

Beyond the Postcolonial Capitalocene: Studying the Theoretical Approaches and Widening Diction of Environmental Humanities

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Abstract

The discipline of Environmental Humanities proposes the need for an ardent and potent multidisciplinary vocabulary to propagate the conceptualizations that reach all humanity and offer workable, ground-level solutions to the varied organizations and civic society towards tackling the climate crisis. The terminologies that have henceforth emerged throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first-century fall into the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary registers of Anthropology, History, Literature, Sociology, Biology, Environment Studies, Geology, Legality, and Psychology, to name a few. The paper argues that the Environmental Humanities proposes a shift in our globalized perception of the world seen through the lens of postcoloniality and driven by oligarchic capitalist forces, to a planetary world where humans and Nature live in harmony with each other. The paper attempts to collate the working vocabulary that is aiding researchers, philosophers, and policymakers address the issue of climate change.

Keywords: Environmental humanities, capitalocene, eco-criticism, postcolonial eco-criticism, eco-feminism, anthropoharmonism

The twenty-first century is significant for its realisation of a fast-changing planet raising environmental concerns. It has given rise to the understanding of the urgency for constructive action for harmonious living, in turn also leading to the development of theoretical and literary

approaches to view these concerns. Environmental Humanities exist as a natural and essential progression when viewed in the context of global history. This paper attempts to study the theoretical shifts that have taken place in the field of Environmental Humanities and the expanding diction that has been central in advancing our understanding of the climate crisis and inventing its possible solutions. It goes further to argue how the economic and political models that drive the world need to be renegotiated as they are preventing the movement from a postcolonial 'Capitalocene' to 'Anthropoharmonism' which "...recognises the unique perspective (and power) of humans, but also recognises that humans are wholly dependent on the wider Earth community and need to act in harmony with it" (Hathaway, 2015, p. 1). According to Bill McKibben (1989),

'We live in a post-natural world.' But did 'Nature' in this sense ever exist? Or was it rather the deification of the human that gave it an illusory apartness from ourselves? Now that non-human agencies have dispelled that illusion, we are confronted suddenly with a new task: that of finding other ways in which to imagine the unthinkable beings and events of this era. (p. 49)

The attempt to create exclusive categories of 'human' and 'nature' may seem futile, however, it aids in our understanding of how the homo-sapiens affect every 'non-human' entity and have gravely impacted ecosystems in an extremely minuscule geological time frame. This has gradually paved the way for the term 'Anthropocene' to enter the sociological and scientific discourse to study the effect humans have on non-human beings and the planet. The term was coined in the 1980s by a biologist, Eugene F. Stoermer and was popularized by Paul J. Crutzen. The conception of viewing humans as the centre, or 'Anthropocentrism' became a destructive force for all life forms. However, one can infer that the inequalities stemming from political and economic frameworks have historically ensured a lopsided and narrow 'development' of a select few humans at the expense of Nature and most humans who are not considered as a resource in capitalistic terminology.

The environmental debate for a long period has provided a postcolonial historical insight into understanding the power dynamics as they operate today, based on the spatiotemporal continuum that has existed since the Industrial Revolution and European colonization. The Global North-South divide of the Developed, Developing, and Least Developed

Countries drives the global economy and the lopsided distribution of resources and waste, which further affects the quality of life and natural resources in the world. However, Environmental Humanities has initiated conversations around hegemonic intercontinental relationships that have driven the power dynamics of the world, as we inhabit it today, and questions the future of such an unequal and exploitative system of operation. The study opens a more holistic understanding of how the world operates and who has the ultimate agency to alleviate the planet from this crisis. The recent developments in various fields of Humanities have progressed further from the postcolonial political and capitalistic economic model.

This unequal distribution of resources takes the postcolonial narrative forward into a more nuanced understanding of the Global North-South divide debate that resurfaces during the Global Conventions. The age of the 'Capitalocene', proposed by Jason W. Moore, provides a more holistic understanding of this inequality in the context of capital and resources. "...[Capitalism] is premised on the separation of Humanity and Nature..." (2017, p. 600) that focuses on exploiting Nature and most humans (forced to be seen as less human) as 'cheap' or 'disposable' forms of labour in the Capitalocene. Amitav Ghosh, in his 2022 fable, *The Living Mountain* also engages with this concept of viewing the world from an economic lens, thereby establishing how an oligarchic capitalistic group of individuals have concentrated wealth, power, and resources; making decisions for the rest of the planet, leading it towards climate crisis for short-term profitable gains.

