

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

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Discussion On Ecoprecarity and Ecodystopias - I

All right, so this group discussion is focused on ecological dystopias and dystopias in general as part of our Vulnerability Studies NPTEL lesson. Allow me to first introduce you: Anna Kurian is professor at the Department of English, University of Hyderabad and is Faculty Fellow, UNESCO chair in vulnerability studies. Saradindu Bhattacharya is Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Hyderabad. He comes to us via Central University of Tamil Nadu and both of them along with me share an interest in dystopian literature in general.

Although this particular segment will be a little more wide-ranging as you know from the lessons recorded already. Lessons one to three we have looked at ecological dystopias in some detail and we hope to bring together some literary examples where we can maybe point to fresh aspects of ecological dystopias and forms of vulnerability that have emerged in contemporary literature of the last say 25-30 years and so, we will start with a few preliminary remarks. With Octavia Butler's fiction, a lot of popular culture, especially disaster films and the literature of people like Cormac McCarthy, ecological dystopias, end of the world scenarios, the planet in crisis, these have become very commonplace themes. And as you know from the lessons films like *2012* or *I am Legend* have been hugely successful and have also attracted considerable critical attention for their tropes, of say, of disaster, survivor cultures, the anti-technological stance that some of the movies take. There's of course a lot of religiosity and theological themes that also get incorporated such as in the *Book of Eli* the Denzel Washington film. So there is in many literature of this kind, particularly Octavia Butler but also in Margaret Atwood, an emphasis on the rejuvenation of the earth sometimes the founding of new cults even new religions as we know in both Octavia Butler and the *MaddAddam* trilogy by Margaret Atwood. So this is more or less the setting of the scene for what we want to discuss. So I first look to Sharad to kick off with a few points on what you think is central to, say, the genre of ecological dystopias. We will move on to literary texts later. Over to you Sharath.

So I was thinking in terms of how global warming and climate change, if we were to look at it scientifically, they have a slow incremental nature in terms of the geological time

scales and the global impact that they have. But in a lot of popular culture mainstream media as well as in literary fiction we do see that there seems to be a certain emphasis on the catastrophism, sudden overnight changes, even if you think about texts like Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* that the overthrowing of a current regime and the establishment of a new one takes place almost overnight although the discursive work towards that we are told, informed through certain hints of clues in the text has been in the making for quite some time.

So there seems to be a certain kind of emphasis at least in terms of popular media and cultural representation on the mode of catastrophism rather than to take into account what scientists would direct attention to, which is the slow incremental nature of climate change. And that I think is interesting because in some ways, then, a catastrophe, when it is represented in the literary text gives us something of a very clear break as opposed to the slow gradual unraveling of a world order which perhaps is too massive for us to even comprehend in terms of time scales or geological time scales when in relation to or in contrast with human time scales. So that's something that I think is worth noticing, where it almost becomes a sublime category, for us to be able to or to be confronted with climate change as something that actually results from the choices, our everyday choices of millions and millions of people over millennia and over geological time scales, in fact, and it becomes, then far easier perhaps, to think about the effects of climate change on very concentrated or compressed timelines.

It's interesting to think of this a very clear contrast between a slow erosion of say the coastline or the quality of water and air as opposed to one cataclysmic event that one big meteor strikes the earth and everything goes kaput or, say, the slow radiation poisoning which accounts for such large numbers of, not just death, but deterioration of life forms and soil. So those are two modes that we can very easily identify. Anna, would you like to respond to Sharad's comments?

Yeah, so I was thinking that when he says that there is the slow incremental nature of ecological degradation, vulnerability and eventually a distorted reality moving from there to how it is portrayed in some fiction that has achieved some popularity in the recent past. We are looking not just at the slow degradation, which is fine, but also at these sudden cataclysmic events and one of the ones which struck me as particularly curious was the one which became a cult soon around the time of the pandemic because it had a pandemic at its core, *Station Eleven* which spoke about this world which changed overnight, within a very short period of time, because of a pandemic that wipes out huge numbers across the world. The ecological dystopic nature of the event comes to pass because of the elimination of human life. So, because mankind which populated, "civilized" the world around it, mankind died out in large numbers and there were very few survivors left. The world itself then becomes dystopic and yet there is also this that even as it was not

