

COMRADES IN CRISES: COMPARING THE WRITINGS ON
ENVIRONMENTAL CATASTROPHES IN HABILA'S
OIL ON WATER AND GHOSH'S *GUN ISLAND*

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ABSTRACT. In recent years, environment and its related issues are the most discussed and drafted topic across the world, both in physical and social sciences. As the physical sciences focus on the technical aspects of a subject, the humanities are responsible for presenting a more personal and compassionate perspective. The recent literature emerging from various parts of the world, particularly from Africa and India, highlights this responsibility. This paper analyzes two novels, Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) and Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019), which depict distinct environmental catastrophes in the two respective geographies. These narratives portray the devastating effects on local tribes and communities, resulting in the migration of both humans and non-humans, thereby connecting the two geographies beyond physical boundaries. Using the lens of eco-critical study, this paper aims to undertake a comparative analysis of the present-day environmentally degraded conditions of Nigeria and India. This analysis highlights the urgent need for both countries to implement effective environmental policies and practices to mitigate the negative impacts of human activities on their ecosystems.

KEY WORDS: environment, India, Nigeria, Sundarbans, comparative studies

Introduction

In the last decade of 20th century and the first two of 21st, environment became the centre of political debates, policy making, aggressive activism and holistic economical progression. Even in literature, writers and critics took this field of study to present their views, thoughts and ideas which formed various related theories in works like Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), Hellen Tiffin and Graham Huggan's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2006), Vandana

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Shiva's *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1988), etc. Pramod K. Nayar in his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* (2010) defines eco-criticism as:

A critical mode that looks at the representation of nature and landscape in cultural texts, paying particular attention to attitudes towards 'nature' and the rhetoric employed when speaking about it. It aligns itself with ecological activism and social theory with the assumption that the rhetoric of cultural texts reflects and informs material practices towards the environment. (Nayar 2010: 242)

Today the material practices and industrial expansions are at the forefront with the environment, its associated agencies and their ethical utilization, at the back-seat. There are regular reports and studies about natural resources being compromised for economic and consumerist growth across the Earth suggesting global warming as the biggest catastrophe to unfold. Pippa argues that, "because of these temporal and planetary implications of anthropogenic environmental destruction, no act or result of damage can be seen as purely local" (Marland 2013: 854). In the field of literature and academia too, the race of representation of nature, its abuse, and their subsequent effects on living conditions of not just individuals but societies have also paced up. With eco-critical theory, the former colonial centres and steadily progressing societies like Africa and India are finally getting a voice in a generally euro-centric discourse. This change has been acknowledged by Roman Bartosch in his work *EnvironMentality – Ecocriticism and the Event of Postcolonial Fiction* (2013), as he says:

In the beginning, ecocriticism sought to trace 'the natural' in cultural artefacts, claiming that 'nature' had almost been forgotten in modernist and postmodernist times – despite its pivotal role in human life. Ecocriticism today is a diverse field but all approaches share two main objectives: that ecocriticism constitute an active contribution to meeting a contemporary social challenge - environmental crisis - and that it provides a way of re-assessing scholarly practice with regard to the role nature has been assigned in academic studies. (Bartosch 2013: 10)

Helon Habila through his novel *Oil on Water* (2010) and Amitav Ghosh through *Gun Island* (2019) have tried to portray the reality on-ground and have discussed the different catastrophic outcomes negligence can lead towards. *Oil on Water* foregrounds the prevailing Nigerian politics around Oil and how through years it has led to violent protests, civil unrest, economic disparity, and a general distress among the masses. Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* on the other hand goes beyond geographies to draw similarities of crises in human and non-human lives.

The novel also shows how migration becomes inevitable in such scenarios, and jeopardizes communities as well as their age long cultural practices and traditions. This paper therefore focuses on the alarming environmental conditions as highlighted in the works with respect to the two delta regions, The Niger and The Sundarbans. The abuse by oil companies and growing industrial presence in the regions respectively has affected the biodiversity of the two lands resulting in unforeseen events. The study provides a comparative study of these catastrophes in the two regions. Finally, the ever-happening movement in the regions and what it means for the migrants and the cities and towns they leave and further acquire will also be studied thoroughly.

