

The Destitute, Ecocide and the Anthropocene

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And they were sawing off the branches on which they were sitting while shouting across their experiences to one another how to saw more efficiently. And they went crashing down into the deep. And those who watched them shook their heads and continued sawing vigorously (Bertolt Brecht, Poems of Bertolt Brecht 1913- 1956: Socialist Stories, 252).

The concept of ecocide¹ is very explicitly delineated in Dino Buzzati's work, *The Bears' Famous Invasion of Sicily* (1945), but the actual problem accentuates when ecocide makes frequent reappearances. The story starts with the description of an extreme case of the kidnapping of a bear cub named Tony, who is the son of the King of bears, King Leander, in the mountains by two hunters. But Leander chooses not to spill the real reason behind the disappearance of his son and covers it with a lie. This incident implicitly forms the cause of all the bears' suffering. After a few years, extreme weather conditions drive the bears to the plains and Leander secretly hopes to meet his lost son. The climax occurs when, during the migration, the bears face the military campaign organised by the Duke of Sicily against them. In the story, Buzzati makes this problem of "inequitable treatment" visible to his readers by mixing his ingenious imagination with the workings of ecological realism². Ecological realism manifests itself in the Anthropocene Epoch³ with the disappearance of species, the side-effects of capitalism and the irreversible damage to nonhumans.

Infused with imagination, Buzzati's narrative structure displays intentional elements that govern this apocalyptic narrative, making it proleptic⁴. He gives his nonhumans the gift of language, thereby reversing the traditional topoi (place), and demands an imaginative urge in the modern mechanical soulless society. With language comes the power of expression that breaks through all the power barriers and helps one to hold rational arguments in the face of an unequal dispute.

This imagination adds to the concept of ecocide another dimension that brings to revelation the role played by capitalist, communist and judicial organisations in carrying out this ecocide. The first line of the above-mentioned quote establishes the relation between man and his ecology in the modern world. This quote in the form of an emergent idea provides us with an unavoidable context for thinking in anecocritical way about the functioning of the abovementioned organisations that plunder, exploit and colonize the destitute⁵, thereby delivering an integrated and holistic understanding of ecocide. Why does it seem vital to have knowledge of ecocide or to realize the importance of this concept? This concept is ascertained and carried out according to the level of inequality amongst anthropocentric and bio-centric cultures. The spirit of domination that tries to conquer anything and everything that is without the egocentric "I" believes in the unequal conquest and answers the aforementioned question very aptly. The impact born out of the dominating desire in the anthropocentric culture suffices to destroy the natural ecology of the planet. With domination comes the ruthless power to carry out the catastrophic extinction of mass species. This power, when it comes into one's contact with the help of various modes, implants itself within and forms one single entity. This confirms the relation of this mass destruction to humanity.

Mass extinction and mass murder are not new phenomena but have their roots embedded in history. It was 250 million years ago when a large scale, mass extinction finished a 200 million year-long Paleozoic⁶ era's evolutionary history on land and in shallow water and erased most of the land-living animal and marine life. Environmental

¹ Ecocide refers to the deliberate destruction of the natural environment, its constituent parts and the nonhumans by the man and his anthropocentric attitude.

² Ecological realism delimits the actions of man by placing environmental limits on human agency, and revealing the true nature of the capitalist driven ideologies based on extracting profit from the nature. The revelation is done in realistic manner by studying the material conditions of existence, and relations of reproduction that assign only use-value to nature. James J. Gibson's form of direct perception goes by the name of ecological realism, and believes in providing to the environment of an organism the status of attributing actions to the organism.

³ The concept of Anthropocene has been used to denote a geological time unit that depicts dynamic interactions between natural processes and human impact

⁴ A form of rhetorical device by which objections are anticipated, and answered in advance.

⁵ Here the destitute refer to the gentle furry giants of the mountain world, that is, the bears.

⁶ It comes from the Greek words palaios and zoe, meaning old life.

change in any form throughout history has led to the production of a series of mass extinctions. Apart from such extinctions with the advent of modern humans, there was a totally different yet conspicuous case of ecocide. In this work by Buzzati, the bears have to abandon their home in order to survive an extreme change in climate that deeply affect them:

Then there came a winter more terrible than any of the other winters...they could not stand it any longer (17). Once upon a time, in the ancient mountains of Sicily, two hunters captured the bear-cub Tony (3).