necessarily an eco-dystopia in the sense that the world did not show so much environmental damage yet it still remains in one sense an environmentally challenging event because without human beings there to control the way in which the world worked, *Station Eleven* showed us a world which came to a standstill. So, you had these elements where electricity power grid stopped working, airports of course died out, there is no food. So many of the features that we associate with eco-dystopia were also there in *Station Eleven* except that in *Station Eleven* what happened there, Emily St. John Mandel book, what happened was that it was the dying out of the human and the human dying out because of the pandemic. So therefore, we can at one point move connected to the idea of the eco-dystopia as well, that the pandemic results because of the ways in which humans have interacted with germs and so on and so forth but eventually the world still comes to a standstill or it begins to develop in a direction which otherwise it would not have. So, I know that was curious, interesting also in comparison, I mean I'll come back to some of these. Sharad, would you like to respond to me even as we can PKN is momentary out of there?

So what you were talking about is a strain of anthropocentrism perhaps that even as we try to conceptualize or visualize, imagine what a dystopic world looks like, we tend to see it in terms of how human nature itself also becomes a casualty. So it is not just the world of nature in terms of flora and fauna and all the elements the topographical or geographical elements that we look at the landscape of the setting, to use terms from literary studies, but it is also essentially to do with how human nature itself adapts response to or undergoes erosion in the wake of ecological disaster and I have a passing interest in disaster movies of the time where planetary objects from outer space actually come and crash into the world and though this is not a genre we are looking at specifically for this discussion there are certain overlaps, because if you look at some popular films such as *The Day After Tomorrow*, you see that that anthropocentrism is something that is built into this particular genre which envisages which tries to imagine what a world would look like if humans were to be removed or if they were to face the possibility of extinction. So, they built this kind of a Noah's Arc of sorts with all kinds of species put in and there is literally a flood type situation over there. So, you think about those kinds of ideas of anthropocentrism that are very pronounced in any kind of literary or cinematic text that looks at the possibility or the scenario of an end of the world situation.

So, the end of the world is primarily the end of humanity in one sense, isn't it? Anna?

Yeah, actually not really. It is that we cannot imagine a world where we are not there. So, we will cut down our numbers. However the eco-dystopia might shape up in the sense of a world which has been damaged thoroughly, nearly fully, ecologically like in *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy's, the human still has to be there because otherwise around

what do you center that world. Which is the anthropocentrism that Sharad was also referring to and that Alan Weisman's text *The World Without Us* but also Mary Shelley is *The Last Man* trying to imagine a world evacuated of all humanity. Sharad, would you want to continue that.

Yeah, so if you are thinking about a scenario such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, throughout the text we see that what remains are residues of things that used to inhabit or occupy the world before whatever it was that unspecified cause or event that triggered this kind of a what looks like a nuclear winter, but is never spelt out very clearly. We see that if this in that particular text the road it's a father-son relationship that is at the core of it the human relationship and the journey itself then is in some senses in less we do not know where they're headed. We just know that they're moving around. So in that case the anthropocentrism is something that is posited against a demoting or a stripping away of all other kinds of life forms. In that particular text, we see that there are no other kinds of life forms. There is a reference to a dog that the little boy perhaps imagines his barking. We do not know for sure whether there's actually a dog. We see the absence of any other life form and the sole witnesses or the last witnesses so to speak are humans and I'm reminded of something that this guy called Brian Cox. He does a lot of these popular science videos on YouTube. He talks about how if we were to contemplate a scenario and which is a likely scenario that humans wipe themselves out because of the way we are living now. It would not necessarily mean perhaps that all life in the universe comes to an end. There might be microbial life even in our own solar system. He says, he makes this point that it would mean the end of consciousness which would mean that there's no one to witness what this universe is. So, in that sense it would be an end of meaning. It would be a stripping away of meaning not necessarily of life and that is where the anthropocentrism point actually I think comes in.

Which is also the reason why many of these texts think in terms of survivor cultures to carry the meaning forward. Somebody who lives to tell the tale. So, if for example we are envisaging the extreme case of vulnerable earth where the earth itself has been denuded to borrow your term of humanity then what kind of meaning is left? I mean surely the cockroaches will make some meaning or any other plant life will make some meaning of whatever is left. But then we come to this question whether we can only think of the earth or planetary vulnerability and eco-dystopias in terms of defined by ourselves. Which is what we are thinking of as meaning our meaning of what extreme cultures mean, what the extremity means and therefore many of these texts also are actually looking at meaning surviving even if humanity doesn't survive and Alan Weisman actually talks about that in *The World Without Us*. He says other buildings will survive us but what is the interpretation to be made of buildings devoid of humanity? Are they architectural wonders? Are they strange things like Stonehenge about which we know or random scattered facts? So the question of meaning is interesting that you brought up here

because for much of the eco-dystopian tradition some textual form of memory has to survive in the form of songs or so humanity doesn't continue but the meaning of what humanity represented when it was around continues, or if there are survivors, then the way the progress towards destruction what McCarthy will talk about as a counter spectacle of things winding down also to be documented to be thought about. Anna, any thoughts on this?

