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INDIGENEITY AND THE ANTHROPOCENE: RE-SYNCHRONIZING THE MAN-NATURE
'CONFLICT'

HIMANSHU PARMAR

Associate Professor

Dept of English, H. P. University, Shimla

E-mail: himanshuparmar16@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT

The literary and theoretical circles, in contemporaneity, are, yet again, pursuing an inter-disciplinary problematic: the Anthropocene. The domain of multi-disciplinarity, towards which this epoch of specialization is rapidly advancing and the 'knack' of literature to represent the social reality has motivated the ascent of the Anthropocene in literature. The basic premises remaining the same, the concept of the Anthropocene in literature is, subsequently, pictured as a construct dealing with the problematizing relationship between man and nature, with the former wreaking havoc on the latter. The 21st century social order and literature has, then, built upon the notion in tandem with the multiple recent happenings of nature "striking back" with a vengeance in the form of tsunamis, floods and other forms of natural disasters.

However, is this human-nature liaison actually problematic or is it a construct of a social order steeped in a structure of exploitation? The paper tries to critique this construct of the Anthropocene by juxtaposing it to the "lived experiences" of the fringe social orders. Seeking examples from varied literary texts, the paper strives to re-visit the Anthropocene as it is conceived and problematized in theory and praxis. Finally, attempt shall be made to ascertain if the fringe social order is another cog in the machinery of problematizing or offers an alternative understanding to the construct of Anthropocene.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Problematics, Mainstream, Fringe Social Order, Lived Experiences.

In a modern world, priding itself in its knack for specializations and exclusivities, the Anthropocene has emerged as a 'uniting' force that has spread its ken across disciplines. However, what makes this 'unity' problematic is its scope, that, essentially is problem-centred. Consequently, the term, in fiction and non-fiction alike, has evoked responses on problematic paradigms:

Through an analysis that bridges non-fiction and fiction, Gib Prettyman's 'Anthropocene Knowledge Practices in McKenzie Wark's Molecular Red and Kim Stanley Robinson's Aurora' argues that the Anthropocene challenge conceptions of what it means to be human, forcing us to 'un-see our

traditional perceptions of self-separation from our environment and work to perceive more accurately our intra-active entanglement with matter.’ (De Cristofaro 4)

The idea of “un-seeing” the “traditional perceptions of self-separation” are testimony, not only to the problematics surrounding the Anthropocene, but also its roots in the paradigm of a ‘man-centred’ culture. The mainstream theory delving into the relationship of nature with man has invariably been binarized and visualized as one at loggerheads. The civilized world stands in contradiction to the natural world, and the presence of one means the absence or negating of the other. Given that the human order of living is the “civilized” order, in the self-other relationship of the two, man became the “self” while nature, the “other.” Descartes, in “On Method” affirms the same when he says, “The purpose of science is to bend nature to man’s requirements.”

Not only the manifest forms of man and nature are contradictory, but also its ‘repercussions’ with the “id” being suppressed by the “super ego,” and eventually, under the pressure of the latter, the former dissolving itself into the solvent of the individual unconscious. Dominion goes with the principle of power and the two, in tandem, exhibit their presence in the form of “knowledge is power” to be used to exercise authority over the ‘other.’

This contradictory relationship of nature and man, binarized, as well, finds space in the very foundations of civilization, leading to a “man-centred” social construct: The “dominion” of man over nature and natural things. The entire construct of the Anthropocene has, then, been built on contentious grounds, one that traces its roots back to the very core of human civilization: the very beginning of the Hebraic civilization, found in *The Bible*:

And God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. (Genesis 1:26)

Anthropocene, since its inception, once again placed man at the centre with nature at the periphery; however, at this time man was the perpetrator of crimes on nature: a relation that places nature at the receiving end of human interference. It, then, has defined the entire construct of human cult and traditions. Nature sat at the receiving end of the binary, with man exploiting nature to further his ends. The product of this binary is evident in *The Waste Land*:

“Trams and dusty trees.
Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew
Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees
Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe.”
“My feet are at Moorgate, and my heart
Under my feet.

This “otherness” of nature, in literature, complemented the basic premise of nature as an “object” for human utilization and the same chronology re-occurred towards the ascent of the twenty-first century when the Anthropocene was born:

Anthropocene dates back to the mid-twentieth century (Media Note: Anthropocene Working Group, 2016), the term was itself popularised in 2000 by Paul Crutzen and has become more and more prominent in the media in the last few years. (Cristofaro, 2)

The entire construct produces a line of academia and intelligentsia that problematizes the human:

...the humanities have a problem with the word "human."

—Bruno Latour, "Life among Conceptual Characters" (Qtd. in Usher)

The entire corpus of literature, then, is constructed around the “human dominion” where nature either substantiates the human emotion or is a ‘natural’ background to the events happening in a text. From the “Storm scene” of *King Lear* to the weather and nature imagery in *Wuthering Heights*, the former is explicitly highlighted.

