

The Opposition and Unity of Individualism and Collectivism in SF: The Mode of Governance in Clarke's novel *The City and the Stars*

Yijiang Lou¹ and Hanbing Tong[#]

¹HangZhou Foreign Language School, China

[#]Advisor

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the opposition and unity of two ideologies, individualism and collectivism, in Arthur C. Clarke's science fiction novel *The City and the Stars*. Written in late 1900s, this work was largely influenced by the global political environment of the time, especially the backdrop of ideological contradictions. In this fictional work, Clarke expresses his vision of a dynamic equilibrium between those two ideologies through several iconic characters. Instead of being an ardent supporter of either ideology, Clarke suggests, through his depiction of different characters representing each ideology, that a blend of the two – continuously evolving – represents the ideal scenario. Specifically, the main representative characters are: Alvin, the protagonist, who symbolizes the individualism, while the high-tech city of Diasper, its ruler the Central Computer, and its residents represent collectivism. By analyzing the impact of those ideologies on characters' identities and actions, it becomes clear in several key moments that individualism and collectivism each have their own advantages and disadvantages. Initially, the confrontations and conflicts between these two, ideologies – whether direct or indirect, physical or spiritual – are multifaceted. However, as the plots unfold, the tendency of cooperation and fusion shows its potential. By the end, Alvin's absolute individualism is partially mitigated, and the collectivist ideals represented by Diaspar are also blurred. Thus, the novel can be interpreted as a work that primarily highlights compensation and cooptation between these two ideologies.

Introduction

This essay will focus on the contradiction between two social theories: individualism and collectivism, presented in Arthur C. Clarke's science fiction *The City and the Star*. First published in 1956, this work integrates many contemporary ideas from a time when the world, just after the World War II, was facing significant ideological conflicts and differences in social system. The ideological struggle between the individualism pervasively supported by the American society (Arieli, 1964) and the collectivism admired by the Soviet Union (Paretskaya, 2007) led many to speculate about the future direction of human civilization.

Arthur Clarke is one of those whose writing style and analysis have changed significantly in post-war period. Though the incentive behind Clarke's sudden shift in writing style to include this discussion on ideological differences remains unclear, critics now suggest that the socio-political backdrop of the time prompted him to consider these factors when constructing his future city, rather than merely depicting technological advancements while ignoring the ideological system (Westfahl, 2018). Moreover, given the context of United States and the Soviet Union being evenly matched at the time (Schlesinger, 1967), Clarke appears to have balanced the portrayal of both ideologies in this book, with the expectation of using nonviolent means to achieve mutual understanding and cooperation between these two powers. As Moylan (1977) points out, "Although [Clarke] works were future-oriented and critical, they were still primarily works of compensation and cooptation". By featuring both cooperation and confrontation between Alvin,

the protagonist representing individualism, and the city of Diaspar, representing collectivism, Clarke can be regarded as neutral, willing to compromise and cooperate.

Plot

In this story, humans have departed the earth due to hashed climates. According to historical records, only one city survived, Diaspar. Alvin lives in this immortal city where everyone is sent back to the city's memory banks and reincarnated later. As the one of the "Uniques" who has not experience reincarnation and lacks a past, Alvin later discovers that being a "Unique" explains his difference from the people around him. Unlike his friends and family, who have lived multiple lifetimes within Diaspar and fear the outside world, Alvin is more curious about the world outside Diaspar. Compared to his peers, who instinctively reject going out due to their dread, Alvin longs to explore the world beyond Diaspar. Accidentally, he discovers an abandoned underground subway and finds another human habitation, Lys. His journey to uncover the true history continues from there.

Representation of Individualism

Like the stereotypical settings in many works of fiction, the protagonist of *The City and the Stars*, Alvin, as an exception in Diaspar, primarily represents the individualism in the book. Given the name "Unique," he is truly distinctive, often referred to his teacher Jeserac as the "monster" (Clarke, 2001, p. 36). At the beginning of this book, his friend Alystra, Callistron, and Alvin are playing the most popular game in Diaspar, the sagas, which are simulated reality games designed in advance by the city designers. This time, the game is about an underground adventure. However, while his friends are following the designed path to experience the settings, Alvin feels an irresistible urge to go upward to see what is on the ground, and this violation ultimately ruins the whole game (Clarke, 2001, p. 10). In this first scene, Clarke successfully portrays Alvin as an "abnormal" character by accentuating the contrast between him and his peers to better shape him as an icon of individualism – an icon of curiosity, independent, and freedom of action.

