

Environment: From a Humanities Perspective: Introductory Thoughts

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In the last decades, there has begun a close and productive dialogue between humanities studies and environment and disaster studies. This has arisen from the general understanding in academic and policy-making circles that the problem of environment crisis or of climate change cannot be meaningfully engaged with through the lens of one single discipline or for that matter through scientific studies alone. Environment is constituted of material and non-material interactions between the humans and the non-humans. It is a very broad and complex domain, and a study addressed towards sustainable living and caring for the environment will need to take into account factors responsible for the current global environmental crisis and the way human communities and non-human living beings in a local set up have responded to environmentally directed but (majorly) human-oriented policies and values. As development ideology continues to remain the cornerstone for 'progress', questions of sustainability and conservation have become vital to national, state, and non-state thinktanks.

If one has to one constitutive reason for the global visibility of climate related issues in today's socio-political and economic discourses, it is this developmental ideology which began, aggressively enough at least, from capitalism's world-imperialist expansion from the early modern years of colonialism. Capitalist development and the social condition of modernity, in this logic, have become synonymous in today's world. To modernize a nation, it has become proverbial to either embrace or be forced to embrace the logic of globalised capital. However, the consequence of embracing modernity and partaking in the world-circuits of capital and culture have been deeply damaging, especially for developing nations plagued by the dual conditions of colonial pasts and postcolonial economic dependence on developed nations. Often, modernity's obverse side seems to appear through large-scale catastrophes. Famines, floods, earthquakes, and a slow violence of malnutrition, starvation, and deprivation characterise Third-World nations. While these catastrophes are often read as 'natural', studies have shown that they are variously 'manufactured' by political or economic decisions of aggressive extractivism. Indeed, Indian historian Sumit Sarkar noted that the systematic deindustrialisation of agriculture and industry by the British in nineteenth century India resulted in a number of disasters in colonial India (Sarkar 36). More recently, cultural studies scholar Eric Cazdyn has shown how catastrophes and socio-economic crisis of modernity are intimately tied (Cazdyn 652). In many cases, as activist-scholar Naomi Klein has pointed out, catastrophes are artificially caused to 'control' political disputes (Klein 18-19).

This ontological relation between the logic of developmental or rather the social condition of modernity and catastrophe and crisis needs to be studied more thoroughly in an interdisciplinary fashion. Capitalism's role as an aggressor in the Anthropocene cannot be denied; neither can capitalist development as a global system be nullified or thrown away as, without recourse to a viable alternative, it continues to find a way to overcome its barriers. Is it possible then to find a possibility where development and progress (where progress is understood not in 'liberal' terms but as a dialectic composed of the logic of development as well as its critique) will allow for a sustainable world? Where victimized or vulnerable communities will be given prior care and concern by the state and non-state actors? Where forests dwellers or marginalized groups will not be understood as obstacles to modernity but rather constitutive of it? This is where humanities and social sciences will play a major role in finding out how human communities and non-human living beings have received or responded to certain environmentally built crisis situations or to various human methods/practices meant to better those situations.

In the humanities studies, in particular, different disciplines have come to discuss environmental problems that concern a global population. Major conferences, journal issues, anthologies and journals have been devoted to this area, and significant new research has been published. In the discipline of literary studies, environmental criticism has already become a strong player. From its formative years in the US in the 1960s and 70s, with works from Aldo Leopold to

Rachel Carson, to the intervention by Third-World environmentalists such as Ramachandra Guha and J-Martinez Allier, to the more explicit literary undertakings by scholars such as Lawrence Buell (1994), Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (1996), or Greg Garrard (2004), or where terms such as ecocriticism, environmental imagination, green studies, and eco-poetics have managed to hold public attention, ecological readings in literary texts have carved a subfield of its own. The prospects have become even sharper with the recent dialogue between postcolonial/world literary studies with environmental studies, as initiated by such critics as Graham Huggan (2009), Rob Nixon (2011), Pablo Mukherjee (2013), Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2015), Parham and Westling (2016), and others. In addition to finding out how literatures and cultures have registered disasters and their impacts, these studies have insightfully pointed out the link between a disaster's orientation and the formal pattern of a literary work.

This brings us to the question of reading literature and art for the environment. In 1992, in a review essay titled 'Petrofiction', Indian writer Amitav Ghosh asked why, despite the overbearing presence of fossil fuel in contemporary times, literary writings have been so lacking in this area (Ghosh n.p.). More recently, in his book, *The Great Derangement* (2016), Ghosh has resuscitated the point and highlighted the significant role that 'stories' can play in understanding the urgent issue and building solidarity and resistance based politics on a global scale. Ghosh does not only focus on the 'ethical' side of storytelling here, but also on the symbolic or tropological side – the aesthetic dimensions. A fine close reader himself, Ghosh tells us in the way stories lay out the problems through trope, symbols, forms, and styles. He finds that while the so-called 'genre-fiction' has engaged with the urgent issues in a more serious manner, 'mainstream' literature has not been so prolific in this context. Here Ghosh has mainly realist literature in mind. He also recognizes the several levels of mutation that a 'realist' text may have to undergo in order to register the impact of a catastrophe. The crisis, according to him, should call for aesthetic challenges within mainstream literature rather than a tokenistic use of it as a mere backdrop of secondary concern. Indeed, in a newspaper article, Ghosh writes,

There is, however, an important difference between the weather events that we are now experiencing and those that occur in surrealist and magical realist novels: improbable though they might be, these events are neither surreal nor magical. To the contrary, these highly improbable occurrences are overwhelmingly, urgently, astoundingly real. The ethical difficulties that might arise in treating them as magical or metaphorical or allegorical are obvious. (2016, n.pag.).

