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MIGRATION AS ECOCIDAL JUSTIFICATION: AN UNRESOLVED ISSUE PRESENTED IN
ANTHONY DOERR'S *CLOUD CUCKOO LAND*

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ABSTRACT

The human mind's complexity and the thought process have been studied for centuries. One such complexity of the human mind is greed for more and encroaching the belonging of others. Deforestation has become a universal greed and conveniently justified world over. This novel by Doerr is an apology for deforestation given in a creative, persuasive tone which almost transforms the excuse into a fact, making the onlookers believe it. Migration of species is a phenomenon which celebrates the movement of animals and this process is controlled by nature. Nature is the author of migration, but this thought is undergoing a rapid change in the past years. Humans have promoted ecocide without considering the plight of species, using migration of species as an excuse. The ability of animals to move to a different locality is highlighted and destruction of trees takes place without experiencing guilt. Animals are treated as creatures who will find a solution somehow, and deforestation continues in various ways. Anthony Doerr's presentation of ecological destruction makes the readers probe into the relationship between humans and other species. His unique style in *Cloud Cuckoo Land* projects ecocides in layers. This paper explores how humans justify ecocide and the destructive impact of such assertions. It will also highlight aspects of environmental degradation, nature connectedness and the need for nature's presence.

Keywords: Ecocide, environmental degradation, identity, migration, language, communication, nature connectedness.

Introduction

Understanding works from various perspectives is necessary to probe into the deeper understanding of the text. Anthony Doerr's works, like *All the Light We Cannot See* and *Cloud Cuckoo Land* can be treated as novels of historical fiction. The plot provides information about war and it refreshes the reader's knowledge of history. However, a deeper understanding of the works help us get a glimpse of the ecological aspects of it. Environmental degradation is mentioned vividly along with the loss of life and ecocide. In *Cloud Cuckoo Land*,

the stream of plots revolve around the destruction of the environment caused by humans. An ecocritical reading of reality helps the readers understand the author's ideas and views more clearly. Thomas Alfred Coward provides the definition of migration in *The Migration of Birds*:

Migration is the act of changing an abode or resting place, the wandering or movement from one place to another, but technically the word is applied to the passage or movement of birds, fishes, insects and a few mammals between the localities inhabited at different periods of the year. (Coward 1)

Coward argues that migration still has mysteries which are not solved. This aspect is used by people to justify environmental destruction. Deforestation has affected the lives of innumerable creatures for centuries. It has affected the fertility of the soil and the landscape. Deforestation is analysed in *Global Deforestation*:

Deforestation is a *disturbance* because it leads to biomass losses over timescales much shorter than those needed for forest regeneration. In some cases recovery is not possible because the disturbance induces a shift in forest ecosystems to a permanently deforested state by impacting the availability of resources and environmental conditions that are necessary for forest regeneration. (Runyan and D'odorico ix)

The consequences of deforestation, when considered, can help in improving the natural conditions of the biosphere. However, this is ignored resulting in chaos.

In *Cloud Cuckoo Land*, the characters experience environmental degradation on a large scale. The way they tackle the issues, provides an insight into their spectrum of priority. The value they attach to flora and fauna is captivating and they are seldom static. They fight for a cause even if the circumstances are bleak. The presence of hope and willpower paints their world green. They strive to achieve harmony with nature. However, certain minor characters promote ecocides on a massive scale which provides a conflict in the narrative. The attempt to rationalise deforestation occurs without any hindrance, and it also becomes a way of life. There is an absence of questioning the authenticity of the justifications made and humans rule the wilderness promoting urbanisation. Even migration of animals is used as an excuse to destroy trees by people. Animals will "find a home" somehow because they can migrate to other places is the justification provided. People who are close to nature fall victim to the degradation of the natural landscape. Their desire to live in close proximity with nature is destroyed which in turn is similar to ecocide.

