

## **Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction**

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**Lecture- 03**

### **Ecodystopia - II**

So, let us now continue our exploration of ecodystopias. As we have done in the first part, we will go through certain literary and cultural texts and we will see what more has to be said about ecodystopias. Please recall what we have said dystopia from the origin means *dus topos*, not very good place, an unfavourable place, even a diseased place. And we looked at some aspects of dystopia including the connection between the local and the global as the texts show where instead of talking about or rather than the impossibility of talking about the entire planet, the film or the novel will speak about one particular city and with constant reference to other cities which are experiencing the same catastrophe. We also said that eco dystopias are a form of critique where the novels or the film point to the problems of our ways of life, our cultural industrial and technological processes, practices and habits that have instrumentalized the world, that have instrumentalized the planet and all life forms and the non-living upon it. So, this is something as a backdrop, as a reiteration and recall of what we have said so far and now we move to our further exploration.

So, ecodystopian visions in the literature and popular culture often include a very large component of waste or wasted geography of the earth. By wasted geography we mean garbage and waste accumulating everywhere. You know that waste management is now a full-fledged commercial industry but it also gestures at wasted humans as in humans who have been rendered disposable, who have been rendered into waste.

Ecodystopias envision a return of the primal, the primeval or the primordial on a post-apocalyptic earth where all technology has failed. Remember what I said, vehicles parked by the side of the road, malls empty, electricity gone, the internet is down, phone lines, everything is over, food is also over. And in such a condition, in such a context where technology has failed, the social chaos increases, gangs rule the territory, there is violence, there are battles between gangs, people are not safe, everybody is fighting for a meager amount of food or whatever leftover fuel is available. This social entropy, so social entropy in the system also increases many times over. Eco dystopias often think in terms of an end of humanity, the human race itself slowly dying. There is a group of survivors here and a group of survivors elsewhere but in many cases, they envision the

end of the planet but a little spark of hope is also given to us that some of these survivors might actually build a new world, a perhaps better world.

There's no guarantee, it is just given to us as a sliver, as a semblance of hope. In some cases, we also see the return of the natural because humanity itself has been displaced or just outright died. So, let's look at some of these in some detail and we will start with the return of the primordial and the primeval in post-apocalyptic earth. And we have two quotations, one is from Jim Crace's *The Pesthouse* and the other is from Indra Sinha's novel set in Bhopal during the tragedy *Animal's People*, now a very well-known ecological text too. Jim Crace's *The Pesthouse* quote:

“It was fascinating, if disturbing, to stand now among the bludgeoned stones and rusting cadavers, trying to imagine what America had been all those grandpas ago, while the potman and his son hunted round for any thin metal scraps that they could scavenge and use as staples for fixing broken shards of clay.”

Remember what we said in the earlier sessions that the ecodystopian novel is about humanity or the earth as it once was. It's an attempt to nostalgically capture what civilization had been, what human culture had been, what humanity itself had been and now you see people scrounging and scavenging for thin metal scraps trying to imagine what America had been all those grandpas ago. The next one is not about the end of the world, it is not an apocalyptic novel as in the planet itself breaking down but it is about an ecological disaster. As some of you know the Bhopal Gas Tragedy is the world's worst industrial disaster. It is a disaster in another sense it's a continuing disaster because the effects of what happened in Bhopal linger across generations.

It's generally thought about as and talked about as an intergenerational disaster. So, here is a description from Indra Sinha's *Animals People*. “Step through one of these holes in the factory wall that is” this is the union carbide factory which is being described the factory is now abandoned because it's stopped functioning as in the factory has been shut down but the place is still open for people.

“Step through one of these holes [in the factory wall], you're into an-other world. Gone are the city noises, horns of trucks and autos. ... No bird song. No hoppers in the grass. No bee hum. Insects can't survive here. ... Imagine you're in the factory with me. See that thing rising above the trees, those rusty pipes and metal stairs going no- where? That's the place where they made the poisons. ... Each big wind pulls more iron sheets loose. We hear them banging like angry ghosts. All that's left now is its skeleton.”

What is this kind of description doing? It's about a place that is no longer a place where machines hummed people worked things were produced. It's a place which is more or less dead except, except one little clue here. Insects cannot survive here. Why? Because

the place has been poisoned. This is the place where they made those poisons says the passage but what is also important is that the poisons linger. It's a post-apocalyptic description where the conditions of the soil, the material nature of the soil or air or water these have all been toxified, right, these have all been poisoned and here they recall how the factory used to be like the preceding passage from Jim Crace's *The Pesthouse* trying to imagine what America was or had been all those grandpas ago. Ecotestopias are marked by the return to primal ways of life that reverse the civilizational timeline.

So, note how here Jim Grace is speaking about the scavenging of material. It's not a productive earth any longer. It's not an industrialized civilized place any longer. People are scrounging scavenging to survive. They recall an older earth in terms of either traumatic memories which would be *Animal's People* or the nostalgia for an older era where things used to work.