The rising inequality has been visiblized through the looming refugee crisis that spans through the twenty-first century juxtaposed by globalization where some humans have become global citizens; however, some have lost all hope of a home or a safe space. Kenya, Jordan, Sudan, and Tanzania hold some of the largest refugee camps in the world with millions of people, homeless (UNHCR, 2023). The national identity of a person or the lack of it, determines one's positioning in the world and the privileges or access to resources one will have. The huge refugee crisis that haunts the world disturbs the neatly drawn national boundaries that cut through geological landscapes of mountains, oceans, and rivers. These boundaries are constantly negotiated by political authorities to exploit maximum resources for 'capitalist growth' and gain the power to dump human-produced waste to less-privileged countries. This is how

neo-colonialism operates in the present times, leading certain Developing and Least Developed Countries to become more vulnerable to the climate crisis. In Refugee Studies, the term, Climate Refugees is proposed to describe those displaced by climate related threats. As Ida (2021) notes, "The Ecosystem Threat Register (ETR) released in September 2018 by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), an Australian international think tank, points out that at least 1.2 billion people could be displaced by [climate related] threats by 2050". This forms almost one-sixth of the world. The lived realities of these people result in trauma formation.

The field of Trauma Studies now encompasses ecological disasters as well, bringing forth theorists such as Pramod K. Nayar who has written on the Bhopal Gas Tragedy as an ecological crisis that results in generational trauma (2017). Similarly, the drowning of Bhashanchar island and the overcrowded Cox's Bazaar, located far from mainland Bangladesh, and inhabited by Rohingya refugees is a looming disaster. The degradation of life through these ecological crises brings what Nayar refers to as "ecoprecarity" (2019), a precariousness from an ecosystemic perspective to describe the vulnerabilities of working relations, human existence, and ecological balance. This imbalance in the spheres of water, air, land, and biosphere needs to be explored from a social, cultural, and humanist perspective.

The need to theorise the varied perspectives on Environmental Humanities has led to what has come to be known as 'Ecocriticism'. One of the pioneers in the field, Scott Slovic (2010) theorizes the 'three waves of ecocriticism' where the first wave explored the relationship between nature and literature, the second wave delved into the socio-cultural aspects associated with nature and man; and the third wave espoused Ecofeminism, the theory that examines the connection between Nature and women. Coined in 1974 by Francoise d'Eaubonne, Ecofeminism has seen extensive engagement, especially by theorists like Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, and Patrick D. Murphy. Along with Gender Studies, Marxist Studies also finds interconnections with Environmental Humanities and is known as Material Ecocriticism or Marxist Ecocriticism, that studies how class distinctions juxtapose with nature. Theorists such as Ariel Salleh and Başak Ain are pioneers in the field. Similarly, in Sociology, Eco socialism is presented to study how societal frameworks and hierarchies interact in the context of ecology. The significant theorists in this domain are Mary Mellor and James O'Connor. Nicole Anaem theorizes ecological

changes when studied from the perspective of Culture Studies, as each culture inhabits peculiar rules in the context of Nature, depending on their proximity with it and their dependence on it.

An upcoming domain within the theoretical framework of Eco-criticism is Blue Humanities. The field of Blue Humanities dives into the water bodies of our planet to take cognizance of the damage done by humans there. Theorists such as Serpil Oppermann, Steve Mentz, Sidney I. Dobrin, and Stacy Alaimo have worked extensively in the area. The study of coral bleaching, ocean plastic pollution, the ingestion of harmful industry chemicals and untreated waste by marine lives, endangered marine ecosystems, the rising sea temperatures, and changing precipitation patterns that result in changed ecological and ecosystem cycles on the planet are some of the issues that the field explores.

These changes in conceptual terminology and the environmental crises impacting the world have provided the establishment and advancement of Environmental Humanities. Various organizations, states, and global authorities are trying to work in tandem towards the looming crisis. The Earth Summit held in Rio in 1992, which came to be known as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), initiated conversations and aided in raising awareness about the long-lasting, global, and interconnected effects of climate change and the need for an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach to find equitable solutions, spearheading positive action towards living in harmony. The various initiatives taken by the organized governmental, institutional, and civic society elements have given the world various Conventions, Agendas, and Protocols like the Montreal Protocol (1987), United National Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, 1992), United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD, 1992), Agenda 21 (1992), United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD, 1994), Kyoto Protocol (1997), Millenium Development Goals (MDGs, 2000) and Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (SDGs, 2015), to name a few significant ones. These overarching frameworks conduct Conference of the Parties (COP) Summits regularly to have ongoing conversations around environmental crises; the most recent one being UNFCCC COP29 at Baku, Azerbaijan (November 11-12, 2024) that resulted in a settlement by providing annual finance of 300 USD to developing countries (Tumi, 2024) from 2035 onwards; what most developing countries and countries vulnerable to climate

change can term as, “a post-dated cheque on a crashing bank” (Geeks for geeks, 2022). Reports like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change are also published to review human efforts to control the rise in world temperature. “According to the 2024 edition of the Emissions Gap Report, released in the lead-up to COP29, countries must cut emissions by 42 per cent by 2030 to limit warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Yet current climate plans would see an increase of 2.6°C to 3.1°C this century, a rise that would be disastrous for the planet” (United Nations Environment Programme, 2024). However, over these five decades, most efforts have been half-hearted, and most treaties have been toothless, without effective ground-level improvements. Unfortunately, the neutral peacekeeping agencies lack agency, financial autonomy, and a vision to comprehend the enormous scale at which the world is collapsing. Hence, the hegemonic capitalistic forces drive the decision-making processes that function through short-term profit-making mindset.