The impact of nature connectedness:

In the novel, Doerr highlights the close relationship between humans and nature. Nature connectedness improves the lives of humans and the presence of a change escalates an imbalance leading to destruction. Seymour, in the novel, spends time with nature. Seymour's mother struggles to make the ends meet. As a single mother she takes efforts to earn and also spends time with Seymour when she can. Seymour finds a sense of peace with nature. He is able to develop a comfortable relationship with nature in a short span of time. Nature embraces Seymour when people discriminate and draw borders. The atmosphere in school crushes Seymour and he is attacked by people, verbally and physically, and there is a sense of violence that ruptures the peace which Seymour experiences when he is with nature. Seymour is considered to be strange and unusual. His activities are questioned and he is treated like a child with an unusual disorder which is hard to diagnose.

An ecocritical understanding of Seymour's childhood highlights the psychological importance of nature connectedness. Ecocriticism is defined by Cheryll Glotfelty:

What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of the modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty xviii)

The application of ecocriticism provides a vivid view of the author's ideas and notions. Seymour is comfortable, stable and more humane when he spends time with nature. His instability rules his life when he is separated from the forest.

The presence of wildfire prevents students from spending time outdoors, stifling Seymour in a way. They are forced to stay indoors and learn lessons. This detachment from nature, a break, hinders Seymour and it affects him. The presence of pollution hinders nature's connectedness and the relationship is destroyed. The other students also fail to experience the beauty of spending time with nature because of the circumstances. The plight of the students and nature lovers presented provides an understanding of the loss of a valuable relationship:

But nine days into September, a wildfire in the Seven Devils chokes the whole valley with smoke, and Mrs. Oregon says the air quality is too low for outside recess, and they'll need to keep the windows closed because of Rodrigo's asthma, and within minutes the portable reeks like Paw-paw's microwave when Bunny defrosts a freezer Fajita. (Doerr 86)

The rule to stay indoors becomes a challenge which also affects the mental wellbeing of people, nature lovers like Seymour. Seymour's scream is a voice, a frustrated response to this rule which is hard for the teachers to decipher. The short break from experiencing nature appears like a meaningless vacation for Seymour. The people refrain from addressing the issue and avoid nature completely. Their connection with nature is on the verge of extinction and this is never realised till the end. They ignore, and only Seymour is left to struggle.

Species and friendships

The relationship between humans and animals is important for individuals whose lives become meaningful with the presence of animals. Ecocides annihilate this connectivity and it imposes ecological destruction followed by chaos, disrupting the life of individuals. Seymour's relationship with an owl, mentioned by Doerr, helps the readers understand the need for nature's presence. His identity is shaped by the owl's presence in his life. The importance of the relationship between humans and nature is also mentioned by Ruskin Bond:

I don't think I could have got through life without the company of flowers. They sustain and stimulate. My desk is just a place of work until one of the children places a vase of flowers upon it, and then it becomes a place of delight. Be it a rose or a chrysanthemum or a simple daisy, it will help me in my work. They are there to remind me that life has its beautiful moments. (Bond 152)

When Seymour finds the owl near his place of stay, he is captivated. He decides to visit the bird everyday in secret. This movement towards nature is natural for Seymour and he feels one with the landscape. Moreover, the stroll becomes an escape from the society ruled by humans to a habitat cherished by fauna. The absence of environmental degradation provides a better understanding of nature, when it remains pure and untouched by humans. Seymour is able to appreciate the beauty when the society is ignorant of the presence of nature. The habitual visit becomes a refreshing experience and Seymour is able to express himself clearly to a bird. One instance in the novel shows how Seymour talks to the owl, whom he has named 'Trustyfriend', about the way he is treated at school:

He says, "They say I'm weird. They say I'm scary."

The owl blinks into the fading light. His head is the size of a volleyball. He looks like the souls of ten thousand trees distilled into a single form. (Doerr 98)

This communication has an impact on Seymour's identity as he feels belonged, appreciated. His presence is acknowledged by a creature ignored by many. Seymour and the owl feel understood and appreciated by the presence of each other, and this shows the necessity of the bond between humans and nature. It becomes difficult to survive when one is lost or missing. The absolute dependence for mutual support builds the bridge which connects both, the human and the owl in the book.

