

An Obligation to Sustain: An Eco Justice Reading of Stirling Davenport's "Masks"

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Abstract

Right from the time immemorial, the equation between the creations have been in equilibrium. The flora and the fauna have always adhered to the environment and its modules. It has always been the human race that has gone against the laws of nature thereby creating chaos beyond repair. The factor of time is a key for healing. The naturally occurring phenomena have adhered to time and healed with respect to it. Whereas the hazards and perils created by human beings have trespassed the limitations of time required to heal. The so-called scientific developments have catered only to the selfish luxuries of human kind and thereby withholding the very essence and necessity of life. The avarice and greed of the wealthy has altered the naturally occurring seasonal change and has robbed the joy of spring, the nourishments of shower, magic of summer and the miracles of winter. This paper aims to establish eco justice, to maintain and sustain naturally occurring climatic changes while reading Stirling Davenport's "Masks" through the lens of Eco-Justice.

Keywords: Eco Justice, Climate Change, Man-Made Disasters, Environment, Avarice.

Introduction

Climate, environment and justice are never spoken in the same breath. When everything in the face of the earth and the depth of the sea has aligned itself with the environment, human beings have always failed to adhere to these rules of nature. In the past few decades alone, the avarice of human beings has altered nature and its phenomena. The need for a sophisticated lifestyle of the rich has robbed the daily livelihood of the poor, thereby failing to advocate Eco-justice and pushing them to the margins.

Stirling Davenport, a renowned novelist, short story writer and a painter, in her short story titled "Masks" introduces the readers to the Nation of China in the 2040's through the Chinese American protagonist Julie. The world of the future appears no good compared to the one in the present; there are extreme and harsh weather conditions, limited water and measured units of oxygen. Dust has covered the face of the earth and people wear masks all the time. Everything is synthesised in labs and people are allotted specific dates to shower, until which they use wet wipes and tissues. In the end, the protagonist goes back to the mountains of Tibet to find and channelize the potable waters from the springs. Davenport paints the

picture of the world beyond repair; where, there is not even fresh and potable water. She makes it clear, the actions of men have resulted in the sorry state of earth and it is always the rich that could afford the basic needs while the marginalised are always neglected and robbed of the basic needs for survival.

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Davenport, in her short story explains the negligence of the human beings to an extent that the affluent class, amidst the country being in a dystopian state, care nothing more than their need for a luxurious living. When the city had already banned the usage of cars due to the high emission of smoke which led to the city being enveloped by a blanket of smog, the rich still used them. "I just follow the car lights. There are still too many, even with the ban. The laws change, but corruption doesn't." (Davenport et al. 108). In the period of Artificial intelligence where machines have overtaken and replaced human beings, the latter still thinks to be superior above all the creations. Davenport places the characters in a typical anthropocentric scenario. The plot and the story aligns itself with the western anglicised and anthropocentric dominant ideology that claims that human beings have been given 'dominion' over the creations and it is at their disposal to exploit.

In the short story "Masks", Julie, the protagonist, a University Fellow, and her Professor visit the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Building. Julie is given fresh water instead of the one synthesised in the labs. She is surprised and guesses it had to be exported. "University students didn't get much in the way of rations. I almost choked: it was real water. Clean untreated water. It tasted like a spring where my father had taken me after Mom died." (Davenport et al. 112). She is right in her guessing as the water was specially transported from Tibet. The ones in power and authority were given fresh water, imported from a foreign country while the ordinary were forced to drink treated and synthesised water.

When Julie and the Professor are offered to build a greenhouse in the hills of Tibet by the External Minister, the professor realises that the common man is again neglected and it is for the ones in power. He questions, "Who's going to enjoy this paradise you're creating? Is it just for you and a few friends? What about the great Chinese populace, working and sweating in the ever-crowded cities?" (Davenport et al. 122) to which there is no satisfying answer.

