

Exploring Eco-ability and Ecosomatic Paradigm in the Works We Measure the Earth by Our Bodies and No Looking Back

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Abstract

Disability Studies deals with the idea of a normative society where the disabled are marginalized and outcasted. It believes that the society is ableist in nature and the people are “temporarily able-bodied” (TAB). Ecocriticism on the other hand works on environmental justice and the binary of species and humans. This paper works on the intermingling of Disability Studies and Ecocriticism. It concerns itself with the notion of eco-ability and ecosomatic paradigm which affects the place pathology. “Ableism, sexism and environmental injustice are interconnected systems of exclusion and oppression that also depend on the other oppressive systems (racism, classism, religious intolerance, etc.) to support unequal treatment of people based on category. We, as a society construct these inequalities, they are not natural or inherent” – Valerie Ann Johnson. There is a common lingering point in eco-ability: the discrimination against both the disabled people and the environment; it seeks environmental justice as well as social justice. Anthony J. Nocella II writes: “Eco-ability combines the concepts of interdisciplinarity, inclusion and respect for difference within a community and this includes all life, sentient and non-sentient.” The label Different plays a vital role in ascribing eco-ability. It has seven D’s of stigmatization: demonic, deviant, delinquent, disabled, debtor, disorder and dissenter. Meanwhile, ecosomatics is a practice that combines ecological principles with somatic principles, or mind-body disciplines, to explore our connection to nature. Further, the idea of ecosomatic deals with the ‘place theory’ where the body acts as an agent as well as a vehicle.

Keywords: ecocriticism, ableism, eco-ability, discrimination, ecosomatic.

The idea of surviving and adapting in the post-apocalyptic physical environment is common to both Disability Studies and Ecocriticism. “Both speciesism and ableism are social

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constructions interwoven into society, promoting civilization, normalcy and intellectualism grounded in modernity, which arose out of the European Enlightenment.” Speciesism is the assumption of human superiority leading to the exploitation of animals whereas ableism is the discrimination of and social prejudice against people with disabilities based on the belief that ability is permanent and superior in nature. The disabled is always considered a threat to the society, a threat that must be controlled, disciplined and punished. There is also a linguistic barrier when we speak of the disabled body. They are demeaned, insulted and stigmatized, e.g. blind, deaf, lame, idiot, insane, crazy, dumb etc. in our everyday lives. In fact, the classic label dumb is historically applied to both human and non-human animals. “Dumb animals and plants are devoid of life of reason whereby to set themselves in motion; they are moved, as it were by another, by a kind of natural impulse, a sign of which they are naturally enslaved and accommodated to the use of others.” – St. Thomas Aquinas. The idea that a being cannot speak the dominant language (i.e. English) and does not fit into the dominant normative criteria (human, white, able-bodied, heterosexual male) makes them a set of people which can be used for labour. When China attacked the theocratic government of Tibet in order to establish the Chinese control, several high authority people mainly Dalai Lama were looked to be captured and executed (neutralized) which in turn forced them with the highlands of Tibet to the non-Tibet and non-Chinese lowlands, mostly to India and Nepal.

According to the ancient Tibetan prophecy “...when the iron bird flies and horses run on wheels, the People of Snows will be scattered like ants across the face of the Earth...” (Lama, 4). The People of Snows (here denoting the people of Tibet) in millions are forced to scatter across the lowlands due to this invasion, thus, leaving behind their adaptation skills of the highland ecology, their roots and culture derived from their environment and their homeland, “... our Gods are here in the mountains and rivers... we are tied to this land and this land is tied to us...” (Lama, 15). Apart from the cultural and material loss, the Tibetans who bravely escaped their homeland, they had to endure the gruesome journey through the mountains and rivers for weeks, mostly on their foot which was a Herculean task in terms of both psychologically and physiologically. A very large number of people who commenced their journey could not complete, meanwhile, several of them lost their body parts and their minds.

Pala (father) wasn’t able to complete the journey across the snowy mountains as “... toes are the darkest – purple and black, as if charred by fire – while the center of his foot is bruised yellow and red, covered with swollen blisters... the right foot is even worse...” he lost his ability to walk, became weaker with each passing day and considered himself a burden to his

family and an obstruction to the escape. The family halted their journey for six days to take care of Pala, whom they had to carry on their back afterwards due to his inability to walk anymore. Meanwhile Tenkayi, the younger of the two sisters, became restless along the journey affecting her mental health at a very young age. Her sister was concerned about her repetitive nightmares "... been feverish and having nightmares..." (Lama, 17) as the impact of the journey and multiple displacements throughout her life. She grew conscious of her own mental condition "...will we have break from our own mind..." (Lama, 23).

The belief system of the Tibetans had been very important to them, not only in terms of their identity and culture, but also for their survival in their ecosystem. The tough journey in the rough terrain broke the spirit of the family "... we have enough nightmares, enough aches and dark visions that flash and tease us ... but we are so far from the holy mountains and lakes at home..." (Lama, 23). The nature and ecosystem were more than resources to them; they were the Gods and source of their identity. Their knowledge system was closely knitted to the belief system which took consideration of the religious principles, importance of natural ecosystem, mental and physical health, which overall made their culture and survival related heavily to the nature. But their ecosystem had entirely transformed once they escaped Tibet, thus affecting the culture, belief system and economy of the escaping Tibetans once and all.