I was thinking about how when we say that meaning has to survive alongside meaning goes memory and when you look at a lot of young adult dystopic fiction and there was this whole entire trilogies and trilogy upon trilogy written by various authors of dystopias during the early 2000s and the early 2010s about how the world of course was coming to an end and what was, one, what was the meaning that survived or how do you make meaning of what survived but also what is the memory that is then left into the future and who keeps this memory? The idea of memory and meaning which go together in some senses at least in these early, I mean, not early, but in these dystopia especially for young adults is also important because it also gives you a frame with which to look at the past of the humans. I do not think that it is possible in the case of the eco-dystopia slash dystopia to think in terms of a world where we do not have humans at all that is not going to exactly happen because we are always going to be looking at like if there is no human what story are you telling, we are not usually invested in the telling of stories because once again we do not know how the cockroaches, whom you mentioned earlier, how they are making meaning of this devastated earth. So there has to be a human even if it is the last man standing even if it is like in that very old Nevil Shute text where the guy on the beach isn't it on the beach where the guy is dying and he's awaiting his death. Now all of these dystopias also are to do with the idea of how you look back and what do you see and when you see the past, do you see how you reach this point and that's something which I think a lot of eco-dystopias are also invested in and I was thinking in particular of Octavia Butler's *Parables*, the geology over there, because in that they look at how we came to this point: rampant consumerism, the kinds of divides amongst people, until finally of course you have the kind of end of the earth scenario it's of course nobody everybody is not dying out there are still large numbers of people but all that made the world as we knew it has ended. So there is no transport, there is no fuel, there is no food you scrounge around, there are no laws, there is no police you're waiting trying to make sense of how to live in a world which has no guardrails around it and all the time they look back at the fact that these are the points and that of course is something Butler is particularly good at because Butler then points to the fact that how we get where we get to is because of the fact that humans themselves are inherently flawed. So that is the meaning part of it, there is of course also the memory part of it which we can come back to later but I'm sure you'd like to say something at this point.

I think the memory part is very interesting. Sarad, would you like to respond to that?

I cannot simply recall this short story by Mark Twain, I had read a long time back where there are these Martians who visit planet earth which is now like a frozen wasteland and what they discover is an old reel of sorts, a video reel and they take it back to their home and play it and it's actually a Walt Disney film and they try to make meaning out of that. It's a story, it's a narrative that has in some senses anthropocentric origins and what they replay it is something which they think is very significant and profoundly insightful about how the inhabitants of this frozen planet once had lived but they cannot make any sense of it and at the end of the message flashes "a Walt Disney production" and they're trying very hard they have conferences and seminars of Martians where they try to decode what meaning this cartoon video might possibly have. So I'm really sorry I cannot recall the title of that particular story but if we are talking about then meaning making and stories being fundamental to meaning making, the memory also would rely on narratives being told and retold. We see that reflected even in terms of the landscape. If you think about *The Road*, the landscape itself no longer has any specific markers. It is very bleak, it is uniform almost, it's homogenized, so you do not necessarily have any specific cultural or geographical markers that would give meaning even to your own physical space. You just have the road and it does not seem to have any beginning, middle or end, like a story and it does not seem to have a plot, so to speak. They travel and if you think about that being a metaphor for the landscape itself being metaphor for the loss of meaning or the stripping away of all those markers, the signs, so to speak, that give our lives meaning. It fits well within the the eco-dystopic genre, the fact that the physical landscape itself sometimes can be so bereft of any markers that can give us meaning or make sense of help us make sense of it.