Compared to Alvin, an obvious icon of individualism, the representatives of collectivism are more subtly portrayed and might be more obscure when only reading the beginning. Clarke attempts to create a false sense of free individuals' willingness through the detailed and creative settings during the underground adventure. In fact, all these sagas are under the simulation of the Central Computer. This simulated game was set to fulfill the citizens' interest in adventuring as a group while overlooking any individual wishes like Alvin's. In that case, the game saga, used to encourage players' creativity and uniqueness, is now contributing to a collective identity for every player. Under this collectivist atmosphere, Alvin's uniqueness seems to build "a barrier that sundered him from all the people of his world, and which might doom him to a life of frustration" (Clarke, 2001, p. 10).

In the first ten pages of the book, Clarke foreshadows the conflict between Alvin's individualism and the general social atmosphere of collectivism, which will be further explored in the following chapters. Notably, instead of contrasting two different groups holding individualist and collectivist ideologies, as was common in the socio-political context of the time, Clarke sets the conflict between a single person, Alvin, and the collective society of Diaspar. This setting itself is a manifestation of individualism and uniqueness. Therefore, in order to maintain a balanced contrast, much of the narrative focuses on depicting Alvin's individuality and his strong individualistic tendencies.

Many scenes in early chapters emphasize these individualistic tendencies, particularly through antithesis to distinguish Alvin from other characters, for instance, his girlfriend Alystra. When Alvin takes Alystra to his favorite place in Diaspar, the Tower of Loranne, where one could see the outside world through the tunnel of Diaspar, Alystra's reaction contrasts sharply with Alvin's: "Alystra did not stay to hear [Alvin] finish. She turned on her heels and fled back down the long ramp that had brought them up through the floors of this tunnel ... [Alvin] knew that Alystra

would not pause until she had returned to her companions” (Clarke, 2001, p. 37). Fearing the unknown, Alystra chooses to ignore the opportunity to explore a new world and returns to the familiar environment as quickly as possible, even when she is given the choice. Not only Alystra but anyone living a Diaspar would likely act the same way. Although they seem to have the right to follow their free will, the collectivism in Diaspar influences them to abandon any motivation to pursue unique desires. Collectivism not only dictates the routine of life in Diaspar but also shapes residents’ mental worldviews, preventing them from leaving their companions and familiar surroundings. In contrast, Alvin, despite being left behind by Alystra, insists his determination – approaching the grille and throwing his mind into the unknown world outside, which demonstrate a subtle rebellion against the influence of collectivism.

In addition to this indirect rebellion through action, Alvin also develops an appreciation of individualism as he comes to understand the significance of being “Unique.” While his parents regard his uniqueness with “resentment” (Clarke, 2001, p. 10), Alvin does not suppress his individuality as those around him expect. In fact, he sometimes cherishes his uniqueness as a defining trait and shows a strong discontent when it is mitigated. For example, when he encounters another unusual person, Jester, who was designed by the Central Computer to bring change to Diaspar, Alvin feels jealousy. Furthermore, when Alvin leaves the Tower of Loranne and returns to Diaspar after fully enjoying the view outside, he finds Jester at this remote, deserted place. Feeling that his secret base has been invaded by others, what first comes to his mind is jealousy because “[Alvin] had grown to regard the Tower of Loranne as his personal property and felt slightly annoyed that its marvels were known to anyone else” (Clarke, 2001, p. 44).

However, even as one of the naturally born “Uniques,” Alvin’s understanding of individualism is not fully mature at the beginning of the story. Clarke portrays the Alvin’s growth and development throughout his journey in later chapter, allowing Alvin’s individualistic worldview to evolve as he absorbs various new ideas from Lys, a distant city far away from Diaspar, which values the relationship between people and nature. One particularly intriguing moment occurs when Alvin realizes the physical differences between humans, unlike Diaspar, where all unnecessary appendages like nails and navels have been removed and everyone’s body has reached physical perfection with their beautiful countenance, Lysians have more diverse and imperfect bodies. Therefore, growing up in Diaspar, Alvin instinctively lacks the ability to appreciate human beauty, as beauty is so common in Diaspar that it has become “devalued” (Clarke, 2001, p. 125). This setting also determines that little gender difference exists in Diaspar. The lack of gender differences and the focus on harmony and uniformity in Diaspar lead to superficial and short-term relationships within this collective society.

After witnessing the deep and selfless love in Lys, Alvin discovers that love can carry rich feelings. In Lys, individuals identify their partners as special and deserving respect, understanding, and support. This observation incentivizes Alvin to regret his past actions towards Alystra in Diaspar, as he had previously dismissed her love without understanding the nature of real relationships between individuals. In other words, his experiences in Lys help Alvin complete his worldview.

Thus, Clarke’s portrayal of Alvin’s evolving individualism suggests that ideologies like individualism are continuously evolving, rather than existing in a final, perfect, and static state. If Clarke had intended to present his preferred stance on individualism, he might have depicted Alvin as fully committed to his mature individualism from the very beginning.

