achieve the goal. From this aspect, Blixen was a pure advocator of social
utopia. In those days, when racial discrimination upon blacks was still deeply rooted, as a white woman, Blixen should occupy her position as a “master” because she was the owner of a large coffee plantation. However, driven by the pioneering spirit of pursuing equality, instinctive sincerity, and strong emotions for natural beauty in Africa, Blixen naturally deprived of the ideology of exploitation and discrimination prevailing among whites, or it was likely to believe that such ideas never existed in her mind for a second. Thus, she advocated and created a working atmosphere full of equality and friendship between whites and blacks. In a narrower sense, the native Africa land was forged into a dream social utopia with the help of Blixen. In a broader sense, Blixen’s advocacy to the social utopia was just an epitome of the pioneers at her times.

On Blixen’s leave, the natives held an Ngoma (the tradition big native dances) in their own style to see her off. Blixen was deeply touched by their company so that the understanding between them went deeper. When Blixen went back to her hometown in Europe she still received letters from African friends to tell her that how much they missed her and expected her a quick return. With tears in her eyes, she read “Honored Memsa-bl, we do not think that you can ever forget us” (Blixen, 2000, p. 79). During her rest life, she could sense a strong feeling haunting in her heart—the echo from African and Africans. The equal and free relationship between Blixen and the native Africans which lasted long foreshadowed the fulfillment of social utopia.

Social utopia, the concept which first existed in the literary books, is the ultimate aim for those who pursue total equality and freedom between whites and blacks and between man and nature. To some extent, Blixen sets a good example for the following pursuers because she herself is a pure advocator of social utopia. If possible, in modern era, men should reflect on themselves and have firm faith in the existence of social utopia in man’s society so as to reconstruct a pure inner world. Thus, the material world will be also turned to a fairy-like land.

Practitioners of Social Utopia Reflected by Africans

Social utopia, which advocates a world without slavery, exploitation, and discrimination but full of freedom, equality, and friendship, is beyond an ideal theory preached in books of various kinds. On the highlands of Africa, there were a group of people practicing the dogma of it. In Out of Africa, the local native Africans lived in harmony with each other by social concepts of being equal and being honest. In their real world, there were no such things as wars between white men and black men for the sake of conquering and domination. In their value system, there was no cheating, deceiving, intrigues, or endless greed prevailing in the industrialized society but equality, freedom, and simplicity. A peaceful and harmonious picture would be unfolded when “African children were playing and chasing freely and happily, African elders were enjoying their children’s company, African women were living hopefully and positively with their men” (Blixen, 2000, p. 35). The land was like a corner of paradise which was well advocated by supporters of social utopia.

In the world of Africans, equality was demonstrated not only in the harmonious relation between human and nature, but also in the relation between whites and blacks. Local Africans, regardless of various races, were always indulged in both mental and spiritual peace and gave respect to each other mutually. The natives took death as something natural, viewing the same value of animals, which showed the essence of equality between men and animals. When there were disputes and contradictions, an assembly of the elders would be held to discuss and solve problems by the law of their bereavement or economic loss with cattle or sheep and try their best to compensate the victims.
Besides a peaceful relationship between whites and blacks, man and nature, in *Out of Africa*, from the perspective of social utopia, the harmony between African men and women was another evidence to show its essence. On the piece of land, men and women kept a close relation, which was totally different from the gender discrimination against females in modern industrialized society. In the story, young women adhered to their own value system highly and even challenged the traditional custom that they should devote their maidens to husbands for nothing. They found it unacceptable to make marriage become a material exchange because it was humiliating for girls and their families, and even prejudices and discrimination upon females for their virginity and self-respect. As for the local women, they should be treated equally with men and possess higher social positions than males. Moreover, the young local men would naturally become the protectors for their wives when they were mature enough to establish their new families. In a typical African family, nothing could deprive of the equality, mutual trust, and understanding between the wife and the husband, which was viewed as a proper evidence to demonstrate the nature of social utopia.

The equality between men and women also reflected on the natives’ attitudes towards the white settlers. They lived in a manner of being masters rather than being tamed slaves. The local Africans were never prejudiced against the white settlers and knew nothing about judging people by their appearance. They simply evaluated a man by his behavior rather than by his skin-tone. In this sense, the natives were less hypocritical than the white settlers. If one did something for them, they would not be much grateful for the person or bear malice in their mind, instead, just as Kinanjui, the big chief, said, “just let it go” (Blixen, 2000, p. 61).

From what is discussed above, there is no denying that the African land was a community full of the atmosphere of social utopia. However, after Blixen sold the farm to a white settler, the Africans on the farm became homeless all of a sudden. Deeply touched by their dream of togetherness, Blixen gave a hand to them by finding another place to settle down. When they were toiling in the farm together, they were not so close to each other physically, however, now they were united by the spirit of social utopia and determined to stay together. The natives, with their past and roots as one, were indeed the real practitioners to pursue social utopia.