In general, humans still lack full comprehension of the magnitude of the destruction of the planet. The human limitations in the spatiotemporal continuum to comprehend such long-drawn processes were explored by Timothy Morton (2010) through his concept of “hyperobjects in the ecological thought”. According to him, humans cannot primarily comprehend and actively respond to these “hyperobjects” that seem to be events or occurrences spread across an enormous time-space continuum. The causality of this incapability can be explored through Rob Nixon’s concept of “slow violence” in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011). He defines it as:

... violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction dispersed across time and space, attritional violence typically not viewed as violence at all.... [It is] not just attritional but also exponential, operating as a significant threat multiplier; it can fuel long-term, proliferating conflicts in situations where the conditions for sustaining life become increasingly but gradually degraded. (Nixon, 2011, pp. 2-3)

Consequently, there has also been a movement of Environmental Humanities into Psychology which has created a skeletal vocabulary to work with and take cognizance of the violence being unleashed on the planet through changes that are irreversible. As the climate news has become increasingly visiblized and climate crisis has become an everyday

lived reality, the comprehension has also increased. The vocabulary related to psychological correlations was further developed by an Australian Environmental Philosopher, Glenn Albrecht. He proposes that the organizational decisions that change our planet for the worse leave us feeling displaced from our homes without even moving. He terms this concept as “Solastalgia”, a feeling of desolation, isolation, and loss of solace (Albrecht et al., 2007). Human beings, especially the younger generations have been experiencing multiple “psychoterratic dis-eases” apart from Solastalgia, such as ‘Eco-anxiety’, Nature Deficit Disorder, Eco-Paralysis, Eco-Nostalgia, and Global Dread (TEDxSydney, 2010). The awareness of how the world and our surroundings are changing, with urban spaces becoming more concretised without greenery and any space for Nature, brings in a sense of anxiety and helplessness that has now begun to affect our minds and our perception of the reality we inhabit.

The Humanities provide the solution to this problem by providing artworks, literature, and psychological terminologies to make the issue visible and palpable. James E. Lovelock’s (1972) ‘Gaia Theory’ states that living organisms interact with their inorganic surroundings on Earth to form a synergistic and self-regulating, complex system that helps to maintain and perpetuate the conditions for life on the planet, thereby, establishing a more nuanced and holistic view of the biome or the spatial domain we call earth. The world has seen a rise in artworks that address climate change in unique ways. Film Studies and films in various language industries of India are working towards a more equitable and ecologically conscious film-making process. The last few years have seen works such as *The Elephant Whisperers: A Documentary* (Kartiki Gonsalves, English, 2022), *Taledanda* (Praveen Krupakar, Kannada, 2021), *Aranyakam* (Hariharan, Malayalam, 1988), *Bhediya* (Amar Kaushik, Hindi, 2022), *Sherni* (Amit V. Masurkar, Hindi, 2021), and *Vaazhai* (Mari Selvaraj, Tamil, 2024), to name a few. Art has been spearheading the change where the artist realizes the significance of tying it to our realities in actionable, everyday forms through policies and economical ways.

Stranded (2016) by Judy Chicago, an American feminist artist, and art educator [See Figure 1], depicts “climate change and the exploitation of the environment which is now greater than nature can withstand”. Similarly, Susan Schuppli, a UK-based environmental painter depicts in

her painting titled *Nature Represents Itself* (2018) the incident where 4.9 million barrels of oil spilled in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, [See Figure 2]. Various sculptures or photographs such as *Support* by Lorenzo Quinn [Figure 3], an Italian sculptor, depicts the rising waters in Venice; and Daniel Beltra, a Danish photographer's aerial view photograph of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, [Figure 4], are some of the artworks that inspire and provide us with insights into the crisis we are surrounded by (Rojas, 2022).