Various reasons have been propagated for the 'lethal' human intervention in nature, keeping in account the 'perennial' relationship of man and nature as the "self" and the "other." Yuva Nohal Harari, in *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, opines:

Other animals at the top of the pyramid, such as lions and sharks, evolved into that position very gradually, over millions of years. This enables the ecosystem to develop checks and balances that prevent lions and sharks from wreaking too much havoc. As the lions became deadlier, so gazelles evolved to run faster, hyenas to cooperate better, and rhinoceroses to be more bad-tempered. In contrast, humankind ascended to the top so quickly that the ecosystem was not given time to adjust. (Qtd. in Chakrabarty, 106)

An order that placed the humans at the centre, with a manifold increase in the number of humans, became, over generations, an exploitative one. The cataclysmic culmination emanated from the advent of science and the arrival of Industrial Revolution on the stage. The rampant Anthropocene, also, eventually, led to the advent of eco-friendly social movements and eco-centred literatures, in the West, predominantly focussing on the possible strategies and solutions to the problematics of Anthropocene:

A. S. Byatt's short story, 'A Stone Woman' (2003), is a fiction of the 'geologic turn,' its tale of a woman turning into stone following bereavement a means not only to approach grief, but also to explore a 'shift from human time to geological deep time.' Sometimes the formal engagement with the timescales of the Anthropocene is more radical still. Pointing out that our understanding of it is often shaped by visual representations (charts, graphs and so forth) and that even narratives of the Anthropocene draw frequently on 'seeing effects,' in 'Anthroposcenes: Towards an Environmental Graphic Novel' Laura Perry discusses the ways in which works by Lauren Redniss and Richard McGuire exploit opportunities provided by the graphic novel form to engage the Anthropocene and explore how visual phenomena both enable and constrain our understanding. (Cristofaro, 2)

The irony, however, is that behind the façade of "concern for nature" still lay a man-centred approach, which, looking at the prevailing scenario of exploitation of nature has sensed an impending doom of mankind, a man-generated, natural catastrophe, capable of annihilating the world as we know it and live in:

There is a certain ambiguity to the idea of the Anthropocene itself, whereby it is, on the one hand, the culmination of our anthropocentric attitudes as the human-dominated geological epoch and, on the other, an epoch that entails the very palpable risk of humanity's end and that thus requires a reframing of the role and concept of humanity itself. (Cristofaro, 3)

The entire Western mainstream social order and, in consonance, literature, then, is a manifestation of one basic premise: a man-centred order that has, in varying forms, highlighted the "otherness" of nature to human concerns. So much so, that even in contemporaneity, the entire corpus of "saving nature" is a product of the human 'realization' of its extinction if nature is uncared for. In the entire construct, the man-nature relationship is presented as a problematic one as Amelia Moore says:

For all the authors, the term represents another way to have a conversation about the breakdown of the division between Nature and Culture that has historically shaped the Western worldview, though each author approaches the possibilities this breakdown inspires in a different fashion with different stakes in mind. (1)

The Industrial Revolution had divided the entire globe into the developed and the under-developed; the capitalist and the labourer. The two ends of the ensuing binary generated a cultural duality, as presented by Tom Dystra, a senior Aboriginal elder:

We cultivated our land, but in a way different from the white man. We endeavour to live with the land; they seemed to live off it. (*Meaning...*)

The nature-man relationship, in this alternative order, has not been problematic, as William Carlos Williams says in "A Unison":

The hill slopes away,
 then rises in the middleground,
 you remember, with a grove of gnarled
 maples centering the bare pasture,
 sacred, surely —for what reason?
 I cannot say? Idyllic!
 a shrine cinctured there by
 the trees, a certainty of music!
 a unison and a dance,...

The “Americanized” Poetry that Carlos Williams is known for, and the reference to the sacred in nature foregrounds a very significant, albeit unknown facet of the human-nature relationship, one that is not founded on the principle of the Anthropocene. On the contrary, it is representative of the complementary and co-operative order where the two go hand-in-hand. Appraising the cultural nuances of the fringes, the one not at the centre of life and literature, there emerges an order that never saw man and nature at loggerheads; nor did it ever see the world as “man-centred” or “nature-centred”, but rather constructed a paradigm where the two were intricately inter-woven.

Striking instances, explicitly evident, are seen in tribal and indigenous cultures across the world. Djinyini Gondarra, an aboriginal from Milingimbi opined:

The land is my mother. Like a human mother, the land gives us protection, enjoyment, and provides our needs – economic, social, and religious. We have a human relationship with the land: Mother, daughter, son. When the land is taken from us or destroyed, we feel hurt because we belong to the land, and we are part of it.