The name which Seymour gives to the owl shows his attachment with the bird. According to him, Trustyfriend is not a human but a creature who gains value from nature. The peaceful presence of the owl also shapes his identity. He begins to trust nature, enjoy the landscapes which becomes a habit for Seymour. The idea that nature is more trustworthy, loyal and honest when compared to people shapes the thought process of Seymour. He chooses to spend time with Trustyfriend than people, and this makes him feel closer to nature. He gains confidence and support by spending time with his friend, the owl. This makes him a voracious reader at school. He reads about owls, their habitat, and gains more knowledge and support from books, journals. His love for nature increases drastically and he feels belonged when he spends time thinking, living with nature. He is also able to learn more about himself when he is poring over the books, learning lessons from nature. The interest stems from his curiosity to decode his feathery friend. In Elizabeth Rosner's work, *The Speed of Light*, the urge to connect with nature and the way certain people respected nature is hinted:

Paula nods, "He planted it himself," she says. "Four years ago, it must have been, when we first moved in. It's a ginkgo tree."

"Ginkgo," I repeat softly, feeling the word click in my throat. "He takes good care," I say.

"When we bought it he told me it was for me to look at from my window. He said it would be a tree of golden light." (Rosner 23)

This shows the relationship between humans and trees.

Omeir, another character, befriends two oxen who remain as his strength and support in his arduous journey. They are named "Tree" and "Moonlight" revealing Omeir's affection towards nature. When Omeir is ignored by the society for his distorted appearance, the animals never neglect him. They remain loyal and are trustworthy friends, according to Omeir. Doerr's portrayal of the relationship helps the readers appreciate the connection between nature and humans. Omeir's identity is altered by the presence of his animal friends. The way society accepts him to an extent is because of the hard work rendered by the animals. Even though Omeir guides the animals, they in turn support him. They are his family and nature becomes an essential part of his life, providing him support even during hard times. Both, Seymour and Omeir, cherish the moments they spend with animals and it stays in their memory even after the animals have disappeared from their life.

Konstance, a young girl from the future, stays in a spaceship throughout her life. The people of her time are unable to live with nature because of environmental degradation. She timetravels to learn about the Earth and the natural habitat. This activity becomes frequent and she feels peaceful when she looks at nature. The plants preserved in her father's lab increase her sense of curiosity. The process of learning about seeds, travelling to understand the Earth helps Konstance learn about herself, shaping her self-identity. It gives her a sense of belonging in a society she struggles to understand. She also comprehends the need for nature for human survival. It is a relationship she develops with nature when she explores different places in the Earth and her father's lab. Nature's presence in any form helps humans and provides support, which is visible from Konstance's life. The connection is necessary for people to live in peace and harmony. The mutual support guides humans in the process of understanding the world, and the society in which they live.

Ecocides and destruction in layers:

Ecocide can destroy this relationship which is celebrated. The destruction of natural habitat, and the species which depend on it has consequences on a large scale. From an ecocritical viewpoint, the novel shows various aspects of ecocidal destruction, and the ways in which it can affect the lives of individuals which depend on it for survival. Their world takes a shift and they struggle when their relationship with nature is broken because of ecocide.

Seymour is shattered when he discovers about the clearing of trees. The deforestation which takes place is not questioned, the ecocide is not noticed except by nature lovers. The destruction of trees takes place promoting urbanisation. Seymour finds Trustyfriend's tree destroyed, and this shocks him. The destruction of an owl's habitat is seldom noticed by the loggers whose minds are fixed on promoting the land to house people.

The insensitive nature of people who focus on destroying an ecosystem shocks Seymour and his mind thinks about revenge:

Looking at the images starts the roar murmuring at the base of Seymour's spine. In a vision he imagines a hundred thousand NeedleMen rising from the ruins of the forest marching on the contractor's trucks, a vast army, fearless despite the incredible odds, swinging tiny picks at tires, driving nails through men's boots. Plumbing vans go up in flames. (Doerr 198)

Seymour wants them to understand the pain caused by ecological destruction.