The Connection

In the 1990s, Nigeria experienced a period of political turmoil and violence under the dictatorship of Abacha. Despite international support and protests against the government, military, and oil industries, environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa was executed in 1995.

In 2004, a massive undersea earthquake struck near Sumatra, triggering Tsunami waves that killed over 225,000 people in 14 countries, causing extensive damage worth billions of dollars. While India's southern states were among the hardest hit, the Sundarbans in the eastern region acted as a natural fortress, saving thousands of lives in Bengal and Bangladesh.

Geographical variations, content, motives, actors, and other obvious variables divide the narratives in several ways and forms, which, on the surface, appear to be just and valid. But on the other hand, the similarities are profound and unavoidable. The deterioration of the environment, oil wars, trafficking, migration, poverty, unemployment, and the unpredictability and fickleness of life bring together not only the stories, but also the humans and their moments of joys along with their eras of sufferings. These similarities, and parallels, of India and Nigeria, of the Sundarbans and the Niger Delta and of writers' subjectivity in treatment of the issues will serve as the foundation for further arguments in the subsequent sections.

The Burning Delta

Habila's novel *Oil on Water* falls under the category of 'petro-fiction' and explores the ramifications of the region's 'vicious ecological war' waged in the name of oil extraction (Feldner 2018: 1), "a war whose victims are a hapless people and the land on which they have lived and thrived for centuries" (Okonta and Douglas 2003: 64). Habila writes about two journalists on a quest to enquire and find out about a kidnapped white woman, wife of a senior petrochemical industrialist,

in the oil rich but heavily conflicted islands of the delta region. The brutalized environment acts as the main actor in the eco-drama throughout the narrative. Although primarily, the war only seems to have two agents; the federal soldiers instituted by the governments to safeguard oil industries and the armed rebels fighting for the cause of protecting their homelands and revered environment, there are obviously the local masses and communities that are caught in the middle, changing homes and struggling to survive amidst violent clashes.

The USEPA's 2021 report on global greenhouse gas emissions reveals a significant increase in carbon emissions from fossil fuels since 1900, with fossil fuel combustion and industrial processes contributing to 78% of the total greenhouse gas emissions increase from 1970 to 2011. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) 2020 Annual Climate Report indicates a steady increase in land and ocean temperature since 1880, with the average rate of increase being twice as high in the last 40 years. Developing economies like India and Nigeria face a greater challenge in balancing development and natural resource conservation while preserving their culture and history.

Exploiting the Delta's resources to develop other places (mainly Europe and America) while neglecting the region has resulted in serious environmental deterioration, pollution, loss of traditional farming, and the local fishing industry. Byron in *Different Shades of Green* (2014) argues that, "this degradation has mostly been rendered invisible to the rest of the world as a result of the continent's extreme marginality both in imperial representation and in the world economic system" (Byron 2014: 11). As the Oil industries grew, other industries naturally went down. In his eye opening and famous report 'We Thought It Was Oil' Bassey notes that

oil replaced agriculture as the mainstay of the Nigerian economy by the early 1970s. Commercial oil extraction began in 1958 and rose to a production level of 17,000 barrels a day. By 1966, production had risen to 420,000 barrels a day and hit two million barrels a day between 1970 and 1980. (Bassey 2002: 5)

Nigeria has lost 50 percent of its forest cover in last two decades and is losing the remaining at 5 percent every year. By 2047, it is projected that all of its forest cover will be lost to oil and charcoal mining. As a result, militancy, kidnapping, oil theft, and unthinkable health risks emerge. The oil spills in the region leads to the death of hundreds of species of flora and fauna every year. Habila's characters Rufus and Zaq, both journalists, experience this degradation and pollution way before they reach the destination they ought to: "We followed a bend in the river

and in front of us we saw birds dropped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fish bobbed while – bellied between tree roots” (Habila 2010: 8).