Clearly, he feels strongly about the need for an environmentally charged fiction that will not relegate climate crisis to an incursion of surrealist fantasy in an otherwise realistic novel. He observes: "to treat them [environmental disasters] as magical or surreal would be to rob them of precisely the quality that makes them so urgently compelling – which is that they are actually happening on this Earth, at this time" (2016, n.pag.). As Ghosh says, a crucial contemporary task in literature is to decouple the theme of climate crisis from genre-fiction and make it integral to any kind of serious fiction of 21st century. Literature and other cultural discourses are endemic to environment of course. Environment is an entity that constructs itself on the basis of these discourses. If we look beyond the false binary of nature and culture, environment has a deep connect with the cultural and the human. Human beings are significant agents in the contemporary geological landscape and its crisis, i.e., climate change. Human agency is anything but separated from the environmental crisis in which the global community currently finds itself. The task ahead of us is to think human responsibility and find solutions to this crisis without falling back to humanist supremacism. Humanities, as we have been arguing, as a family of disciplines, offers a multifocal critical armoury to tackle the environmental question from vantage points of philosophy, political economy, Globalization, art, literature and so on. Timothy Morton for example has approached the problem of climate change as an alteration in the way we think about the ontology of objects. He has classified global warming as a 'hyperobject'— "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (1). To cognitively process climate change as an object, we have to imagine a non-human and macro modulation of space-time. In other words, global warming is not like any other object. To think through its *being*, we need a new ontology, i.e., a new philosophical paradigm. Be it literature or philosophy, we thus need to utilize our

imaginations to the fullest in order to get into a critical dialogue on environmental crisis. This is what this issue seeks to do.

In an attempt to approach environment and its contemporary crisis points through humanities perspectives, this issue zeroes in on the multiple areas where the environment and the human intersect with one another. Clara de Massol in her essay, “The Anthropocene Memorial: Recording Climate Change on The Banks of the Potomac River in Washington D.C” opens up the connection between environment and man-made architecture. She delves into architecture as a site of memorialization. How does the artistry of memorial site resituate themes of climate change and cultural encounter? Does anthropogenic climate change help us in universalizing the human as one, united planetary community? Clara studies *Climate Chronograph* to ask these critical questions. D. B. Dillard-Wright’s article, “Gaia Theory and the Anthropocene: Radical Contingency in the Posthuman Future” goes into philosophies of humanism and posthumanism to broach the question of environmental humanities. It explores the Gaia hypothesis to argue for a new ecology of the human, sans the exceptionalist discourse of humanism. Wright deepens the paradox of the posthumanist condition in which human beings are geological agents and at the same time, life on earth might well go on smoothly without the human beings, being needed at all. Jihan Zakarriya’s article, “A Postcolonial-Ecocritical Perspective on Modern American Literature” invokes literature in this critique of environmental crisis by zooming in on two American novels: Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* and Ann Pancake’s *Strange as This Weather Has Been*. Zakarriya analyzes the novels through an ecocritical lens with an eye for violence, agency and weaves in concerns like colonialism, childhood, race and gender.

Spring Ulmer in her article “Human Subjects and “Green” Protest in Black African Photography at the Ninth Rencontres de Bamako” points out how recent photography from Africa has engaged with the issues of waste, oil crisis, resource wars, and sustainability. While the images could not be reproduced here for copyright purposes, the essay is able to showcase the intensity and depth of the artists’ engagement as well as their resilient ‘green’ protests through art. Paban Chakraborty’s essay “‘The Hidden Valleys of My Home’: Home, Identity, and Environmental Justice in the Select Works of Mamang Dai” tells us how writers from India’s fringe or frontier areas have spoken about the need to register as well as to work on the conservation of heritage environment. Through an astute reading of Arunachal Pradesh writer Mamang Dai’s novels and non-fiction, Chakraborty raises the question that environmental justice needs to be understood through the framework of storytelling wherein a disappearing or an exploited tribe’s cultural memories and conflicted histories are deeply embedded. Finally, Sarbani Mahapatra in her piece “Negative Externalities of Modern Development: The Continuing Relevance of Gopinath Mohanty’s *Paraja*” demonstrates through a deft reading of Gopinath Mohanty’s novel *Paraja* how postcolonial developmental ideology has been widely damaging for marginalised groups. This novel, for her, is able to capture the notion that the logic of socio-economic exploitation in postcolonial countries is intimately tied with the logic of development and capitalist modernity. The resistance frameworks in *Paraja* offer here a possibility of engaging with, if not overcoming, some of these challenges.

In conclusion, we hope that these essays will be able to give us an idea about how to think through the humanities from an environmentally sensitive perspective as well as, potentially, how to contribute meaningfully in order to make the world a better and a more sustainable and equitable place.

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