Environmental degradation is also connected with one's perspective. Prioritising nature helps people rethink an action which harms the natural landscape. The ignorance escalates a feeling of hatred in Seymour, because the society is unable to understand his attachment towards nature. The inability of people to comprehend the depth of nature is mentioned by Susan Hand Shetterly:

When we speak about the oceans, we don't always picture them as three-dimensional places. Most of us, because we live in this world of land and sky, see in our mind's eye the water's surface and the pitch of the waves, islands at the horizon, and gulls in flight. It is like looking down at a jungle canopy and seeing leaves. (Shetterly 18)

Seymour also represents individuals who are victims of ecological destruction. Their fellowship with nature is not accepted by others whose lives are detached from nature. Marzluff has presented his views on the difficulties of finding a common bird:

As I look through the early morning mist that hovers over this Illinois field, I strain to hear the sweet whistle of a meadowlark's song. Finally, the prairie wind carries the familiar tune from my childhood toward me. I spot the plump, yellow-breasted singer with his contrasting black V-neck plumage atop an old fence post about a football field's distance away. (Marzluff 2)

Robert Macfarlane talks about the destruction caused by humans through pollution and ecocide, and the mark we leave behind. He addresses the issue highlighting the reign of plastic which will remain like a fossil record:

Among the relics of the Anthropocene, therefore, will be the fallout of our atomic age, the crushed foundations of our cities, the spines of millions of intensively farmed ungulates, and the faint outlines of some of the billions of plastic bottles we produce each year... What will survive of us is plastic, swine bones and lead-207, the stable isotope at the end of the uranium-235 decay chain. (Macfarlane 77)

This provides an insight through which the future of ecological destruction can be viewed. The sad reality that plastic will remain in place of vegetation also shows the way artificial products will dominate the biosphere. Men will either rule or will make their plastic ascend the throne of power. This will destroy nature's presence resulting in consequences difficult for the human mind to comprehend. The people who live in close harmony with nature will also be affected in the process, when all they can find is plastic and no element of nature to depend on. Their lives will be shattered because they have lost nature which supported them in various ways at different points in their life. People promote urbanisation silencing the agony of nature lovers with the notion that birds can migrate and find a new home.

This idea when compared with Farlane's statement reveals another insight. The question "where will they migrate to?" must be considered. There is a possibility for the birds to lose their life if they don't find another home. Buildings built after clearing forests which served as a habitat to birds and animals destroys peace. When ecocides initiated by humans occur on a large scale, both animals and humans suffer, especially humans who prioritise nature. The way deforestation also affects humans is presented by Ross Piper:

We have no idea how many species of organism live in the world's most biodiverse places, and with every passing year, species become extinct before we even knew they existed. Until we understand that we are one species among many and that our continued survival depends on living in harmony with the natural

world, the future looks very bleak for the human race and the other species with which we share this planet. (Piper xxii)

Seymour's situation can be analysed with this understanding. Seymour is hurt when he is unable to find Trustyfriend. The owl has followed a pattern of being present in a particular place. Animals are said to have a pattern and this is destroyed because of the presence of humans who attach little or no importance to nature. The owl's life is changed, altered by force. This has destroyed natural phenomena altering the course of life for flora and fauna. The feather Seymour finds provides a multitude of meanings, which also hints at linguistic complexity. The feather for Seymour is a relic, the last trace of his friend who is missing. This raises various questions and Seymour decides it to be an act of humans. He pictures a vehicle to be the cause for Trustyfriend's death. He assumes that Trustyfriend is no more and wants the people responsible for the crime to face the consequences. He considers this as a crime, which the society is unable to accept.

Seymour also takes efforts to save worms which are killed by vehicles. He risks his life on the road and saves the worms from being crushed. This shows his passion and care towards creatures. He believes that worms also have a place in the neighbourhood and that they should be respected and protected. He is not silenced by the idea that worms can move, migrate to another place and survive. This notion is meaningless to Seymour because they also have a reason to live in his locality:

Worms, he realises, cover the whole backdrop. Thousands upon thousands. He deposits the first at the base of a huckleberry bush, rescues a second, then a third. The pines drip; the asphalt steams; the worms thresh.