The nostalgia is also there in the *Animal's People* novel because there also there is a sense that what a great factory this once was and now look at how it is. The suggestion is that this was once a great place it had produced things it produced toxins it produced toxins but it was a flourishing factory it gave employment, it poisoned the place. So, ecodystopias often have a little touch of the nostalgic a little touch of the nostalgic for the Americas of long ago, the civilization of long ago. If you look at the Margaret Atwood excerpt from *The Year of the Flood* which is part of the *MaddAddam* trilogy. Here is a description which is not really just about humanity.

“Consider also His workers in the Earth! Without the Earthworms and Nematodes and Ants, and their endless tilling of the soil, with- out which it would harden into a cement-like mass, extinguishing all Life. Think of the antibiotic properties of the Maggots and of the various Moulds, and of the honey that our Bees make, and also of the Spider's web, so useful in the stopping of bloodflow from a wound. For every ill, God has provided a remedy in His great Medicine Cabinet of Nature! Through the work of the Carrion Beetles and the putrefying Bacteria, our fleshly habitations are broken down, and returned to their elements to enrich the lives of other Creatures. How misguided were our ancestors in their preserving of corpses – their embalmings, their adornings, their encasings in mausoleums. What a horror – to turn the Soul's husk into an unholy fetish! And, in the end, how selfish! Shall we not repay the gift of Life by regifting ourselves to Life when the time comes?”

What is this being what is being suggested here? Eco-dystopian texts such as the year of the flood from which this passage has been taken propose a new beginning. This excerpt, and you will see this in other novels of Octavia Butler's as well, it is proposing a whole new religion actually a religion a form of faith a form of belief a form of cultural practice where there is greater respect for the earth greater respect for other life forms and also

greater respect for the non-living. Eco-dystopian texts propose new beginning. If you recall what we said eco-dystopias are a critique of how we have lived so far of how we have destroyed the world with our consumption greed, and it's a point worth repeating, and that the way we have lived now will at some point definitely produce a disaster but eco-dystopian texts such as the one we are excited from here the year of the flood and Octavia Butler texts that I have mentioned the *Parables* series they suggest that if we were to reinvent the earth if we were to reinvent humanity perhaps we should reconsider the ways we have treated other forms of life other forms of life which can start from the nematodes the earthworms all the way to other larger life forms but also the non-living.

So, eco-dystopian text suggests a greater commitment to symbiotic living the mutually dependent forms of living with other species. It shows and this is a post-human or post-humanist strand of eco-dystopian literature and thought where we begin to believe we accept that we lead entangled lives with other species and the passage that you can see from Margaret Atwood talks about the role of even putrefying bacteria that help us the earthworms that help us the ants the carrion beetles that help us, as in ,we are speaking about a connected earth we are speaking about life forms that are entangled in their lives. So that we are mutually dependent. But it also means that we become aware and this is the post-humanist vision I was speaking about a minute ago that we share ontological corporeal vulnerability what do we mean by this it means very simply that we have the possibility of shared vulnerabilities because we share a biological condition, the body.

This is what Stacy Alaimo in a very influential argument referred to as “transcorporeality”, the linkage of bodies of biological life forms in terms of our mutuality. The toxins that enter one body can eventually reach another body that when we consume plants that have been toxified at some point the toxins enter us as well. Transcorporeality, as eco-dystopian literature pointedly underscores, has to do with our recognition of a post-humanist recognition that we are not autonomous beings we are not autonomous biological bodies. Our presumed our myths of autonomy have led us to this present condition when the actual part is the actual fact is we share a world. Our bodies can imbibe the toxins from other bodies the destruction of one species will mean the destruction of another species, this is generally called co-extinction that when one species dies related species also find it difficult to survive and eventually die out. So, this eco-dystopian critique proposes a new beginning in terms of a greater respect for other life forms and a greater commitment to this recognition that we share a symbiotic relationship with other species, a mutually dependent relationship with other species. Right?

In the next set of visuals that you are seeing scrolling across your screen these are images that appeared in a photo essay by Martin Kimmelman called “The Great Empty” in the *New York Times* 23rd march 2020 and this is at the height of the pandemic’s lockdown the global lockdown of cities. And what you're seeing there is a Munich subway without

commuters, Rome with no people. Right? Now what do these capture? Remember in the lockdown the cities were more or less empty because the people were all locked in voluntarily, but also under medical advice to not step out, right? This particular photo essay looked at a planet without humans, places without humans now strictly speaking they are not without humans in the sense that humans are behind locked doors behind walls people stayed home, except of course for the homeless, but the photo essay was giving a serious question some thought: "How would a city look without humans?"

