

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

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Ecoprecarity

In this particular session, we shall look at one of the key components of vulnerability today, in terms of public discourse and literature and that has to do with ecological precarity and ecological disaster. A very common theme, as I said, in both popular culture and high literary texts, the tone adopted in many of these texts could be of any number of varieties, any kind. The most common one is the apocalyptic. This is the usual end of the world scenario. The world has ended or is ending.

If the world has ended and some survivors are left behind, then it becomes a post-apocalyptic representation and the post-apocalyptic representation is marked by this struggling group of survivors battling the elements, battling the loss of technology, trying to return to older ways of agriculture, of community formation, community living, etc. In this particular kind of text, the world has ended in more ways than one.

Although buildings might survive. There is no electricity. The various structures of modern life have been erased. Fuel has dried up. So, survivors struggle to return to primitive agricultural practices. Here is the theme of terraforming, which is basically the attempt to repopulate another planet as Earth was once populated; to inhabit, make another planet a home for humans because Earth itself has been rendered inhospitable. Most of these texts apportion blame to humans for the ecological disaster, which we can now call anthropogenic disaster because the disaster originates in human actions.

There is a certain, shall we say, moral or didactic tone, which points to human behavior, human lifestyles, which includes excess consumerism, rampant resource depletion, greed, etc., which have brought us to this particular state. New and monstrous forms of life emerge. Plants have mutated. Animals have mutated. Humans have also mutated.

And of course, then there are texts that deal with extra-terrestrial origins of disaster. So, let's go through these different, these varied modes of talking about ecological disaster and ecological precarity. This particular scene, well known from the film *2012*, is one particular example. There are several others which talk about earthquakes and tsunamis, the arrival of a new ice age, forest fires, toxins and droughts. This particular visual from

The Day After Tomorrow shows the arrival of a new ice age where the world, in this particular case, Manhattan has frozen over and the new ice age is upon us.

And these are, as you can see from the slide itself, popular cinematic representations of ecological disaster. These representations talk about extinction events, extra-terrestrial sources, meteors arriving, comets arriving, some piece of space debris arriving on earth, some forms of life, such as the film *Life* itself, titled “*Life*”, where extra-terrestrial life forms arrive in the form of either habiting the human form, which would be the original story of alien, for instance, or they come as themselves. There is species loss, there is a rise of mutated species, and of course, various medical and biological conditions, sterility, cancer, etc. If you move towards, literary representations of eco-precarity, a favorite theme is of new epidemics which arise and devastate the world.

So you can look at Maggie Gee's, *The Ice People*, which is up on the screen, which talks about a new kind of Ebola coinciding with hemorrhaging sleeping sickness. And if you recall what we have said about melodramatic representations, here is one. It's also a very visceral embodied representation that disaster has to be primarily measured in terms of what it does to bodies. And there are of course, alarming statistics and problems of fertility, etc.

Close to home, this is Ambikasuthan Mangad's novel about the endosulfan tragedy in Kerala, titled *Swarga*. And here is the description. *Swarga* is named after the condition where there's an abundance of water, but as the novel says, the poison's been sprayed on those water bodies.

“... Twenty-five yea's, the poison's been sprayed on those waterbodies! If it wer' a well, you could cover it. Bu' the poison tha' falls on the hill, it gets int' the surangas an' reaches you' home. Isn' tha' why this place is full of sick peopl.”

What does it represent? It, as a literary text, represents uninhabitable ecosystems, uninhabitable biomes, where human activity, the poison here is pesticide, the toxin has made life impossible, unsustainable. Human made anthropogenic toxification, which has rendered the entire ecosystem unlivable. Then of course, there is anthropogenic disaster stemming from the fact that humans refuse to learn, where humans have been cautioned several times.

And if there are people here who follow the IPCC reports annually, they issue warnings about the rising temperatures. So, 2023, they said 1.5 degrees centigrade rise of temperatures will itself be devastating in the consequences that will be visited, including the rise of water levels, sea levels and the eventual drowning of cities. But the question these texts asks is, “who listens?” Who listens to the scientists, to the climatologists who has been warning us, who has been shouting from rooftops that disaster and devastation

is coming if you don't learn. And many of these people, as in the authors and popular representations will have instances of statisticians, climatologists, meteorologists who are trying to get the attention of the world saying, "look, this is important, please listen" and nobody listens. Many of the movies you will see, the scientists being brushed aside, they report saying, "oh, this is all rubbish" or worse, you're being told you are an alarmist, you know.