Oil on Water is a continuation of Habila’s attempt of broadcasting Nigeria and its history through narrative fiction in the lines of his other works. The first novel *Waiting for an Angel* (2002) revolves around the Nigeria of 1990s and what was going on in the minds and lives of Nigerians during the horrific time of military dictatorship. His second, *Measuring Time* (2009) portrays the war ridden Nigeria through the eyes of twins, one a soldier and other a scholar-educator, and the internal human confrontations moving alongside nation’s turbulent journey since independence. The reference to Abacha and his rule in the beginning was not only to hint on the gravity of the prevailing condition, the same time when protests and activism was at peak and Ken Saro was first put to jail and then subsequently hanged, but also to argue that his rule divided the independent state of Nigeria into two before and after phases. “Ken Saro’s manifesto *Genocide in Nigeria* (1992) claimed that the Ogoni people were left ‘half-deaf and prone to respiratory diseases’ and that their main livelihoods, farming and fishing, were being destroyed by the poisoning of air, water, and soil” (82, in Byron 2014: 143).

After the discovery of oil in the Delta region in 1956 and four years later when Nigeria got independent, the mood in the ongoing decade was hopeful. A newly born nation with world’s most in-demand commodity in their backyard, it was inevitable for the masses to not feel joyous in their present and secured for the future. But the leadership that fought against the imperialists a few years back was now the very leadership looking for favours from their former masters for orders and businesses. As Andrew Apter explains, “There was no sphere of *res publica* in Abacha’s Nigeria; no effective system of interest articulation, legal process, public education, press coverage, or publicity, nor was the most basic protection of life and liberty even recognized by the state” (in Byron 2014: 134).

What these practices of the past led to is still incomprehensible. After the military dictatorship ended another disaster plagued the Delta region was of conditions forcing people to migrate. With the density of 226 people per km², the Niger Delta is home to several different tribes including the likes of Igbo, Ogoni and Ijaw who have inhabited the region for thousands of years. The violent clashes in an already degrading economy have forced individuals and tribes all the same to look for safety and stable future outside the region. “Ken Saro-Wiwa famously characterized gas-flaring and oil-spills in the Niger Delta as a form of genocidal violence” (Byron 2014: 133). With Oil politics at the centre, migration is the only option left with people. “Communities had borne the brunt of oil wars, caught between the militants and the military, and the only way they could avoid being

crush out of existence was to pretend to be deaf and dumb and blind” (Habila 2010: 33), or leave. The Chief Ibiram while answering Zaq’s question on being happy during turbulent times says:

We’ve lived in five different places but always we’ve had to move. We are looking for a place where we can live in peace. But it is hard. So, your question, are we happy here? I say how can we be happy when we are mere wanderers without a home? (Habila 2010: 41)

The characters are too proud to leave their home. Too proud? Too perplexed? Too scared? That’s for the readers to decide, the truth remains that they are not leaving, until forced to.

This was their ancestral land; this was where their fathers and their fathers’ fathers were buried. They’d be born here, they’d grown up here, and though they may not be rich, the land has been good to them, they never lacked for anything. What kind of custodians of the land they be if they sold it off? (Habila 2010: 39)

The postcolonial occupation in Nigeria and the post-independent neo-colonialism by oil companies and local politicians has suffocated the life out of the region. Even for people that are moving out of the Delta, life is certainly not easy elsewhere. With young men indulging in criminal activities like theft, burglary, kidnapping, etc., women are forced to take up the path of prostitution and house-help where many a times they are sexually exploited. The cities have been distinctly divided in not just class structure but also as natives and outsiders. “The irony of living in a Lagos that thrives on oil wealth but which strips people of their dignity while forcing some into armed robbery and prostitution only to die in shameful and un-dignifying circumstances” (Olaoluwa 2019: 19). Habila’s idea for Nigeria and its people, however unselfish and pure it may seem, questions the futility of aggression and how it is only the Nigerians who are suffering due to the crisis. He portrays, “rivers with floating dead and dying wildlife, poisoned fish, oil-soaked land that has become futile and heavily polluted air and toxic fumes” (Sakshi 2019: 271).

The Sinking Delta

In his study of patterns and occurrences of natural disasters and whether those disasters were actually natural or rather manmade, Upmanyu Mukherjee takes his stand against the Imperialism of Victorian era and marks the beginning of such catastrophes as the outcome of the policies, governance and rule of late 1800s which defined the direction and state of the world. In his work *Natural*

Disasters and Victorian World (2013), he calls the rule as ‘The Empire of Disasters’ where even rulers’ inefficiency, incompetence and short-sightedness were neglected to brand famines, floods and other controllable disasters as natural. The perpetual loss of environment and local communities on which imperialism rose, carried itself forward in the 1900s and with ‘once colonized’ but ‘now free’ nations continuing the approach of political favours and individual prosperity as against nation’s social welfare and development, the civil war like situations develop in many countries.

Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island* is engulfed with the issues of rising sea level, increasing salinity in the ocean, constant floods and wildfires across different cities in the world. From Sundarbans to Los Angeles and from New York to Venice, the universality of crises has certainly brought the world on one forum. The entirety of the novel presents how environment is the biggest sufferer and why even government and local communities are helpless to save it. According to a recent study, the Sundarbans has lost 5.5 percent of its mangrove cover in last 30 years along with the loss of 9990 hectares of landmass to erosion and rising sea level in last one decade. Amitav Ghosh takes a position where he looks beyond theories, arguments, and debates surrounding the issues and advocates for clear and rapid actions acknowledging and involving the support of local communities.

The fiction of Ghosh has always portrayed history, culture and environment as an integral part of a society to attract and aware readers of the pertaining issues. From his first novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) until his most recent *The Nutmeg’s Curse* (2021), there is a continuous yet horrid pattern of deterioration of environment one can notice. Bartosch in *EnvironMentality* states that, “Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004) makes a perfect starting point to address the aporias of ecocentric versus anthropocentric thinking, the role of science and (other) discourses in postcolonial ecocriticism, and the event of fiction” (Bartosch: 2013: 96). *Gun Island* too reflects on the notion how centuries old communities are forced to leave their ancestral habitation. While narrowing only to the environment issues of Sundarbans mentioned in the novels, there are primarily two areas to look at. First the deadly effects of cyclones on the region and its population, with rising sea level breaching through the smaller islands. And Secondly, the increasing salinity of water due to industrial setup and how sea as well as land animals are affected.

There are many ecological studies being carried out in present times in the field of sciences to measure the rising sea level across many coastal regions. The information, news and activism are able to construct a momentary image in the minds of watchers and readers but it is eventually the experiences, storytelling and narration that stay for longer time. The two cyclones being used as a refer-

ence of time in the novel are Bhola in 1970 and Aila in 2009. Bhola, ironic to its name resulted in the human lives loss of 500,000 in numbers in Bangladesh and West Bengal. While cyclone Aila has been referred as a tragedy where, “hundreds of miles of embankment have been swept away and the sea has invaded places where it has never entered before; vast tracts of once fertile land has been swamped by salt water, rendering them uncultivable for a generation, if not forever” (Ghosh 2019: 48). The cyclones are a regular occurrence in this part of the world during the months of April-June and Sept-Oct. With high density along this coastal line of nearly 3 million people there is not much to do for such peoples during a time of disaster.

Ghosh's narration of these consequences here makes the tale even more indulging. As Ursula Kluwick comments, “In his engagement with the scale of climate change, Ghosh expands the scope of his novel to embrace an extraordinary, and sometimes preposterous, mass of settings, topics, events, and characters” (Kluwick 2020: 10). Another prominent issue being raised by Ghosh is of the recent industrial growth around the area and their uncontrolled-unethical treatment of resources, which has blown the biodiversity of the region through the roof. The results are seen as the “change in the composition of the waters of the Sundarbans” (Ghosh 2019:92). The region also has a refinery from where chemicals are discharged into the ocean without any treatment. Not just the composition though, with rising sea levels salt water has entered deep inside the river stretches which makes both fishing industry and farming non-conductible. In the case of Sundarbans as highlighted by Ghosh, there is also an added factor. The two main occupations for the people of the region, farming and fishing, have suffered heavily in the last 20 years. The mangroves have fallen prey to the uncontrolled deforestation, with increasing salinity the fishing industry has completely collapsed and even the last resort of seasonal tourism that takes place, mostly because of the exoticism of the region, is on the decline too. This has resulted in the migration of not just humans but the animals too.