The story commences with a fairy tale tradition leading to the conquest, where humans colonize the non-human world. The first thing that caused exile and diaspora of the bears was the man-induced technology-based activities that led to climatic changes and formed an unbearable environment for the bears, while the other was the sinister act of intruding into the space of the bears and kidnapping one of the bear-cubs.

This intrusion of humans into the nonhuman world where the former colonize the latter points to the presence of punitive powers in the hands of mechanical humans who kill ecosystems for fun and profit. Ecocide here starts with the stealing of peace. The peace of the bear King Leander was stolen and he was ashamed of confessing the truth as it would have brought disgrace upon his capability as a King; therefore, his peace could not be restored either by the bear community or judiciary body, and his mental ecocide began years before the actual movement away from home, symbolising an emotional as well as a contentious issue.

The challenge that stood in front of him now was to reclaim his son from humans, to reclaim part of his life, and his peace. But he feared that his position as a bear was too weak when compared to that of humans. Through these lines, Buzzati marks the interaction of these two worlds with an apocalyptic vision. This vision dominates the entire story and depicts social psychology vis-à-vis ecological psychology, with a sense of inculcated moral dualism that believes in the idea of schism. Ecocide here becomes symptomatic of a “divide” on both metaphorical as well as literal levels. On the metaphorical level, it kills the spirit inhabited in Nature while on the literal level it propounds inequitable sharing among living beings. The idea of schism celebrates human community in the Promethean manner⁷ and disrespects Nature as a mere passive object in the modern world. To form the aetiology of ecocide, the forces of technological progress in the modern era, individual enterprise, dominant modes of ownership, the capitalist mode of production, the burgeoning of Foucault’s modern state with its policy of sectarianism, and commercial assault on Nature, all connive together. In the story, the case of intrusion and kidnapping can be considered intentional as they were self-induced and had the potential to transform the indication of ecocide and habitat destruction into a permanent petrifying phenomenon. Hence, ecocide is not just historical but to a great extent sociological.

This paper tries to delineate an important understanding of this particular aspect and discover achievable emancipatory recourses. For this, the study produces an amalgamation of social, political and ideological forces that govern the concept of ecocide in the story. It tries to locate the destitute and sociological foundation of this killing along with the natural sciences and becomes a seminal space for capital-driven opportunities. Socialization or humanization of Nature encapsulates the combat over surplus production with its own game and self-made rules. This could all be attributed to the idea of class society that commenced with agriculture. This idea of society gained even much greater prominence in the modern industrial and capitalist era due to its newly gained preternatural capability to alter the course of Nature and carry out its destruction without taking any responsibility for the ecological repercussions.

To make sense of the destruction caused and the existence of this threatening social human behaviour, it is vital to understand the concerned humans and their behaviour in a real environment (historical or contemporary) along the lines of production of their material conditions, as provided by Buzzati’s setting of the story here. In order to know the reason behind the progressive ecocide, it becomes mandatory to connect and awaken one’s eco-consciousness in relation to the fundamental connection between ecology and society. With the acceleration of societal living standards and consumerism, the urge to extract from Nature to a point where it turns empty also accelerates. The idea of the complete elimination of Nature has never bothered those who exploit it, as Nature has always catered to their demands. However, this elimination is a strong indicator of a self-defeating crisis.

This Anthropocene Epoch believes in deriving “value”, and this extraction of value pays no heed to the damage caused by the profit governed system to the other, and has nothing to do with the security of social or ecological relations. The bear-cub is one such “value” that depicts the pure greed and self-interest of the humans hidden behind the seemingly egalitarian ideology. Max Weber once said, “Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life. Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means

⁷Associated with rebellion and innovation, in accordance with the characteristics of the demigod Prometheus of Greek mythology.

for the satisfaction of his material needs” (The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, xi). The story informs us and is replete with instances about the acquisition that pretends to follow the judicial aspect of the community, and furnishes strong rationales against the workings of ecocide but to no avail since such pretensions are just fabrications. Rather than being affectionate or sympathetic, these rationales follow utilitarian arguments powered by the desire for self-interest. Humans try to locate the aesthetic element in the utilitarian approach, making the nonhumans even more vulnerable as this aesthetic element is not supplied to make a healthy beautiful ecosystem but rather to elicit the use-value of this other world in commerce.