Figure 1. Judy Chicago, *Stranded*, 2016 (Rojas, 2022)



Figure 2. Susan Schuppli, *Nature Represents Itself*, 2018 (Rojas, 2022)



Figure 3. Lorenzo Quinn, *Support*, 2017 (Rojas, 2022)



Figure 4. Daniel Beltra, *Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill*, 2012 (Rojas, 2022)



The poisoned planet infers a poisoned environment and a poisoned corporeal self. “The poisons our industrial activities spew into the air, water, soil, and food are almost imperceptibly absorbed into all of our bodies” (Slovic, 2020). Stacy Alaimo (2010) describes it as

“‘transcorporeality,’ ...the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from ‘nature’ or ‘environment’. Trans-corporeality, as a theoretical site, is a place where corporeal theories, environmental theories, and science stories meet and mingle in productive ways” (Alaimo, 2010, p. 3). Hence, humans, non-humans, and Nature come together to witness their victimhood of a larger crime that is being committed by a certain section of the society.

It is clear that economic and political domains are consciously just slouching towards solutions to the climate crisis due to a narrow-Westernized understanding of ‘development’ and the fear of losing immorally acquired and unethically maintained geopolitical positioning. In an interview on YouTube, titled “Critique of Capitalism”, Moore says, “...the realities of what we call the ‘economy’ stand on a much larger base of the unpaid work of humans and the rest of nature, and that is both material and culturally enforced not just through the nature-society but through all the various gendered, racialized, sexualized, and colonial discourses...that are embedded in the real practices of colonial powers” (Akbulut, 2018, 2:53-3:24). In *Death of a Discipline*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2003) suggests a conscious shift from globalization to what she labels as ‘Planetary’. She proposes that the planet comprises in itself species of alterity, beyond our control and outside of the global and social markers which have been constructed and reinforced by humans themselves to serve their needs and ensure an unequal distribution of resources and capital to maintain hierarchical establishments. The large-scale and long-lasting damage that the earth has to endure due to these factors has now forced many humans into viewing their identities not as globalized, but as planetary beings. In an interview with the virtual *Noema Magazine*, Dipesh Chakraborty (Gilman & Webb, 2022) ponders how,

[theoretically,] people have been designing global governance, but they still do so, naturally, in terms of nations. Think of the Himalayas. There are eight or nine rivers issuing from the Himalayas that service about eight or nine countries, from Pakistan to Vietnam, so the glaciers are important to these countries. But the glaciers are all nationalized.... How do we move from here to a planetary-level governance?

The political and economic forces of postcoloniality and capitalism have ensured Nature is addressed not as a planetary force, but as a national

entity to be used as a resource for the westernised idea of 'development'. There is an urgent need for political scientists and economists to join the Environmental Humanities and give impetus to discussions and deliberations around newer models to address this "climate emergency" (United Nations press release, 2021).

One can argue if we are currently in an 'ecotonal' space; a liminal fertile transitional space in between two ecological zones or ecosystems that harbour flora and fauna of both types, like wastelands, and mangrove forests, waiting to transition from the capitalist economic model and the postcolonial political model of the Nations working in silos for an extremely narrow definition of 'development' to a more equitable, less hostile, more collaborative, and biophilic forms of living; to ensure the planet can move beyond the postcolonial Capitalocene towards Anthropoharmonism.

This paper provides as a compendium of working vocabulary in the domain of Environmental Humanities, offering insights into the many intersectionalities that the field provides to researchers. Environmental Humanities seeks to delve into the sociological, cultural, economic, political, philosophical, and psychological realms of human civilisation, providing a united, multidimensional, and novel approach to the climate crisis. Hence, creating a network of words and climate language is helping in the cognizance of the everyday effects of the crisis, in creating shared experiences, and innovating socio-cultural and behavioural changes towards eco-friendly practices and anthropoharmonic ways of coexistence.

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Visual-Verbal Performance: Enhancing Ecoliteracy through *Water Stories: From Around the World*

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Abstract

Understanding and engaging with water towards sustainable environmental management is an integral part of education and critical literacy. Propagating the conception of water and its socio-cultural interactions is challenging but necessary. Knowing water is an essential part of ecoliteracy towards human sustainability, interactive storytelling through multimodal narrative structure disseminates such discourses of water for affective cognition. The collection of stories *Water Stories: From Around the World* (2010), edited by Radhika Menon and Sandhya Rao and illustrated by Nirupama Sekhar, can be read as a critical discourse on water and the construction of water literacy. The research paper aims to study how the visual and verbal elements of *Water Stories* promote sustainable ecological practices and enhance ecoliteracy among readers. The paper aims to conduct a multimodal analysis of select stories examining how the literary techniques and modalities of the narrative foster ecoliteracy with a focus on water.

Keywords: *Water Stories*; ecoliteracy, water literacy, multimodality, visual storytelling

Introduction

Ecoliteracy addresses climate change, awareness of ecological knowledge and its socio-cultural relations through literary narratives. Multimodal narratives, as a form of literary representation, serve as a compelling space for ecoliteracy due to their unique blend of visual and verbal