



# Reimagining the Globe: Moving beyond the ‘Human’

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## *Abstract*

In the years to come, one thing that our world would have to deal with more and more is undoubtedly natural disaster. Whether caused by the ever increasing vagaries of nature or by the epistemic hubris of the post-humanist world---natural disasters are bound to leave in its wake, memories of trauma caused by unprecedented loss of life and property and mass scale displacement. The present paper would like to interrogate the possible epistemic shifts that the post-humanist world view has undergone to understand, analyse and appropriate the first changing world around us. The paper would also extensively analyze how those paradigm shifts is casting its shadow within the landscape of literary imagination. The final aim of the paper would be to suggest a different conception of what it is to be human in this fast deteriorating world around us.

**Keywords:** Climate Change, Post Human World, Anthropocene, Climate Fiction

In the world we inhabit, one phenomenon that is increasingly becoming a part of our existence is natural disaster. Whether caused by the ever increasing vagaries of Nature or by the unrestricted epistemic intrusions of the Post- Human world----- the natural calamities are bound to leave in its wake, memories of trauma caused by the unprecedented loss of life, property and mass scale displacement. A glance back at 2019 would be enough to establish my point: the viral images of the devastating bushfires in Australia or the catastrophic Amazon fires ; news regarding Victoria Falls drying up in the face of the worst recorded drought situation, thriving metropolis of Delhi, waking up every day to ever increasing degrees of air pollution ; or, the deadly impact of Hurricane Harvey or Irma resulting in 42 million environment refugees across South

Asia, hogged the headlines and drew attention of the world at large. It is in such circumstances that we are forced to realize the fact it is not merely that human beings are endowed with an agency over its surroundings but most surely share it with other beings and even perhaps with the planet itself. In this present paper, I would like to interrogate how such an experience alters our preconceived notions of Human History and how such a paradigm shift is casting its shadow within the landscape of literary imagination. The paper would be divided into two sections---- the first would attempt to identify how our knowledge systems had to reorient itself to access this new geological epoch popularly termed as Anthropocene, while the latter would show how such a world-view, finds its expression in the novelistic discourse of Iliza Trojanow's novel *The Lamentations of Zeno*.

The era in which we exist is popularly termed as 'Anthropocene' as a result of a verwhelming evidences worldwide that all our Earth System Processes are now greatly influenced and altered by the human race. Dipesh Chakraborty in his article *The Climate of History: Four Theses* has pointed out that the scholars writing on the current climate-change crisis are indeed saying something significantly different from what environmental historians have said so far. They have stressed on the fact that human beings are no longer simple biological agents but a powerful geological force, a force that had its birth at the onset of industrial revolution and reached its peak in the second half of the twentieth century. Such transformations inevitably call into question the entire western tradition of organising the idea of politics around the assumption of separate realm of nature and culture.

If we focus on the epistememes with which human beings have analysed, understood and appropriated their world from the beginning of the society to the present age of globalization, we would realize that it has been essentially a discourse centred round human empowerment. In this context, I would like to draw attention to Immanuel Kant's analysis of the biblical story of Genesis. He considers that the text bears testimony to the fact that the entire world has been created for the development of human beings. With this knowledge Man can conveniently tell the lamb that the fur on your body is given only for the use of a civilized human being. Kant, based on such an understanding, asserts that God has provided for Man in plenty so that man can easily give up all pursuits of flesh and aim towards moral development. This very 'idea of progress' seems to be taken up by Karl Marx and Freidreich Engels when they talk of a revolution that would restructure the world into a stateless and casteless society in the famous pamphlet *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848. Such an anthropocentric concept of development remained powerful till the 1950s. For example, when washing machine and refrigerators started entering households in America, the advertisements used for promotion highlighted the sense of freedom and liberty it would provide to the women of the house.