The Tibetans scattered and became refugees majorly in India and Nepal. Dalai Lama with his followers settled in Dharamsala, a high altitude and less populated city in the Himalayas where they were able to practice their own culture and religion. Although, the changed ecosystem did change the cultural and economic practices. Millions of people became refugees in a new place living in camps with the bare minimum resources, facing discrimination from the locals. The Tibetans were witnessing severe ecological degradation. The camps had no fresh water supply; quality of land and air was very degraded in contrast to Tibet. Cities and camps were densely populated. Since the refugees did not have land for themselves, they could not farm or domesticate animals as they used to. So, their income was dependent on physical labor and begging. But due to degraded ecology, the health of these refugees worsened, and they used to fall sick regularly. The diseased body was not able to labour physically, which means no money and no food.

Colonization had a huge impact on nature, it created a clear divide between the humans and nature and those closely related to nature – the primitive, the natives who were considered savage by the colonizers. During the industrial revolution, factories began expanding and the

idea of producers and consumers was decided. With colonialism, a system based on capitalism was created, they placed value for everything and everyone. E.g. – Whites were more valuable than people of colour. All of nature was viewed as a natural resource, a commodity and typically marked as property to be claimed and bought. The idea of private property and ownership clearly created a strong line between the haves and have-nots. The consumption of these mechanized products increased which ultimately led to the society being consumption-based in nature, “Consumption supports the engines of production because people work in order to buy and ideologically capitalism captures their desires and economic support”.

Furthermore, Edward Casey in his book, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a New Understanding of the Place World*, discusses the phenomenology of place. He dwells deep into the idea of body-place theory where the body is directly related to the environment, the body acts as an articulator as well a witness of being-in-place. When a body moves from one place to another, it experiences displacement and desolation which leads to notion of “place pathology”. The characters in the novel, *We Measure the Earth by Our Bodies*, experience the place pathology in various aspects of their journey, moving from one place to another, losing their identity and roots, finding a new place to settle in, to finally belong somewhere. Casey talks about the idea of embodiment (the representation of something that is tangible or in visible form) and emplacement (a structure in which something is placed), so the body is placed in a certain physical space which it is familiar to. In fact, Casey also discusses the process of “developing a sense of place” – the entanglement between the natural and cultural parameters of the place. So, when the Tibetans migrated, they collectively had a sense of place, an understanding of the environment, a common belief system. So, the natural aspects like the cold weather decided their cultural norm like food, which usually used to be tsampa, flour made from roasted barley, mostly eaten with butter tea, whereas India has a totally different natural as well as cultural difference, they had to survive the hot and humid weather and also the food habit of consuming dal and chawal, it was not convincing to them but somehow they adapted to the changing environmental condition and cultural norm. The displacement made their lives chaotic and miserable, as Casey highlights, “how transitions between places are often accompanied by feelings of desolation and displacement, as the embodied subject mourns the place she is leaving behind”. In fact, Francesco Loriggio mentions the “dialectic of what there is and what people believe or imagine there is”. What we “believe or imagine” is shaped and articulated by stories which ultimately helps us in building a collective environmental imagination.

On the other hand, when we speak of the same body-place theory, looking from a disabled perspective, we realize that attaining the same place pathology becomes difficult for the disabled person and at the same time the idea of space varies with changing bodies, so the body-place theory is not in a continuum, it rather gets disrupted due to its disability. In the book *No Looking Back*, Shivani Gupta describes her experience after a terrible road accident which led to her spinal injury and it completely changed her life, she was wheelchair-bound for her whole life. She lived in a different space before her accident, her home was a comfortable space and the outside world was a beautiful place – a place of learning, fun and adventure. After her accident, everything dismantled and the same outside world was not accepting towards her newer form of self, it was the moment of realization that the world was not as beautiful as she imagined, it was beautiful only for those who fitted well into the norms of the society. Furthermore, the social model of disability talks about this particular discrimination and claims that someone is not disabled but the society makes it so, a person can be born impaired but not disabled, a wheelchair-bound person can have any sort of impairment (cerebral palsy, spinal injury etc.) but the absence of ramp in the building makes him/her disabled, the society lacks accessibility, it cannot just throw off every responsibility to the disabled for existing, for being the way they are. In fact, Tregaskis says, “Disability could be outright eliminated if society was reorganized in such a manner that it accounted for the needs of every one of its members”. Peter Freund also talks about the “architectural paradigm” which could be molded according to the needs of the disabled people. He talks about the “deconstructing and reconstructing of the social organization”.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the place theory is very dynamic in nature, it intensifies the depth of ecosomatic paradigm as well as eco-ability. Whereas eco-ability is a very fresh area to explore as it is the future. Our environment and our bodies are intertwined in determining the space we will live in—will it be a healthy space? A healthy space for all bodies? A healthy space for all species? That remains the bigger question. In this paper, I have tried to give a glimpse of the complexities of migration. The idea of bringing forward both the works from different genres was to merge the different struggles of the writers and make it one. *No Looking Back* is autobiographical whereas *We Measure the Earth by Our Bodies* is semi-autobiographical in nature. Both share a common lingering point of being first-person narrative, it seems more realistic when said from a common perspective. It shares the common context of pain which is very personal to the writers, they also face crisis as well as lost identity in the mid-process of

struggling and finding their own self. Despite all struggle, trauma, chaos and crisis the characters develop a sense of new understanding of the space, environment, society and culture they live in.

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