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Ecodisaster Imaginaries in India: Essays in Critical Perspectives

Edited by Scott Slovic, Joyjit Ghosh, and Samit Kumar Maiti

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262 pp., \$105 USD (cloth), \$45 USD (electronic)

Human experiences with disasters are shaped by anthropogenic action, rising global temperatures, and extreme climate events. This edited volume is an introduction to narratives and imaginative retelling of disasters in India from a multilingual and multicultural lens. This volume provides a rich and nuanced foretelling of the physical effects of disasters such as tsunamis, cyclones, floods, and earthquakes and the profound emotional and cultural shifts over the years.

The fifteen chapters cover fictional books, children's books, ecopoetry, and films, as well as mythological retellings centred on critical disaster events and the environmental landscape in India. The chapter authors, mostly scholars and writers from India, situate the diverse ecological narratives set across various disaster-prone states, such as in Odisha, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand, and Uttarakhand amongst others. These stories narrate the intricate relationship between human and nature across the varied landscapes, ranging from riverine, rural, urban, forest dwellers, and mountainous communities.

Climate change depictions in contemporary literary fiction have been an area of interest; the voices from the Global South provide the nuance beyond the academic-scientific studies. Eco-fiction or climate fiction (cli-fi), as well as poetries and children's stories, provide necessary, qualitative, and creative expressions of disaster effects. Each chapter relies on the fundamental argument presented in Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* (2016): climate change is largely absent from contemporary fiction, mainly because the climate crisis is a crisis of imagination. The stories, poems, and films analyzed in this volume remind us that climate change is not an imagination of a distant yet near future; it is a lived reality of several Indigenous communities, and urban populations of the Global South. In their introduction, the editors explain the conceptual framing of ecodisaster imaginaries, drawing on Gregers Andersen's concept of cli-fi, whereby the contributing anthropogenic factors that lead to climate change are presented using scientific evidence to drive storylines, plots, characters, visual imagery, and portrayal of their

impacts on people's lives and landscapes. This volume extends these ideas of imaginaries to ecopoetry by Vineeta Agarwal and Sudeep Sen. Jacinta Kerkatta, who hails from an Oraon community in Jharkhand, describes the slow violence faced by the natural resources and the threats of dispossession faced by the Adivasis, who depend on this nature for their survival. The poems included in her collections *Angor* (2016) and *Land of the Roots* (2018) describe the forests, trees, and flowers surviving various human-induced destructions.

The chapters unpack layers of disaster narratives, anthropogenic action leading to destruction, dystopian urban futures, and present-day harsh realities of pollution and droughts through films. Some of the contributions deal with disasters using fictional narratives, such as *Cyclone* by Manoj Dash and *Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh. One chapter describes the green criminology presented in the book *Rage of the River: The Untold Story of Kedarnath* by Hridayesh Joshi, which describes the 2013 cloudburst that triggered a flash flood that killed thousands of people in Uttarakhand.

Another chapter emphasizes how children's books present Indigenous storytelling and mythical imagination that can potentially shape children's cognitive powers and imagination. Using both human and nonhuman narrators, novels such as *Ma Ganga and the Razai Box* by Geeta Dharmarajan do not limit themselves in the description of the environmental threats of flood and soil erosion and its effects on people and place. Dharmarajan's work gives agency to the nonhuman Ganga and all the other living beings that matter for the village's sustainability as much as humans do.

Readers may be familiar with well-established authors such as Amitav Ghosh and Jhumpa Lahiri. The latter's novels *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and *Lowland* (2013) are analyzed to understand how the Earth is used as a trope to explore the planetary crises. Lahiri's themes in these books deal with complex strands of technological proliferation and the increasing role of transnational capitalism that results in ecological disasters and conflicts. On the other hand, several of Ghosh's works—*The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), *Hungry Tide* (2004), *Gun Island* (2019), and *Junglenama: A Story of the Sundarban* (2021)—present a rich tapestry of ideas that interweave human and nonhuman interconnectedness.

The volume includes discussion on translated works from the Tamil and the Malayalam. *Rising Heat* (2020) by Perumal Murugan (translated from the Tamil by Janaki Kannan) presents land as a site where complex relations between environmental, emotional, social, and filial trauma are experienced. Murugan explores the family as a representative of marginalization, deprived of ancestral, social, and legal rights to life, livelihoods, dignity, and ownership. *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale* (2017) by Ambikasutan Mangad (translated by J. Devika) describes the story of Kasargod in Kerala where people witnessed

the endosulfan tragedy through the use of pesticide from 1975 to 2000. Both novels present a deepened sense of ecophobia stemming from social dispossession, deterioration, and ecological trauma.

The volume also includes temporal perspectives by including discussion on historical and futurist novels. A chapter deals with two dystopian narratives set in Mumbai: *The Black Dwarves of the Good Little Bay* (2019) by Varun Thomas Mathew and *A Cloud Called Bhura: Climate Champions to the Rescue* (2019) by Bijal Vachharajani. In Mathew's conceptualization the Earth rebels against her perpetrators—the humans—whereas in Bijal's novel the reason for climate catastrophe is clearly anthropogenic action. In the historical account of Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffer Dams* (1969), the ideas of subjecthood and agency of marginalized peoples and places offer a critique of postcolonial modernity. Another essay situates one of the earliest environmental thinkers from India, Rabindranath Tagore's works, including the poetry collection *Proshno* and plays *Red Oleanders* (*Raktakarabi*) and *The Waterfall* (*Mukta Dhara*) to present the relevance of environmental concerns and hazards resulting from destruction of nature in colonial India.

There is no doubt that this edited volume discusses hitherto unheard of and less familiar works by Indian authors and poets, but there is such a breadth of literature published in recent years that it becomes necessary to understand the barriers that artists, writers, and activists face in conceptualizing these ecoimaginaries and publishing them and marketing them.

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