Representation of Collectivism

As mentioned in previous paragraph, Clark shifts the focus from using Alvin to embody individualism to exploring collectivism through a more systemic entity: the Central Computer. Rather than a mere machine, this supercomputer encompasses all the computational systems in Diaspar, “which virtually ran the city [Diaspar]” (Clarke, 2001, p. 58). More than a technological device, it symbolizes the guiding force of collectivism, deeply intertwined with the lives of Diaspar residents.

This connection between the Central Computer and society often misleads readers into focusing on the collectivist tendencies showed in residents’ daily lives, while overlooking the underlying rules the Central Computer

enforces. The special rules in Diaspar have existed for centuries, promoting collectivist behavior among its residents and undermining the uniqueness of everyone's life, making what should be a diverse array of life experiences repetitive and uniform.

A key example lies in the city's reincarnation system. The rules of reincarnation in Diaspar state that the residents at the end of the lives are stored in the city's Memory Banks and "slumber in the Memory Banks, waiting for the signal that will call them forth onto the stage of existence once again" (Clarke, 2001, p. 29). This cycle, similar to immortality, defies natural laws of life and removes the uniqueness of life for each individual. The fact that residents are awakened only by a signal from the central computer shows even a stronger tendency of prioritize the needs of society over individual autonomy. When people lose the right to decide their own life or 'death' (the eternal sleep), they cease to see themselves as independent individuals and instead become one of the thousands of codes stored in the central computer. This tendency seems to contradict with the context presented in later chapters, where residents of Diaspar are not living under many rules as one might expected; no activities are banned in Diaspar. The city is described as a place where individuals pursue intellectual and aesthetic interests without many rules or prohibitions: "No man or woman was without some absorbing intellectual interest. Yet there was no one in Diaspar could not understand something of what [others] were trying to do and did not have some equally consuming interest of his own" (Clarke, 2001, p. 58). However, these freedoms, such as engaging with art or philosophy, are minor distractions from the significant loss of personal agency—the right to govern their own lives and deaths. Thus, the freedoms allowed by the Central Computer serve only to divert attention from the deeper control it exerts.

Aside from depriving people of their rights, these special rules of reincarnation in Diaspar also hugely influence the residents' lifestyle, dismantling traditional family structure. Instead of forming families based on blood relations, in Diaspar, society itself serves like a family, assigning appropriate children to suitable parents. The relationship between parents and their children is more akin to guardians and ward than a bond formed by blood and emotional interaction. The only connection between the "parents" and their kids is the duty of tutoring. "Part of the instruction came from the couples chosen the new citizen. The selection is by lot, and the duties were not onerous." (Clarke, 2001, p. 62). Moreover, this relationship connect by social duty will not stand for long after their children's maturation. As Alvin's parents said, "Our guardianship is now ended, and you are free to as you please" (Clarke, 2001, p. 25). This alienation and detachment in the guardian-ward relationship are evident in Alvin's response: "That was the formal response, [Alvin] had heard it so often that all meaning have been leached away from it—it was merely a pattern of sound with no particular significance" (Clarke, 2001, p. 25). This shift from traditional familial relationships to a formal guardian-ward system marks the weakening of individual relationship in Diaspar, proving that all relationships in Diaspar cannot break free from the framework set up by the collective rules.

To further illustrate the collectivist ideology in Diaspar, Clarke provides more explicit evidence in later chapters. When Alvin hypnotizes Diaspar's residents to reveal the truth, he explains that the designer of Diaspar "re-designed the human spirit, robbing it of ambition and the fiercer passions, so it with the world is now possessed" (Clarke, 2001, p. 281). In this way, Diaspar not only imposes external control but also internalizes collectivism by reshaping the residents themselves. With the unique traits of personality removed, a collective identity prevails, bounded by a shared and constructed sense of belonging.

When Alvin is first introduced to the Council Hall, the narrative states, "That Hall was one of the largest buildings in the city and was almost entirely given to the machines that were the real administrators of Diaspar" (Clarke, 2001, p. 71). Like granting them the right to engage in various activities freely but not the rights to decide their own lives, the Central Computer fully demonstrates its veto and approves power over significant events while allowing the council (formed by residents through election) to discuss and decide on little significant matters. Such as whether a piece of artwork should be destroyed or stored in the Memory Banks. Therefore,