In *Out of Africa*, Africans’ life was full of sincerity, frankness, peace, and trust not only because they were close to the nature instinctively, but also for their pursuit for the dream of social utopia because all the individuals shared the equality and freedom with each other within their own tribes. Fortunately, their life was not disturbed by industrial civilization so that they were far from the ideology of exploitation and discrimination. What they conducted was following the natural laws, which integrated human, nature, and society into an entirety full of the spirit of social utopia.

**Dominator of Social Utopia Reflected by Western People**

In *Out of Africa*, Blixen was a typical advocator of social utopia and the Africans the practitioners. To some extent, both of them represented the elements connected with social utopia. Apart from it, western people could be viewed as an opposite factor who represented an evil force of dystopia against social utopia. From the opposing element, the strong points and advantages of social utopia could be well set off by contrast.

Oswald Spengler commented in his *The Decline of the West* that “the development of modern civilization is the most external and unnatural state of human nature” (Oswald, 2010, p. 198). Numerous spiritless cities piled by stones and concretes had taken place of natural land. “The so-called development of industrialization indeed
was the disaster of both nature and humanity” (Oswald, 2010, p. 275). What is worse was that the domination to the nature by western men intensified their domination to blacks and men’s domination to women, which was a typical weak point of social dystopia. In this sense, driven by real civilization, man should pursue a sheer equality, freedom, and friendship which was well preached in social utopia.

In the story, in the sharp contrast to the harmonious native life on African land, the white settlers from the industrialized countries began to destroy the harmony and peace after they became the dominators of the land. Those noblemen, rich men, and so-called civilized men launched the game of possession and domination to worldly belongings. They purchased larger pieces of land and constructed into dream palaces which symbolized the anti-nature and decadent life against the spirit of social utopia which focused on natural and simple life. They did so simply because they were driven by personal profits and interest rather than the desire and enthusiasm to build the African land into a harmonious place.

Modern white people, the westerners, in Africa looked down upon the natives and treated them as commodity for trade. In their mind, white people were much superior to the colored. In the white settlers’ hands, Africa had changed a lot: They sold black people as they liked; they deforested to build the new houses; they went on safaris to kill wild animals. The new settlers with rifles were keen hunters because they almost hunted everything on the peaceful land. What is more, they intended to turn the traditional funeral ways of Africans—to expose the corpse in the open air so as to make dead person embrace the bosom of the land—into being buried in the soil. On one hand, apparently speaking, the instructions given by the white settlers seemed to bring western civilization to the native Africa, yet, on the other hand, such preaches represented their disrespect to the local customs and a strong ambition to conquer the natives spiritually, which violated the essence of the creeds which advocated mutual respect and understanding in social utopia.

In the meanwhile, the white settlers were more insincere and hypocritical than the local people. Though they claimed that what they did simply followed the guidance of God, as a matter of a fact, they merely attempted to fulfill their own desires driven by self-interest. Since the white settlers settled down on the African land, the land lost its original beauty and harmony and gradually turned into another “civilized” place destroyed by industrialized countries. From this perspective, the western settlers were no more than the dominators of the social utopia rather than the innovators of a world full of equality and respect.

The original paradise of social utopia was almost destroyed under the domination of western settlers within decades. The destruction to the spiritual freedom and equality made locals sense the strong desire to regain the life style of utopian land. For another, with the negative example given by the western settlers, natives and the other civilized people realized the necessity to maintain the features of social utopia on the African land.

Conclusion

In the modern era of industrialization and modernization, human’s attitudes towards nature change greatly from peaceful coexistence to exploitation and utilization, which has obviously brought adverse effects to the relation between man and nature and the relation among people from different races. People are thrown into great panic of losing what they have already possessed and are driven by new desires and greed to possess more worldly belongings. However, disharmony between man and nature brings endless mental anguish to them. What is more, man’s domination to nature intensifies various dominations among different races, nations, and gender.
The ecological crisis has evolved into cultural crisis, causing the division of human inner world. Only if human reflect themselves and rebuild a harmonious relationship between nature and culture, can they have a balanced life in the industrial world.

The novel, *Out of Africa*, is full of the elements of both ecological utopia and social utopia. The western dominators in the story was a true portrayal of man’s behavior to devastate the natural beauty and social harmony on that African land. However, from the perspective of both Blixen and native Africans, the story claimed that man should be the advocators and practitioners to protect the harmony and peace between man and nature and among people from different races in a community full of the features of ecological and social utopia.

**References**