Look at this excerpt from Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy. The people in the chaos cannot learn, they cannot understand what they're doing to the sea and the sky and the plants and the animals. They cannot understand that they're killing them and that they will end by killing themselves. And there are so many of them, each one of them is doing part of the killing. And when you tell them to stop, they don't hear you. That's important, they don't hear you. So, what the literary text, what the popular text tries to show is that we are unwilling to accept, we are unwilling to learn and that mutually assured destruction acronymed as MAD is inevitable because we don't listen, because we just don't want to listen.

Eco-precarity is my term for the discourses of fragility, vulnerability, power relations across species and imminent extinction. Eco-precarity is at once about the precarious lives humans lead in the event of ecological disaster, but it's about the environment itself. So eco-precarity has two principle dimensions. It is ecological disaster as in what happens to the lives of humans, the precarious lives of humans, but also the environment itself, which has been rendered precarious thanks to human intervention in the Anthropocene. Eco-precarity or in the sense of imminent ecological disaster is the mainstay of the environmental imagination now as in contemporary times.

So let's move on to discussing what are the elements of eco-precarity discourse. One, the ecosystem of the earth and its various regions have been rendered fragile and precarious in the Anthropocene. Many of you know the term, we have also mentioned it in passing. Anthropocene is the era of human intervention into the history, into the life cycle of the earth. So just as we have Pleistocene and other ages geological markers, we now have a marker of human interventions.

The exact dating of Anthropocene remains controversial and debate continues, but we will put that aside. But the point here is the entire ecosystem, the entire planet earth, these have been rendered fragile and precarious and is represented in terms of the degradation and destruction of habitats, which means the loss of animal populations because they are unable to live any longer, find food and the destruction of nature, which is more or less, historically taken for granted. So, because the ecosystem and its biomes have been damaged, the ecosystem itself becomes threatened to life with the toxic landscape everywhere. Then eco-precarity is also going to talk about the relationship between and

among humans and other life forms and non-human life forms. So, it is about the interaction between humans as a form of life and other non-human life forms, but also between life and non-living, which would be, for example, the geological or the mineralogical interaction with humanity and other life forms.

And this relationship is itself pushing several species towards their death. Several forms of life are wasting away at the altar of human development and modernity. Right? Then of course, there is the within species precarity, the integrity, the coherence of the species itself has begun to slowly collapse. The human body or the form of the human person has begun to erase, become blurred. Personhood itself is beginning to be called into question. What Sherryl Vint, the critic of science fiction talks about as a new mythology of becoming.

And the authors envisage a change in the form of the reproduction of life itself. It could be cloning or genetic engineering, alien invasion or any other, which thereby threatens the traditional heterosexual model of human reproduction. Then there will be the bigger question of belonging. Given the overriding importance attached to genetic origins and affiliations and the tendency towards a certain genetic determinism. What about structures like community or family or social belonging? What happens to them? This is the kind of work that Kimberly Tallbear has extensively studied, where she notes how traditional models of belonging of family and kinship having altered because now we start talking in terms of genetic connections and genetic families and gene pools.

Then there is of course, the contemporary practices, principally human, lifestyles that have sought security and comfort, which oddly enough has produced a vast amount of waste and that waste threatens the lifestyle that produces them. Susan Signe Morrison and others have spoken about the fact that waste itself is a form of history. It provides an alternate history of humanity itself, that the lifestyle which produces waste is itself threatened by the waste that it has produced. Then there are of course, the xenocide, whether of alien species by humans or of humans by alien species, where we are looking at interspecies war and one species threatens to or wipes out other species. In the case of, in the eventuality of any such ecological disaster, cultural entropy sets in.

By cultural entropy, we mean the collapse of existing social norms, forms of social behavior, conventions that determine social relations. New ghettos are formed, new social hierarchies are formed and you know that in science fiction, genetically enhanced humans begin to occupy the higher echelons of society. Those who are not enhanced become the lower or slave segments of the population or the auditory humans, so to speak. When there are surplus populations, totalitarianism, totalitarianism by the way is a favorite subject in eco-dystopias. Then also, novels and films that talk about the

transformation of the humans and the new biopolitical systems that come into place.