The comparison of the council, which represents the will of the individual, and the Central Computer is portrayed from different perspectives. When Alystra tries to enter a room to look for Alvin, she is blocked by robots asking for council permission: "Alystra was quite certain that Alvin had not obtain Council permission, and this could only mean that a higher authority was helping him," which indicates the Central Computer (Clarke, 2001, p.78). When

facing significant events, it is the Central Computer that holds decisive power as well. For example, when Alvin returns with a discovery that there are still humans living in Lys, he is brought to the council meeting to determine whether he should be charged, but Alvin knows that “his judge now would not be the Council. It would be the Central Computer” (Clarke, 2001, p. 179). From both Alvin’s and Alystra’s perspectives, the idea that the Central Computer is the true ruler of Diaspar is deeply imprinted in the mind of the residents, evident even to a typical 17-year-old. That imbalance in power position is the result of Clarke’s deliberate setting, as he writes that “the Council ruled Diaspar, but the Council itself could be overridden by a superior power – the all-but-infinite intellectual of the Central Computer,” to accentuate that the role of Central Computer, or to say, the role of collectivism, is unparalleled in decision-making within Diaspar (Clarke, 2001, p. 78). Thus, an obvious icon of collectivism is raised contrast to the individualism.

Combination

Delving deeper into the ambivalent representation of individualism and collectivism, the two ideologies, which were once sharply divided in earlier chapters, gradually begin to converge, revealing a trend of merging. This occurrence is not an abrupt shift; rather, it is foreshadowed by earlier events, such as the introduction of Jester, who, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, was also one of the “Uniques.” Unlike Alvin, however, Jester was intentionally created by the Central Computer to “introduce calculated amounts of disorder into the city” (Clarke, 2001, p. 56). This seemingly counterintuitive decision by Central Computer serves as a subtle precursor to the later blending of ideologies. However, it is important to point out that this is merely a foreshadowing, a minor presage that does not disrupt the underlying collectivist social structure. Clarke’s choice of words emphasized this, as he describes a Jester who has repeatedly violated the rules as having “overstepped” (Clarke, 2001, p. 63). Despite their role in introducing disorder, the Jesters are still ultimately controlled by the Central Computer and operate within the bounds of social rules.

The real fusion of the two ideologies begins to unfold and accelerates after Alvin discovers Lys, where symbols of pure individualism and collectivism begin to blur. Alvin, once the epitome of individualism, is subtly influenced by collectivist ideas as the plot develops. This implicit blending of two ideologies loosens Alvin’s rigid adherence to individualism and creates a possibility for ideological exchange. For example, after his bold and decisive adventure from Diaspar to Lys, the unfamiliar city and its entirely new environment cause Alvin to recall his hometown, Diaspar. Only a few days after his adventure, Alvin feels a strong urge to go back to Diaspar: “I must return,” he said, “Khedron—my parents—they will be expecting me” (Clarke, 2001, p. 114). More than homesick, this yearning to return to the familiar group can be better explained as an ongoing influence of Diaspar and its collectivist framework. Similar to Alystra, who runs back to her companions when overwhelmed by the outside view, Alvin, in this moment, eager for a sense of belonging and safety – a sentiment that never surfaced while Alvin was in Diaspar. This shift introduces cracks in Alvin’s previously solidified individualist beliefs, foreshadowing the growing trend of ideology fusion.

As the plot progresses, this gradual combination of individualism and collectivism accelerates and begins to noticeably affect the characters. To emphasize this shift, Clarke repeatedly uses the same setting, the Tower of Loranne, to underscore the dramatic change. After hearing about Alvin’s discovery of Lys at the Council meeting, Jeserac is led by Alvin to the Tower to see the outer world for himself. Though Jeserac, like Alystra, is a typical Diaspar resident, his reaction is completely different—he dares to approach the tube and look outside. This repetition of the scene with contrasting outcomes highlights the fact that a purely collectivist ideological system would no longer dominate Diaspar. The fusion of individualism and collectivism pushes the narrative towards a more sophisticated and nuanced conclusion, where Clarke’s message of compromise and cooperation is clearly visible.

Conclusion

Throughout the novel, this fusion of ideologies is not achieved through war or colonization but through mutual influence and gradual change. Arthur C. Clarke does not argue that one ideology is superior to the other or that one should replace the other entirely. Instead, the cooperation between these two ideologies in this novel reflects Clarke's vision of inclusion and his hope for cooperation among people of different beliefs or who grow up under different ideologies.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic.

Reference

- Arieli, Y. (1964). *Individualism and Nationalism in American Ideology*. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674280090>
- Clarke, A. C. (2001). *The City and the Stars and The Sands of Mars*. New York: Warner Books.
- Moylan, T. (1977). Ideological Contradiction in Clarke's the City and the Stars. *Science Fiction Studies*, 4(2), 150–157. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4239108>
- Paretskaya, A. (2007). Middle class without capitalism? Socialist ideology and post-collectivist discourse in late Soviet Union. https://miamioh.edu/cas/_files/documents/havighurst/2007/paretskaya.pdf
- Schlesinger, A. (1967). Origins of the Cold War. *Foreign Affairs*, 46(1), 22–52. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20039280>
- Westfahl, G. (2019). *Arthur C. Clarke*. Urbana, University of Illinois Press.