He rescues twenty-four twenty-five twenty-six. Clouds seal off the sun. A truck turns off the Cross Road and approaches, crushing the bodies of how many? Faster. Pick up the pace.

(Doerr 196)

He knows the truth that ecocide which takes place in his neighbourhood will affect even smaller creatures like worms which keep the soil nourished and fertile. Without worms, birds, and other species there is an imbalance in the ecosystem.

The death of Omeir's oxen affects him. They lose their health when they are forced to accomplish a strenuous task and this seldom bothers other people. Omeir cannot accept the death of his animal friends as a casual, eternal migration. While the other men are not bothered when their animals lose their life, Omeir is shattered. The insensitive nature bothers Omeir, and it is hard for him to accept the death of many animals who lose their life because of the violent nature of humans. The difficult work, lack of rest, affects the animals whose voices are silenced. Omeir is astonished by the food habits of the people who consume animals which die. He is unable to accept humans as his friends when they destroy the lives of valuable creatures. The displacement of animals, the insensitive attitude of people who replace dead animals with new ones rapidly is hard to accept. Omeir's attachment with the oxen makes him treat them like friends, and the death affects him. The creatures which understood him have become victims of human violence. The killing of polar bears by humans mentioned by Barry Lopez projects an understanding of the cruel nature of humans:

...Europeans took to killing any polar bear they saw. They shot them out of pettiness and a sense of rectitude. In time, killing polar bears became a sort of amusement people expected on an arctic journey... They shot the animals with colonial indifference. (Lopez 111)

Omeir knows the nature of their migration, that they will never return because they do not have a home which protects them without threatening them. He also knows that they cannot be displaced easily, and that they are unique. Their presence in his life stays as a memory with Omeir who considers them as special creatures. They have coloured his life with positivity when he was ignored and despised by others. This death affects him because this ecological destruction has affected his attachment with nature. By understanding the situation, harmony is also lost and the ignorance of others prevents a solution to the issue. People continue using animals for their own gain without questioning or analysing the situation from the view of animals. As a result, more

animals face pain, agony and it results in the death of animals. Omeir is also affected because of the imbalance which takes place in the society.

Konstance learns about the destruction caused by humans when she travels across time to different places. She is shocked to find the impact of ecological destruction on humans who have lost their health. Many suffer from malnutrition, people struggle to get water and they fight to be alive. This makes Konstance realise the importance of nature and its conservation. She also understands that movement of humans to a better planet should not promote ecocides in the Earth. In the end she understands that the only planet which is present must be saved and that it cannot be replaced or ignored.

Migration - a justification:

Birds and animals move to better places when there is a change in the temperature. This phenomenon is natural and habitual. Barry Lopez presents his view of migration when he talks about the beauty of birds as they migrate from the arctic to warmer regions on the onset of winter:

The lives of many animals are constrained by the schemes of men, but the determination in these lives, their traditional pattern of movement, are a calming reminder of a more fundamental order. The company of these birds in the field is guileless. It is easy to feel transcendent when camped among them. (Lopez 155)

The description given by Barry Lopez highlights the beauty of autonomy which is essential for nature to survive. People control the lives of creatures and plants for their personal benefit and this becomes destructive. The freedom of plants, animals is lost. Lopez believed that humans might control the lives of animals to an extent, but they cannot control migration. The "fundamental order" that nature intertwines lives, controls creatures, and makes the world habitable for organisms is a truth which cannot be proved false. Observing nature, when the species are free, also calms the human mind and elevates it to a greater height as mentioned by Lopez. The book by Lopez was published in the 1980s and the view of migration has changed. This freedom is questioned now, and it makes people wonder whether birds are given the choice to migrate to another place or whether they are forced to choose a new place to survive in the contemporary setting.