For example, some are rendered zombies or slaves and these become parts of our components of a new system of community and that is also of course, violent, oppressive, totalitarian like I said. If you recall, we spoke already about scientists not being heard and that humanity refuses to listen to voices that tell us that climate change is inevitable, that climate disaster is imminent. Denialism, as this is called, is a very common feature of eco-precarity discourse and *The Ice People* novel gives you fairly decent descriptions about how data is ignored, data is manipulated as you can see from the excerpt here that there's a denial from scientists, there's a denial from politicians and people will say or people will criticize those freaks as this particular excerpt shows. "This freak bunch of results would undo every hard-won environmental resolution." Somebody comes along and says, no, this data is all wrong and somebody points to the link between corporations and science, which then leads to denialism.

No one believed them, nor could envisage global warming coming to an end. It was too damn hot and getting hotter by the day. And this particular novel shows how the entire system moves from data provided by certain scientists, which shows that global warming is coming to an end and eventually it's forgotten and then the ice age sets in. So, the reversal is important. The refusal to acknowledge climate change and disaster has been documented in texts like such as the BBC's news reports on this.

Now, the question we need to ask because principally we are concerned with the form of literary representations as to why literature should respond to ecological precarity or ecological disaster. Robert Macfarlane, very well-known commentator and writer, writes that any literary response to the present situation would need to be measured and prudent and we need to find ways of imagining which remained honest to the scientific evidence. It might require literary languages which are attentive to the creep of change, which practice a vigilance of attention and a precision of utterance. Macfarlane is actually speaking about the language of ecological precarity, the language of ecological disaster. How do we speak about it? If you recall, we began by talking about the apocalyptic tone being adopted and people who are writing novels, making films which speak about, which represent the end of the world as imminent.

But is that the best way to talk about it? As in, do you want to frighten people into accepting climate change and its inevitability? But as Macfarlane says and shows here, because it's not an instant of disaster, it's not a single moment of disaster but climate change is gradual. The phrase he uses is attentive to "the creep of change", that it's incremental, it's not always visible. What is the best way to talk about it? Because climate change occurs over a long period of time. It is built up, it's incremental, it's progressive.

It's not necessarily one fine day everything changes, but over a period of time, everything changes.

So that's one question. Amita Ghosh's now very well-known famous celebrated text, *The Great Derangement*, argues that for a very long time, humanity has remained stuck with novels that deal with the internal condition of man, of humanity. That is, the modern novel is actually looking at consciousness. It's looking at people's mind, our ideas, our subjectivity and not always concerned with larger political questions, larger issues. What Ghosh talks about in *The Great Derangement* is the need for literature to engage with much larger concerns such as climate change. And you cannot always be looking at what literary critics would talk of as interiority.

So these two examples, Robert Macfarlane and Ghosh, both of them are actually looking at ways of talking about ways of cautioning people about climate change and ecological disaster. So, if apocalyptic models, apocalyptic tones are the best way to talk about it, or is it better to talk about the slow progress of change? If you know your Ghosh novels, Ghosh will trace all these via a set of characters in history too. So, if you look at his works, more recently, he is talking about how colonialism actually resulted in very specific economic changes, but also changes in the environment. For example, his work, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, does talk about this particular aspect of colonialism and ecological linkages. So, what would be the best tone to be adopted? Now if you look at science fiction, science fiction, as people have noted, is an attempt to imagine, say, alternate worlds, alternate ways of being, different planet, this planet modified, etc.

That kind of novel engages with the environment in ways that the modern novel doesn't. And the fact that the modern novel doesn't is typically Ghosh's concern that we are no longer interested in the world outside. A bunch of novels coming out of the post-colonial phase, specifically the formerly colonized nations or what is sometimes called the global south, looks at historical change, but also how in the post-colonial period, in the post-colony, many of the policies adopted by the government, by the state and by the corporate bodies are actually anti-environment. And they show how many of these texts, the policies, many of the policies are in fact detrimental to the environment. And this kind of fiction alerts us to the continuity between say, European colonization, which played havoc with the environment and the post-colonial, which is supposed to be a little more attentive to the environment, but is actually not quite the case. So many of these texts are important for this particular reason. And that's all for now. Thank you.