It recalls Alan Weisman's very celebrated book, *The World Without Us* as a thought experiment the book's title is *The World Without Us*/ what would planet earth be if humanity wasn't there, if humanity disappears? What would the cities be like? What would the villages be like? And this Martin Kimmelman's essay titled appropriately "The Great Empty" is a reflection of that particular question: this is how the world will be and you can see the comparable parallel in the visual in the image from uh Cormac McCarthy's book which becomes the film *The Road* which is 2009. And here again you will see uh just two solitary people and if you look at the Martin Kimmelman's essay the rest of the uh the there are images from New Delhi and across the world, there will be one person somewhere, there is a railway station with one policeman, another city with one person walking across the road. Empty more or less, empty. And here is Cormac McCarthy's image brought live on the screen.

So, "The Great Empty" was a series of photographs which showed empty places and the description is of what *New York Times* called "the ghost town". So, Times Square it said is a ghost town as are the city of London and Paris where actually during the morning hour it would be tremendously crowded. About Bangkok, it called the places "streets of fear". Cities is known for a high density of population suddenly emptied, devoid of people, you know. Can you even imagine that? So it's worth taking a look at *The New York Times*' photo feature "The Great Empty".

For many people "The Great Empty" is a new form of gothic horror what is called "urban gothic" where the empty city is still waiting and watching. As Kwasi Tembo talks about this urban gothic: "The city is empty but for its scenography" because the roads the material infrastructure still remain the lamp-posts haven't disappeared, the lights have not disappeared, the buildings have not disappeared. They are there but it's almost as though it's waiting. As he puts, it every frame is flooded with a sense of oppressive stillness and a disquieting suspicion the city itself is watching"

So Tembo's description is a brilliant example of the urban gothic of the rather eerie of the rather frightening sense that the city is waiting and watching exactly like in a horror film, where you think something is about to happen and that is part of the worry the anxiety of a world without us. What happens? Something is brooding. And there are several examples of texts which try to do this. The first one, first novel of this type was

Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and there are graphic novels including a new one from 2002-2008 serialized as *Y: The Last Man* a 10 volume text now.

Having said that, let's move on to something else, where, again, using the pandemic as a case study you look at the post-natural wilderness and this is marked by the return of the wild, the return of something that we have never imagined would be a part of our everyday lives, of a part of our city. And images are from various places again this was a photo gallery which was carried in news18 about wild animals that have begun to appear in the city streets, during the pandemic.

The first one is, as you can see on your screen, a fox carries a squirrel in his mouth Toronto, Ontario, Canada and the second one is the image or a photograph of an African Penguin which is walking in the parking lot in Cape Town. Pelicans and penguins and feral cats, jackals and others began to appear in cities, streets during the lockdowns. And this indicates a non-human reclamation of what was previously human space, okay?

In places like Chernobyl, we have known of and heard of a post-natural wilderness a place from where humans were excluded and that makes them the wilderness. By wilderness we are not referring exclusively to the jungle out there. The post-natural wilderness is a condition where in these places humans had to be excluded or the humans excluded themselves and suddenly it enables the pelicans or the penguins or the cat feral cats to enter the city.

In ecodystopian text this is a common theme where other life forms sometimes even older life forms replace the humans or at least enter into the same space which were once claimed by or inhabited by humans. And, in the case of *The Drowned World*, you will see creatures that were previously water-bound suddenly appearing on the city streets. So in eco dystopias, the landscape which has been rendered a wasteland traces that wasting away and the wasting away, remember what I have said, is a wasting away of people animals the land but also the accumulation of waste. All of these are anthropogenic as in caused by the human hand, as in, the responsibility of such a wasting away is that of the humans. There is a global degeneration that is the wasting of the human form through toxified bodies, toxified air, toxified soil, etc.

But there's also a cultural decay the humaneness or the humanity of humans disappears, compassion is minimal, rational thinking is minimal, there is more violence, altruism is practically non-existent. And if you look at texts like Octavia Butler's, there's heightened violence actually because the survivors are battling to survive, everybody distrusts everybody else, they're trying to work as a community it's not succeeding very well, there is an attempt by some groups to claim control other groups, which fight to reject that control, there is excessive violence against women and then entropy proceeds incrementally and whatever social cohesion marked humanity that has also more or less

disappeared. There are vast landscapes of deserted houses and everything has more or less collapsed, everything collapses bodies, cultural values, material objects what we thought of as morals have also all collapsed, which is why the wasting away is the wasting away of human civilization but also of civilizational and human values including things like compassion, pity and charity.

So, these last two sessions have focused on eco-dystopias as a specific genre. The specific genre and its features talk about a world in which humanity has been responsible for much of the breakdown much of the collapse not only of humanity itself but of the other life forms the non-human life forms and of the non-living too. It envisages and envisions a retreat from the civilizational situation to a pre-civilizational era, a primeval era. It also ponders over the question of alternate modes of thinking, where you begin to recognize that we are leading entangled lives with other creatures with other life forms and as a result we need to rethink our relationships with them. Then of course there is the question of how would the world be without us as bodies: cultural values moral values and material structures all collapse. So that is our summary of or rather an approach to ecodystopias. Thank you.