The pre-post contradiction between landscape and no landscape in the line “though there are no longer any mountains in Sicily... They are all covered in snow” (11), hints at the self-inflicted anthropogenic climatic change by man-made technology. On the one hand, there are:

Streams, woods full of small birds – and houses scattered here and there – a most beautiful landscape, while on the other, there are “enchanted Castles, (11).

The transmutation of the natural glorious city of Sicily was so intense, that even its memory has been erased; by the fortified strongholds of the built landscape and due to encroachment of colonial and capital power. The nostalgia for the erased memory, for a return to the ancient mountains, links together the issues of ecology and ecocide, demanding recourse to Nature and her majestic aura.

For the bears, lichen, truffles and fungi symbolise not just plants but givers of life. Soon their lives and habitat are invaded by capitalist hunger. This paper highlights the way of existence of the nonhumans as no value is given to them, and they have to, therefore “create” their own value.

The case of ecocide gains even more power after Industrial Revolution and in the Anthropocene where machines gained prominence over ecology and mechanical mindless ideology shaped the human world and was instrumental in the creation of consolidated colonialism with rivalry and incessant competition for acquiring control. Therefore, it can be said that in the story, the assault on bears was tailored to sustain the colonial rule of the Duke. The patriarchal spirit, of domination as manifested in the idioms used, is reversed when the Orient becomes the Occident both in power and capital. Writers, like Buzatti, can be seen writing ahead of their times, raising issues dealing with a way of life remote from humans, along with the entry of the nonhumans into the human world and variegated attitudes around power. He familiarises the readers with bears and other nonhuman species, their pain and suffering as similar to ours and makes apparent the change that does not just enumerate any one particular space, but what is at stake everywhere.

The deployment of the dual-lens, in the setting pertaining to the postcolonial/colonial and eco-critical mode of survival, helps the reader to locate and interrogate imperialist modes of environmental and social dominance. In this context, Huggan and Tiffin’s terms “green postcolonialism”⁸ and “postcolonial criticism” fit quite aptly (Cilano and DeLoughrey, 2007). Firstly, this association takes into consideration the relevant yet elusive play between the historical, social and material aspects of Oikos; fungi, nonhumans, habitat and the cultural, and economic categories; community, judiciary, and capital. Secondly, it deals with two kinds of division; the one within human society and the other within Nature. Ecocide here, in spiritual terms symbolising the death of entire Oikos, becomes a struggle for hope for bear king Leander, whose son had been stolen from him in his presence. It becomes vital to trace the emotions of the nonhumans in the story because they form part of our culture and its tradition and work towards its enlightenment and sustainability. With the demise of these creatures, the death of humans is but natural; as he is one with his culture and cannot survive without it.

This clear cut case of environmental orientalism maintained by cultural categories which are at war with ecosystem bespeaks of frontiers and conquest assigning to Nature the emotionless, spiritless use-value as governed by the capitalist world in the line by GisliPalsson, “Humans compete with God by creating order in nature” (Ingold, 16). But in the story, the bears compete with the humans, made apparent in the sentence:

At length one of them said: why don’t we go down to the plains? better fight with men than die of hunger up here (17).

⁸ Green postcolonialism conflates ecocriticism with postcolonialism, and tries to analyse the concerns and debates around the differences and similarities between ecological and cultural spaces. Both the terms though seemingly antagonistic share some internal divisions in the sense that the former deals with division within nature, while the latter sees the division between people. Postcolonial ideology though anthropocentric has a long history of ecological concerns but is less inclusive as compared to ecocriticism.

The word “fight”, brings in the idea of an “eco-body” comprising of the nonhumans against the humans whose evil, malign nature was unfamiliar to all the bears, except King Leander. The reference to “terrible weapons” in the fight alludes to the technological advancement that has created thinking machines out of sensitive humans. But somehow, this reversal of point-of-view, in favour of the nonhumans can be viewed as a threshold for their future emancipation and “unconscious decolonization”. This paper, hence, makes apparent the power of prophecy and colonization of humans by the other nonhuman species of the ecosystem. Falling in the fairy tale tradition, the story uses the character of Professor Ambrose, to proclaim that:

Invincible forces from the mountains would declare themselves masters of the Duke’s country” (18).