Migration which was naturally happening earlier, tends to be controlled by humans for their benefit in the present. This is evident in the novel by Doerr, where Seymour's mother talks to him about the missing owl. For the mother, the owl is not a friend, but an ordinary creature. This contrasts with Seymour who treats the owl like a friend. The missing bird appears to Seymour like a missing human and this hurts him. Seymour's mother provides her view about the transient nature of things, and that changes will take place in life even though it's hard to understand. She added that Seymour's Trusty friend has gone to a better place where the owl will have better food and habitat. The conversation helps the readers understand her views:

"There are at least twenty places like that north of here your owl could fly to. Bigger forests, better forests. He could have his pick."

"There are?"

"Sure."

"With lots of voles?"

"Tons of voles. More votes than there are hairs on your head." ...

"You promise, Mom?"

"I promise." (Doerr 200, 201)

Seymour's mother distances herself from nature and wants to console her son by saying that the owl has gone to a better place. Migration here is used as an excuse and people construct buildings highlighting the ability of birds to migrate to better places. They do not think about the possibility that an ecosystem is destroyed when they construct buildings after clearing a forest and the birds which depend on it for survival. Seymour's mother

says “your owl”, and not “our owl” which shows that she distances or refrains from connecting with nature. Moreover, she assures him that the owl will find a better place and that a new neighbourhood will increase Seymour’s possibility of finding a friend of his own age.

The mother gives importance to her son but tends to attach less importance to her son’s passion of protecting and connecting with nature. Moreover, she adds that the owl can choose a place according to the bird’s wish. This brings various aspects into consideration, because animals are rarely given a choice to decide where they want to stay. When trees are destroyed, they are forced to move and when many ecosystems are destroyed, they might not find a home or better food. The fact that they can die due to starvation, or lack of a good ecosystem is seldom considered. Seymour’s mother goes to the extent of promising without thinking about the validity of the statement. She wants her son to be peaceful and calm and destruction of nature does not bother her to a great extent.

When Seymour finds the feather, he wants the people who destroyed the ecosystem to be imprisoned for their crime:

He says, “Somebody needs to pay.”

She reaches to touch his forehead but he rolls against the wall.

“Somebody needs to go to jail.”(Doerr 254)

This projects the agony experienced by Seymour.

Seymour’s mother, who uses the natural ability of birds to migrate, resonates with the thoughts of the construction workers who start constructing buildings without feeling guilty. The owners believe that they have the right to own a land completely without nature’s presence. According to them the presence of nature is a hindrance to their work, and this excuse of pointing at a fact that birds can migrate provides a licence to commit ecocides on a larger scale. Nature lovers are provided with an assurance that their winged friends have found a beautiful habitat and this is used to silence them. The forced migration is hidden behind a facade of natural migration. Birds and other creatures are not treated as important and the truth that humans need other species to survive is barely noticed by people who focus on building a better place for humans. The destruction of Trustyfriend’s habitat and the bird itself, makes Seymour use violence to terrorise people later. He feels that people have become hard hearted and that violence might make them understand the importance of nature. This shows the consequences which society will have to face when it destroys nature and wounds nature lovers.

The usage of language and the meaning of migration is distorted when humans control nature. The lack of freedom, flexibility, and independence in the lives of animals is the truth which is hidden. Nature is enslaved, controlled even in communication and this is not brought into light. The power of migration is dominated by humans in all aspects enslaving the creatures which depend on nature.

The story of the owl migrating makes the readers question the usage of literature. A story is created, by Seymour’s mother, to give a false sense of hope. It is presented for temporary relief to cure Seymour of his pain. The selection of a temporary solution over a stable one must be analyzed. This shows the way humans create stories for their personal benefit and hide a deeper truth. Migration is used as an invisible tool to silence the uproar of environmentalists. The truth is never exposed, and construction and deforestation take place simultaneously without arguments.

Conclusion

Ecocides are a threat to the welfare of nature’s growth. They have consequences which also impact the lives of humans to a great extent. Several species have also become extinct and some are on the verge of extinction because of the intervention of humans who destroy ecosystems. If such destruction is hidden and never addressed, the world will lose many creatures in the future. Excuses, even using a greener language, cannot prevent the consequences of destroying nature. One must truly understand the importance of nature and treat organisms with care, as they also have a right to live and experience prosperity in their own green ways.

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