The entire corpus and framework of fringe social orders, then, is centred around the inseparability of man and nature, a relationship born out of the essential oneness of the two. This oneness, unlike the romantic oneness of man and nature, is more concrete and founded not in abstractions and transcendental hypothecations. Nature, in these fringe cultures, is a presence that goes simultaneous with the existence of humans and carries no ‘symptoms’ of binarization into the “self” and the “other.” In this inclusive “selfness,” nature and man act in tandem towards one purpose: collaborative existence.

A culture promoting such an order may be defined as a culture of “Lived experiences,” as against the culture of “orthodoxies and other-worldliness” of the mainstream. Kancha Ilaiah, in *Why I am Not a Hindu*, highlights the culture of “lived experience” of the marginal profession-oriented castes:

A Kurumaa man hardly sleeps at home. Wherever the herd of sheep sleeps, that is his living place. Early in the morning he gets up, separates his own sheep from the general herd. Next, he releases the younger ones from the podhi (an enclosure where the young sheep are kept) and takes them to their mother to be suckled...A Goudaa gets up and straightaway puts on his toddy-climbing clothes and goes to the toddy tree rows. He knows his toddy trees by name as the shepherd knows his sheep or goats by name and as the peasants know their cows, bulls and buffaloes by name. The Goudaa climbs his first tree at sunrise. He is the one who gets to see the beauty of nature at sunrise from the tallest tree. Poised at the top, he skilfully chooses the point at which he makes the first cut to his gela (a projection on the toddy tree from where the toddy is tapped). (24)

The culture of the *Adi* tribe in Arunachal Pradesh is also testimony to the non-conflicting and non-contradictory relationship of man and nature. Mamang Dai, in *The Legends of Pensam* says:

The man had come up to map the wilderness and trace the source of a river...and all he had discovered was that the river was a woman... (54)

The marginal and tribal, fringe cultures have survived, for centuries in a unified, cohesive and undividable ambience where nature and man are not separate but in perfect synchronization and harmony with each other. As Palyku woman Ambelin Kwaymullina explains:

For Aboriginal peoples, country is much more than a place. Rock, tree, river, hill, animal, human – all were formed of the same substance by the Ancestors who continue to live in land, water, sky. Country is filled with relations speaking language and following Law, no matter whether the shape of that relation is human, rock, crow, wattle. Country is loved, needed, and cared for, and country loves, needs, and cares for her peoples in turn. Country is family, culture, identity. Country is self. (*Meaning...*)

The evident coherence and synchronization is unfathomable to and in the mainstream, which, with its hegemonic and/or coercive power, over the fringe social orders, has normalized its realities, the non-tribal norms, as the standard, over the tribal realities, leading to a disbelief towards any alternative orders that might be projected by the fringes. As Mamang Dai says:

Jules spoke about how important it was to work out grass-root strategies for forest management. He said he did not buy all the talk about innocent, guileless forest dwellers. He was concerned that we didn't value what we had and that our people seemed too eager to sell out everything to anyone who came with a little money and with designs to decimate our forests. (42)

The contrast in the language of Jules, a representative of the mainstream, and the narrator, a tribal, is evident in the former's allegations on the latter being "too eager to sell out everything...{for} little money," while the latter referring to people and forests as "our". The very "grass-root strategies" that Jules emphasizes are the hegemonic imposition of non-tribal realities on the tribal world.

It, however, remains that the fringe social orders, through their non-confrontational attitude towards nature, promise a concrete resolution to the mainstream problems of the Anthropocene. Their inclusivity and comprehensiveness, evident in the way they live their lives, their "lived experience," is the solution:

I saw, yes, a canopy of trees and a river stretching like an ocean with a trembling sliver of light polishing its flat surface. Then, turning the ring a little bit more, I saw, in the distance, narrow apartment blocks, grubby streets, and bamboo scaffolding. I held my breath, mystified, and as I continued to peer intently my sight travelled the horizon and I saw a blue, smoky evening through a window, and through cement walls and through the hills, suddenly, I saw a view of a bright harbour, and sail boats! (192)

Their ability to retain a healthy man-nature relationship comes from a salient quality immanent in their civilization: non-confrontation. The quality of assimilation of the new into their traditional order comes naturally to the tribals, given their mutual relationship with nature. Their culture, steeped in natural divinity, is manifested in a non-confrontational attitude towards things and changes. Kulllu and Lahaul & Spiti, in Himachal Pradesh, are a living testimony to this, where the ascent of modernization has altered the life style of the natives, yet the core culture is untouched and unpolluted. Hence while the modern markets have paved their way into their life, the grounds of the Gods, nature-centred, stay consecrated as ever. The aboriginal, Palyku writer Kwaymullina sums it up as:

The health of land and water is central to their culture. Land is their mother, is steeped in their culture, but also gives them the responsibility to care for it. They "feel the pain of the shapes of life in country as pain to the self. (*Meaning...*)

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