This belief, in superstition and the fear of the unknown make him shiver, forcing him to order the ecocide of that unknown force. Just like Europe which had to adhere to the absolutist system in order to promote its capitalist engines, the Duke’s parochial politics considered it fair enough to destroy any living thing which threatened his kingdom and power; and for this, he intervened in the process of Nature. This anthropocentric attitude which neglects any other living species makes ecocide appear very irrelevant and trivial. The decree issued by the Duke causes the ecocide of every living thing, “marmots, squirrels and even little innocent birds” (18). The emergence of an anthropocentric attitude raises issues of confiscation whether geopolitical, environmental, social or ideological. The Duke’s manoeuvre, at establishing a competitive framework of power and state, where he could own the entire natural geography and destroy whoever he wanted to present ecology as mechanised, objectified and in sync with the thought process of the Enlightenment period, which saw Nature as something that can be controlled by humans. Also, scientists like Francis Bacon and Sir Isaac Newton, and philosophers like René Descartes, John Locke and David Hume supported a “scientific method” according to which “living ecosystems become objects of detached analysis, observation, and experimentation” (Brosimmer, 56).

The phrase in the story, “The slaughter began” (20), hints at the Duke’s meaningless and blind attack on the nonhumans twice. The heaviness of the phrase finds expression in the slaughtering done during World War 1, when mechanised technology with mindless decree led to the mechanised genocide. The technology-free Nature, symbolised by the desperate bears, used self-made arrows and spears when they were up against an insensitive generation of humans guarded with cannons, shots and muskets. The destruction of bears was considered essential by the Duke for his indomitable rule over everything, just like the destruction of the commons⁹ for the Industrial Revolution. The attack can be read as a global phenomenon and not just the historical one, as it becomes the guiding star for understanding ecocide, for studying the human colonization of nonhuman habitats and lives. The identity of the nonhumans has been absorbed by the anthropocentric desire to rule Nature. The prevailing culture and community around capitalist ethos tend to remain imperial in nature with an attitude of economic apathy towards ecological order. This juggernaut attitude produces social inequality with a scope of global ecocidal activities that makes the commodification and exploitation of ecology universal:

Rifles crack, and the unsullied snow turns red (The Bears’ Famous Invasion of Sicily, 20).

The word “red” makes the reader relive the horrors of the two World Wars, the physical and the mental trauma that ruled the minds and hearts of the helpless. It depicts the similarity between humans and nonhumans, as both are composed of red blood cells and the interconnectedness that has been overruled by humans.

Animals cut into pieces... wonderful! Splendid! Says the Duke (The Bears’ Famous Invasion of Sicily, 21).

This full-fledged mechanical attack on Nature with the purpose of eradicating the entire bear species has serious repercussions. The autonomous desire to be able to solely rule private property has reduced Nature to the state of a commodity, an object to be manipulated and used for commercial purposes. Ecocide delineates the alienation of humans from the marvellous wonders of Nature. When humans carelessly cause ecocide, Nature eventually reverts in a manner unprecedented. Here, the subjectivity of Nature springs up when the nonhumans decide to roll up snow into large cannons to slaughter humans. Hence, Nature finally stands victorious in the face of the anthropocentric mechanical world. The bears being foragers go foraging for food, except for King Leander, and metamorphose into something completely different, with a sense of identity and nonhuman rights. So what starts as a foraging act is transmuted into a game of survival. In this way, the writer treats the unfamiliar as the familiar and this juxtaposition brings to the fore the façade-free face of anthropocentric human civilization. Writers of literature contribute and make such revelations possible by disseminating facts otherwise secluded.

Ecocriticism raises questions dealing with collective concerns to acknowledge and protect the other living species. The question gets answered in the phrase “interdependence” which highlights our collective dependence on other species and their ecological services as one of the major existential imperatives. The production of oxygen,

⁹ The source of cultural and natural materials for all the members of a society

absorption of carbon dioxide and decomposition of matter would be impossible if the desire to exist were not apportioned with the requisite awareness to help the ecosystem and prevent ecocide. Therefore, ecocriticism is often replete with apocalyptic narratives that ensure the visible functioning of environmental ethics in radical ecological discourses. The respect for the uniqueness of each and every species, regardless of their economic value, ought to shape the moral and ideological basis of the human race. The World Charter for Nature of 1982 had laid down many such claims, thereby linking the extermination of species with intellectual insufficiency within humans. The words of the philosopher, Elias Canetti, sum this up aptly, “The power of human dreams is tied to the multiformity of animals. With the disappearance of dreams, people’s imagination and creativity dry up as well”. (Broszimmer, 28)

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