

# Unearthing Climate Colonialism in the Anthropocene: A Study of Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner’s “Dear Matafele Peinam”

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**Priyanka Bera**

*Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English  
Pondicherry University, Puducherry, India*

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9597-8397>

### Abstract

*Anthropogenic planetary crisis contributes to climate dislocations, compelling millions to leave their ‘disappearing’ habitats. The impact of climate change will undoubtedly affect all countries, but its repercussions will be distributed disproportionately among regions, age groups and genders. The discourse on climate colonialism addresses the intricate relationship between the profit-driven mindset of the Global North, which prioritises financial gains over environmental concerns, and its adverse impact on the Global South. Marshallese poet and activist, Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, addresses this issue in her poem “Dear Matafele Peinam” (2014) by taking an intersectional approach. This paper explores how climate-induced displacement is reflected in literature, with a focus on Marshall Islands’ submergence due to rising sea levels. Secondly, by investigating how marginalised artists combat climate crisis culturally, the paper seeks to highlight the multiplying existential threat due to the colonial profitable ideologies of greed and desire over nature’s intrinsic value.*

**Keywords:** Climate Colonialism, Identity, Anthropocene and Displacement.

### Introduction

Tracing back to the planet’s history, Industrial Revolution, fossil fuel consumption, and greenhouse gas emissions have exponentially led the geological composition of Earth to such an extent that climate disasters can no longer be considered to be a natural phenomenon but rather a consequence of human action. Such magnitude transformation of climate is the resultant impression of human activity, which, to put in the words of geologist Paul Crutzen, the ‘Anthropocene,’ a geological epoch which will stay/remain; he states, “Unless there is a global catastrophe- a meteorite impact, a world war or a pandemic-mankind will remain a major environmental force for many a millennia” (23). This Anthropogenic climate crisis is forcing millions of people to displace worldwide. On one hand, prolonged and slow-onset of disasters like sea level rising, draught, ocean acidification are steadily and unnoticeably killing the world’s most vulnerable people (Nixon), on the other, natural disasters such as tsunamis, earthquakes, flash floods, and hurricanes are displacing millions from their own ‘disappearing’ habitats, leaving no time to take prevention. Although climate change is not directly interconnected

to colonialism or forced displacement, it is an undeniable fact that under the veil of profit minded Western development, climate metamorphoses is inadvertently causing forced displacement. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre states that over 318 million people since 2008 and 30.7 million in 2020 have been forcibly displaced and ninety per cent of them are from the small island states and poor developing countries of the Global South. The language of colonialism within the context of climate change invokes acts of domination, control, and violence against the indigenous people, their societies, traditions, and cultures.

Published in 2014, “Dear Matafele Peinam” by the Marshallese Poet and Activist Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, is a cautionary poem against climate change. Addressed to her six-month-old daughter, the poem is a futuristic imagination of her homeland—Marshall Island’s submergence due to the rising sea tides. The poem intertwines the present threat of the disappearance of thousands of islands with the deeply rooted distortions in climate justice and discourse perpetuated by racist and capitalist influences. While emitting the least harmful greenhouse gases, individuals residing in economically disadvantaged communities in the developing world are more prone to experiencing severe impacts of climate change. Since the indigenous people are the most vulnerable to climate-induced displacement, the poet seeks to join the ongoing conversation of how environmental humanities in general- and indigenous literature in particular- can combat climate change, illuminating the connection between colonial ideologies, ecological vulnerability, and traumatic identity.

### “Sinking Islands” and Displacement

U.S. Geological Survey predicted that The Marshall Islands, a central Pacific island nation made up of twenty nine low-lying coral reefs, will submerge by 2035, forcing thousands of climate-vulnerable communities to become “climate refugees” (Barnett; Farbotko and Lazrus). Even if climate change cannot uphold the sole authority in displacement, climate-induced disasters are responsible for property damage, agricultural disruptions, lack of access to water, leaving forced relocation as the only viable survival option. World Bank Group has estimated that by 2050, approximately 140 million people in the world’s most vulnerable developing regions, including South Asia, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa, may be displaced due to the effects of climate change. Against the climate-vulnerable geographical background, the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) has forcibly dislocated their “disappearing” lands, in due course deteriorating their core aspects of self-determination, resilience, and adaptation possibilities against anthropogenic metamorphoses. Despite these forced displacements, above one-fifth of Marshall Island’s inhabitants have become “climate refugees,” a debatable term not internationally recognised by The Geneva Convention in 1951. Because of this, these unrecognised “climate refugees” are forced to lose their land, cultural past, claim to sovereignty, and adaptation possibilities, becoming utterly dependent upon other nations for survival.

Starting it off as a bedtime story to her daughter, Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner first depicts the exceptional beauty of her homeland through the “lagoon” that is symbolised as a “lucid, sleepy lagoon lounging against the sunrise” (Jetnil- Kijiner 9). However, soon after the positive description of the “lagoon,” the very following lines of the poem, “men say that one day/ that lagoon will devour you” (Jetnil-Kijiner 10-11), can be interpreted as the negative facet of the world, delineating the destruction that the “lucid” and “sleepy” “lagoon” will eventually cause. Just as forceful displacements threaten the Republic of the Marshall Islands of resultant consequences on their sense of place, identity, and belongingness, the symbol of “lagoon” bears the equivalent outcome by eventually devouring her daughter and homeland and rendering her “rootless,” “with only a passport to call home” (Jetnil- Kijiner 19). Despite showcasing the failure of policymakers and global powers dealing with climate change, the poet echoes the sentiments of a warrior by envisioning a future where “no

one's moving/ no one's losing/ their homeland/ no one's gonna become/ a climate change refugee” (Jetnil- Kijiner 31-35).