Lauren Nauheimer defines Eco-justice as "the understanding that local and global ecosystems are essential to all life; challenging the deep cultural assumptions underlying modern thinking that undermine those systems; and the recognition of the need to restore the cultural and environmental commons" (Nauheimer). Largely, environmental concerns and that of climate change are considered the luxury of the developed countries. But in reality, whenever planet earth was endangered, it has been the marginalised that have fought for sustaining the environment and thereby maintaining and sustaining climate change as nature had ordained. Be it the native indigenous people from North and South America or the Aborigines from New Zealand and Australia, it has always been the people from the margins that have fought for the safekeeping of nature and environment. The Chipko movement can be just one of the greatest examples from India.

These marginalised and poor people have been denied justice socially, economically as well as ecologically too. For whenever one speaks of justice, the idea of providing equal opportunity or equal quotient of natural elements like land, water and clean air hardly strikes as an idea and in recent days, it has become a commodity of the rich and affluent. Access to potable water and cultivable land has become directly proportional to how much one can afford it. It has come to a state that the rich class, being a minority in the population control major shares with respect to land and potable water while the middle class and the poor who roughly add up to ninety per cent of the population are denied these luxuries.

The poor dwell in areas where their livelihood is entirely dependent on the ecosystem -both land and sea but have understood the two dimensions of commitment: to renewal of the society and the renewal of earth. Despite their conditions, they have kept it intact whereas the rich target the ecological areas for expanding their industrial plants in the name of development and comfort. It is a bitter truth to swallow that the poor are squeezed together and are forced to live under closed secluded areas and their dwellings are destroyed for the expansion and betterment of the affluent and for their trivial pet projects that are often built at the cost of the livelihood of the poor and the lives of plants and animals.

Davenport, in her short story, stresses on the fact that for one's own luxury, the human kind has devastated the environment. The rich and the affluent keep building labs and leisure houses by logging down forest, thereby denying ecological means of survival and justice; that is equal quotient of the natural elements at least in terms of clean air and potable water. Rev. KC Abraham, in his essay "A Theological Response to the Ecological Crisis" states

Justice is actualized in just relationships. Unequal partnerships and patterns of domination are unjust. It is obvious that today's human relationship with nature is not that of equal partners, but of domination and exploitations. Unjust treatment of the planet by humans is one of the principal causes of the ecological crisis. (Abraham 97)

The pertaining question here being- where is eco-justice? Does the one who sows reap its benefits? Can we improve the climatic change which has gone beyond repair as a result of human avarice? Can we at-least sustain what is left? These questions will definitely keep haunting till humans exist.

Conclusion

The devastated condition of the planet earth is a result of the avarice driven modern industrial growth. Although there are technological means to control and protect the environment, no one cares enough about it. This so-called development and improvement in the standard of living by neglecting nature and environment is a result of a consumerist economy that pays no heed to the working class and the downtrodden. As a result, luxury triumphs over necessity, thereby creating an imbalance between various sectors and exploits the rural and natural environment and their dependents. Whenever it comes to equality and justice, people usually associate it with social and political aspects while completely neglecting the ecological aspect. Are the marginalised allowed to live their life? Are they allowed to dictate terms? Are they really given an equal space to introduce, implement, protect and sustain nature that they take care of? Are they in a position to control and regulate climatic changes? The answer is disheartening. The United Nations claimed that the recent floods and extreme heat waves in the European countries are all the results of climate change, which again is a result of the denial of eco justice.

In the name of expansion of cities, the green covers are completely wiped out just to make the lives of the rich even more comfortable. The marginalised are driven out of their livelihood and most often their colonies serve as the dumpsite for the city corporations. The rich keep destroying while the poor endure suffering. Things can change if one strives for equality in the aspect of ecology too. Isn't it fair that the one who preserves and upholds the ecology to sustain the climate is given a fair space and opportunity to live? Isn't it fair that the one destroying nature and altering the environment is held accountable and forced to mend ways? It is definitely true that it is too late to restore the nature ordained climate change but we as humans can definitely appeal to the masses to oblige in sustaining climate change. For it is the duty of every individual.

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