It was essentially during the end of 1960s, that Western World woke up to a realization that natural resources available to us might not be enough to satiate the growing needs of human existence. Michel Foucault in his famous lecture titled Governmentality (1978), showed that the modern nation state will have to think of managing one crucial factor, that is population, and for serving that purpose statistics will emerge as an effective tool (He points out the presence of the very word 'state' in statistics). Such discursive practices ultimately paved way for the theory of sustainability that believed that in order to manage and sustain ourselves man needs to take control of the natural resources of the world and use it with caution. I would here like to mention about the work of Canadian Marine Biologist Peter Larkin who introduced a formula called maximum Sustainable yield in context of deep sea fishing industry. The formula is interestingly poised on a belief that every species have a harvestable surplus, with only one exception, that of human beings. One thing which needs to be noticed at this point is that even when the discussion is in regards to sustainability the approach is nonetheless essentially anthropocentric. Dipesh Chakraborty terms it as a ground – up perspective of the world, a point of view which is structured round the factors of conflict and identity.

In opposition to such a view of human history, scholars who study human beings in relation to climate change and other ecological problems proposes what Dipesh Chakraborty terms the outside-in view of the world, the view one gets to see when one looks at the world from the top. In their discussions they have made basic distinction between 'recorded history' of human beings and their 'deep history'. While the recorded history refers broadly to the last 400 years or so of which written records exist, 'deep history' incorporates a record of combined genetic and cultural changes that created humanity over thousands of years. They argue that geologists and climate scientists may explain the current phase of global warming as anthropogenic in nature but the ensuing crisis for humans is not understandable unless one works out the consequences of such warming and the consequences make sense only if we have a holistic view of human as a form of life and look on human history as part of the history of life on this planet. The word that scholars like Edward Wilson and Paul J Crutzen uses to designate life in human form--- and in other living forms ----- is 'species'. Thus, they speak of the human being as 'collective' and find that category useful in thinking about the nature of the current crisis. Wilson in his book emphatically states: 'we need this larger view...not only to understand our species but more firmly to secure its future'. Interestingly such an essentialist conception of human identity finds reflection in one of the most important publications on climate change in 2015, Pope Francis's Encyclical letter Laudato Si. Pope here provides a critique of the era that he describes as a period of irrational confidence in progress and human abilities.' The letter questions the very pivotal idea on which the modern world has oriented itself, the idea that 'human freedom is limitless'. Pope writes, 'We have forgotten...[that]man is not only freedom which he creates for himself...He is spirit and will, but also nature.' The text is fiercely critical of the idea of infinite and unlimited growth, which proves so attractive to economists, financiers and experts in technology. It returns to this theme repeatedly, insisting it is because of the 'technocratic paradigm' that

we fail to see the deepest roots of our present failures, which have to do with the directions, goals, meaning and social implications of technological growth'. In the light of such arguments, it can therefore be said, that we stand at such a juncture when it is essential to realize that the prevalent discourses of human freedom, may not be an effective tool in dealing with the crisis of global warming. What is required is a global approach which would consider 'Human' as a collective existing in close relation to the 'Non-human'. It has increasingly become evident that the word 'Globe' as we conceive of it in matters related to globalization has to be distinctly different from our idea of 'globe' when we use it in matters of global warming.

It would now be interesting to see how such a paradigm shift in our understanding of the 'human' finds its reflection in the literary imagination of our times. Amitav Ghosh in his book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* has pointed out that our modern culture has consciously kept all writing on climate change out of the literary mainstream by relegating it to the category of science fiction. He raises a very pertinent question: what is it in the nature of modernity that has led to this separation? He finds his answer in Bruno Latour's argument that the originary impulse of modernity is the project of 'partitioning or deepening the imaginary gulf between Nature and Culture.' The former comes to be relegated exclusively to the sciences and is regarded as being off limits to the latter. Ghosh also finds the new genre of science fiction called 'Climate Fiction' or 'Cli-Fi' inadequate in articulating the urgency of climate-crisis as most of these narratives are set as disaster stories set in distant and often unrecognizable future. He considers that problem lies with the modern novelistic tradition's radical centering on the individual psyche while the collective ----- 'men in aggregate'----- has receded both in the cultural and fictional imagination.