In *Southeast Asian Ecocriticism: Theories, Practices, Prospects* (2017), Editor John Charles Ryan shares his views while incorporating the alarming ecological effects on jungle cats (*Felischaus*) and saola (*Pseudoryx nghetinhensis*) of Thailand, Laos and nearby areas. Ryan studies the rise in poaching, trafficking and smuggling of *Felischaus* as an independent breed and how even though an animal of least concern in overall categorization in *IUCN Red list*, it faces extinction and verge of endangerment around Thailand and Laos. Saola on the other hand has been only limited to some areas of Vietnam and Laos in recent years. In further chapters while mentioning Ghosh's *Hungry Tide* and *The Great Derangement* (2016), the environmental issues are broadened to incorporate Sundarbans

and nearby areas along with the more dangerous economic imperialism of the past. Quoting Ghosh, Ryan says, “that the continent of Asia is conceptually critical to every aspect of global warming: its causes, its philosophical and historical implications, and the possibility of a global response to it” (Ryan 2017: 64).

The human migration in the region takes place in two stages. The first phase or first batch so to say, is of Bangladeshi migrants coming to Indian side due to reasons of political instability, religious atrocities, and other factors. This migration includes both the legal and the illegal one. The border police, the kidnappers and the agents are all involved into the business of transferring people across the border. The second stage is of the migration from Sundarbans to other cities of India and countries across the world. This too happens because of the same reasons as in Bangladeshi side, but people now are more aware of their choices and at least legally, have more options to choose from. The varying migration been carried out is shown in the novel as:

Making a life in the Sundarbans had become so hard that the exodus of the young was accelerating every year: boys and girls were borrowing and stealing to pay agents to find them work elsewhere. Some were slipping over the border into Bangladesh, to join labour gangs headed for the Gulf. And if that failed they would pay traffickers to smuggle them to Malaysia or Indonesia, on boats. (Ghosh 2019: 53)

Animals too are on the move as mentioned earlier. Although the novel in large considers many different species of animals across different geographies like snakes in Los Angeles and Shipworms in Venice, the Sundarbans in general and this novel in particular brings the lesser known aspect of migration of river dolphins. Ghosh takes the account of Rani and her pod, dolphins of the species Irrawaddy dolphin, to show how they have been displaced from their natural hunting grounds because of the pollutants in the water. Piya, a marine biologist, in the novel maintains how:

Dolphins had started to avoid some of the waterways they have frequented before; they had also, slowly, begun to venture further and further upriver, into populated, heavily fished areas. Over the last few years the pod had lost so many members that its numbers were now down to Rani and just two others. (Ghosh 2019: 93)

The other animals of the region are too being seen in ‘never seen before’ areas of the delta. Endangered snakes and spiders and their poaching i.e., illegal trafficking of prohibit animals and parts, are too on the rise. Charles Ryan claims that, “Over time, scarcely-seen animals—their environmental behaviors and adaptive

modes remaining partially or wholly unexplained— become uncanny embodiments of the limits of techno-scientific universalization” (Ryan 2017: 11). Ghosh also mentions the plight of Los Angeles, New York and Venice and makes his subject, the catastrophes more than the characters, outright global.

Amitav Ghosh takes a strong stand, firstly in theory with his *The Great Derangement* and then in fictional narration and application with *Gun Island*, against these practices and the domino effect they create. He brings out, through different narrations and perspectives, the sight of devastation for all concerned parties. He also, in subsequent sections, engages in solution-oriented dialogues involving local communities and suggests even reading and learning about historic documents, tales and legends to incorporate practices to counter the severity of the situation.

Conclusions

The arguments not only provide the glimpses of the conditions to the outside world but also paint a picture of the uncertain and unbothered future for the internal social and power structures of the nations. Both Ghosh and Habila have tried to responsibly engage in solution driven dialogue which considers the history, traditions and cultural practices of the regions. These two works in their execution and propagation are unique but what brings them together is their common struggle against environmental catastrophes. The study depicts the sorry state of two of the liveliest and most diverse places on earth, how they have been ruined by different industries and what lies ahead for them are some questions to further think about.

The research also opens a spectrum of comparative study, not just between two geographic locations but two different yet captivating styles of narration. Not just environment though, communities too are at loss, as people along with animals are forced to migrate due to various socio-economical and nature related reasons. The readers will also be able to understand this unavoidable migration and the resulting cause and effect. The novels from start to end tell a tale of discontent, hardships, deaths and sorrow but finally end in hope and momentarily happiness thereby advocating the fact that ‘Earth’s story is yet to end’.

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