But actually that's quite interesting in terms of how most of these texts both visual, as in film, and literature do have these markers. Empty malls, barren streets, abandoned vehicles seems to be a central motif in all of these ones. There will be long roads where there are cars piled upon us because there's no fuel any longer. In some cases, of course the cars will have corpses in them, because they died in them. But those are themselves in meaning making devices because when you think in terms of waste, waste is actually a teleological assessment of our life isn't it? It comes at the end product of a civilization. So, all that you see I am thinking of Jim Crace's *Quarantine* and *The Pest House* in which there are descriptions of old wheels, old mills, machinery piled high, rusted, broken which are themselves in many ways inscribed in a meaning making process, that this is how they lived. Though of course like in the story that you mentioned what a visitor from outer space will make sense of, we cannot say. It will depend on their meaning making apparatuses and the cognitive abilities to understand that "oh, these broken bridges mean, or must have meant" you know or they just say "oh people now standing up dead when they look at television antennae" how do we know? So, it's interesting to think of those but I am also thinking in terms of what you just said about the landscape. Anna would you like to say something about the landscape bit in what shall I say?

So how the landscape works now actually I want to go back a little further to what you said when you said that we have Stonehenge and nobody quite knows exactly what Stonehenge or the Easter Island rocks are remnants of, that how do we make sense of that past. And also of course looking into a future where say humanity has wiped out and something else has replaced us what will they make sense of say looking at university buildings: vast, sprawling or looking at multi-storied, the IITs have what kind of buildings, or any of these ones like how do you make sense of a landscape which has changed completely and yet which has remnants, residues of what once was. And that's where the memory issue also comes in because if there is stored memory, if of whatever for, whether accessible or not accessible, and I would like to go to the Lois Lowry story of *The Giver* where you have one person who goes within himself all the memories of the people till that point in time. Now we of course instead of a person can substitute the idea of a mechanical device of some sort but a landscape that is in ruins and both of you talked about *The Road* but there are also all of the others, including *Parable of the Sower*, all of them like you said have these instant recognition markers for people who are familiar with the tropes of this. So you have broken down buildings which have all the glass facades broken everything has been looted from inside then you have your cars which are lying there stored because there is no fuel at some point in time and you have also the vegetation which is coming back, which *The Road* doesn't have *The Road* because it's a nuclear world which has a nuclear weapon which has emptied it is dusty and gray. In fact, it is very reminiscent of some of the war pictures which we are watching on our tv screens and which we see in our news reports nowadays because it's a world that is a gray world. But when you think about landscape over here and you think about vegetation that is coming back and I'll go back to my *Station Eleven* example, it's a world that is becoming alive once again in the face of the depredations that all the human beings have done over the centuries. Here is a world that is maybe able to come back from that brink where it was teetering and if you think about either the *Parable of the Sower* or about *Station Eleven*, it's also about the possibility of the making of new communities, which maybe have learnt, so meaning as well as memory from their memories of the past and are trying to build a world which is maybe not quite so inimical to the human as well as to the world out there, as earlier versions of the world were.

So, the question is of course when say the world is destroyed and humanity is more or less gone and nature seems to be reclaiming bits of concrete and you will see that again in many of these texts where there is growth of plant life, animal life. There are studies now of Chernobyl which has also gone through this phase of animals returning. The animals are of course I presume radioactive because of what they have been feeding on, but nature returns in many ways and it's interesting and important to think whether that constitutes a revival of sorts. Sharad, any points on this?

I was thinking about a film called *Annihilation*, it's of course based on a book by Jeff VanderMeer. So over there we do not necessarily have an ecodystopia as a literal collapse of an ecological system but rather the modification of an ecological system where there's this particular area "X" and these scientists and physicists, one of them is a biologist, the protagonist, they go into it and how this occurs is because there are genetic mutations that happen after the planetary body comes and collides with that particular part of the planet, planet Earth. So, they discover that it is human life no longer remains recognizably human anymore and that's an interesting scenario because you see because of whatever radioactive phenomena are occurring over there, humans actually breed with, not breed in the literal sense of the term of copulating with and then reproducing, but the genetic modifications then lead to these interspecies creatures coming up. So, a person actually becoming almost like the trunk of a tree or their neck becoming reptilian, different kinds of snails or animals growing within their abdomen and things like that. So the very idea of the anthropos, the human itself, undergoes transformation which could be a metaphor or an allegory for how genetic engineering might actually lead to a certain kind of a scenario where the human itself no longer remains recognizably or exclusively human. So, we also see that in a lot of this kind of literature and cinema. We'll get back to this in the second part. I will stop recording because 26 minutes. Alright, catch you soon.