In this context I would like to analyze Ilija Trojanow's German novel *Eis Trau* translated into English as *The Lamentations of Zeno* by Philip Boehm. The novel is a welcome deviation in the genre of climate fiction: firstly, as the action is set in the recognizable present and secondly in its portrayal of how the prevalent discursive practices' are unsuccessful in developing our threat perception regarding climate change.

Ilija Trojanow's *The Lamentation of Zeno* takes the form of a notebook written by the protagonist, a retired Glaciologist Zeno Hintermeier while he works as an expedition lecturer on the Antarctic cruise ship MS Hansen. In the notebook, which also acts as a cathartic vessel for Zeno, he writes out his thoughts on and releases his anger towards the ignorant and passive attitudes of those around him regarding their destructive attitude towards the environment. Through the reflection on his part as a scientist and the description of his passionate relationship with the alpine glacier that ends in his nervous breakdown after it melts away due to global warming, Zeno critiques the ability of modern discourse to fully know, appreciate and understand natural phenomena and highlights the necessity of a personal and intimate interaction between the human and non-human to do so. Trojanow interestingly interrupts the first person narrative of Zeno at the end of every chapter with a stream-of-consciousness passage that incorporates a bricolage of maritime distress calls, lines from popular songs, some jokes, some sex and foreshadows of Zeno's desperate response to the futility of

Antarctic eco-tourism, leaving the readers with a sense of how such overload of information leads to a futile model of non-communication. In his recordings of his failed attempts at communicating the urgency and destructiveness of global warming to those around him---- his former students, his ex-wife, the passengers on the cruise ship and his Filipino lover Paulina---- the narrator recognizes that simply talking about global warming is not enough to awaken others' awareness and concern for its consequences. He realizes that, 'left to our own devices, we understand only violence directed against us: violence done to others remains incomprehensible, unheard, voiceless---nothing more than -----a rasping cough in a throat without speech, or at best a stutter'. In this realization of guilt, *The Lamentations of Zeno* doubts the very rightness of human civilization. In the context of climate change, Trojanow addresses what it means to be human or at least to be the cultured, technological, acquisitive, construction-minded human being whose entire frame of reference sets himself or herself apart from nature. The narrator considers all mere discussions on climate change as 'the blanket of rationalization we knit for ourselves --- which is billed day in and day out as the ultimate truth'; we are kept assured that everybody gives a lot and doesn't take much, we're all easy going and eco-friendly, let's not get bent out of shape, despite everything life's pretty bearable. ' But, when the real crisis takes place, as felt by Zeno when he finds his favorite glacier disappear, it becomes clear that 'our methods have failed greatly'. Zeno blames himself even more, aware of his own impotence against the forces of anthropogenic climate change. He considers, ' The realization...that you didn't do anything when you still could, when you still should have, that is hell. And there's no escape.' (152)

At the end of the novel, as an act of desperation Zeno decides to hijack the ship, at the very moment when a Christo -like installation artist Dan Quentin takes the passengers out to create his biggest SOS sign, providing them with a historic opportunity to play an active part in an work of art .Zeno finds in this his only opportunity to merge art with reality and turn a meaningless performance which was just a part of the tourist package into a palpable alarm call, an SOS, not only for the passengers in particular but for this indifferent world in general. Zeno finally jumps overboard, committing suicide and escaping further living out the nightmare he has already experienced. The nightmare of 'being human.'(157).

The final action of the narrator is perfectly in tune with the emphatic statement he makes at the beginning of the novel, that 'something has to happen' (7). It is through this self- sacrifice, he conveys his inability to communicate the urgency of the situation: the necessity of, what Dipesh Chakraborty terms as, 'ecological remapping' where human beings will not merely be identified through their national, religious or gender identities but as an inhabitant residing in an ecological space.

The significance of Turyanov's novel does not merely lie in its dystopic vision but in its realization of a lack of proper communicative process to articulate the consequences of global warming. We may not share Zeno's apocalyptic pessimism by the end of the novel but could probably make sense of what the narrator meant by the very first line of the novel. : ' There's no worse nightmare than no longer being able to save yourself by waking up'. And I seriously hope such an understanding will lead us to a different conception of what it is to be human in this fast deteriorating world around us.

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