### **Colonial Roots of Climate Crisis**

Every independent nation bears its history of colonial oppression, violence, and wound. The Republic of the Marshall Islands is no exception, carrying centuries-old colonial and imperial burdens of false ideology and violence, both material and epistemological. Largely due to their colonial history, including nuclear tests, dwelling policies, dispossession, and forced relocation, these island nations are more prone to climate hazards with less adaptive capacity. “The disproportionate burden of climate catastrophe, rooted in the Eurocentric modernity and high- consumption lifestyle, is falling formerly on the marginalised and ‘once’ colonised communities, affecting “multiple forms of inequality (race, class, gender, sexuality, age, nationality, citizenship, ability, species, etc)” (Pellow, *What is Critical Environmental Justice?* 150).” Moreover, the unequal exchange of environmental disasters doesn't impact the underdeveloped and developing countries on a smaller scale, rather the frequency of climate-induced natural hazards is exacerbating to an extent that the planet's geological composition has started to alter, making mankind to shift from Holocene to Anthropocene. “Moreover, the Anthropocene's origin dates back to the Great Acceleration with the Eurocentric logic and colonial constructions of power and overconsumption where the Nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers and colonialists depicted climate as an “exploitable hermeneutic resource” (Livingstone 93). Historicist Dipesh Chakrabarty refers it as “historicism”—the presumption that the histories of all societies are “variations on a master narrative that could be called ‘the history of Europe’” (27). On top of that, after almost three decades of debates, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in its 2022 report, has finally acknowledged “colonialism” as being a significant drive of climate- imposed- vulnerability due to the “historical and ongoing patterns of inequity such as colonialism, and governance” (IPCC 12).”

Asian Environmental Activist, Kathy Jetnil Kijiner is aware of her homeland's climatic colonialism, which “is being colonised and forced to alter, modify, and- as catastrophe indicates- it is rebelling and resisting the assault upon it” (Martinez 79). Having witnessed and being inspired by various activist movements, her poem “Dear Matafele Peinam” brings to the fore the trauma of racism, colonialism, forced migration, the repercussion of American nuclear testing, and the looming threat of climate change. Despite gaining Independence, the Republic of the Marshall Islands is still colonised through globalisation, industries and climate catastrophe, displacing the indigenous marginalised people, to put in words of the poet, even “your daughter/ and your granddaughter, too” (Jetnil- Kijiner 16-17), “rootless” (Jetnil- Kijiner 18). However, the culturally deep-rooted climate colonialism not merely reproduces the history of imperial hauntings through climate change but also evokes an emotional atmosphere of rage, frustration, grief, resolve, and a desire to fight back, which the poet aptly encompasses through these oceanic metaphoric lines- “no greedy whale of company sharking through political seas/ no backwater bullying of business with broken morals/ no blindfolded bureaucracies gonna push/ this mother ocean over/ the edge” (Jetnil- Kijiner 25-29).

### **Situating Indigenous Resistance and Resilience**

The Anthropogenic disruptions in the ecosphere are engraved in the history of Eurocentric hegemony, racial capitalism, and unsustainable production and consumption patterns. The legacy of colonial violence interconnects environmental degradation and the traditional culture and lifestyle of the indigenous communities that acutely depend on the threatened ecosystem for their livelihood. Hierarchical power relations and the colonial matrix of over-consumption destroy the intrinsic value of the environment, affecting their socioeconomic existence and cultural identity.

Besides, over many millennia, indigenous people share an intimate cultural relationship with the environment and have learned to live in a sustainable balance with Nature. Still, they are among the first to experience the worst consequences of climate catastrophe. The IPCC recognised these indigenous people as socially, culturally, politically, and institutionally marginalised and highly vulnerable to climate crises. As climate metamorphoses is interconnected with “key social dimension of vulnerability, social justice, and equity,” it poses a multiplying menace to the world’s poor, whose livelihood, rights, cultures, and identities are already threatened by socioeconomic, cultural, and political issues.

Despite belonging to different cultures, customs, and languages, most of the indigenous people share one aspect in common—they have not ceased to resist against settler colonialists’ notion of normalised violence that removes them from their habitat and erases their cultural history. For centuries, the indigenous communities’ long-standing history of resistance and protest against the settler colonialists’ systematic violence against Nature speaks not only of their historical trauma and fear of rootlessness but also highlights their Nature-centric attitude. As Frederick Douglass states, “power concedes nothing without a demand” (1857), the acts of resistance and protest are usually embedded with violence; however, successfully changing the world for the better. The indigenous communities in the Marshall Islands are acutely aware of their homeland’s vulnerability against the rising sea-level, the legacy of colonialism and its impact, yet they don’t agree to consider displacing their homeland as the preferable option. The Marshallese poet echoes the same sentiment in the following lines, “we’ve never wanted to leave/ and that we/ are nothing without our islands” (Jetnil- Kijiner 96-98).

However, the very notion of resistance often meets with Indigenous resilience, an inherited long legacy of fighting-back that not merely helps to revive their indigenous identity but also heals the planet as because “without an adequate understanding of how environmental inequalities are produced, our theories about why and how people suffer from them remain inadequate”. (Pellow, “Environmental Inequality Formation: Toward a Theory of Environmental Injustice” 562).” Since the Indigenous people possess ancient, ecological knowledge, their resilience generally relies on organic, sustainable strategies to eradicate the root cause of violence against the climate. “Their wisdom and techniques have been passed down for generations through oral storytelling and personal narratives of “recounting grief, worry, and rage in a combination of emotions that also included determination, empathy, and desire for something better” (Sultana 3).” In the present day, the Marshall Islands is considered to be one of the most vulnerable nations that can vanish within decades. Yet, the Indigenous knowledge and intimate interconnectedness with “lands,” accelerate their resilient and adaptive capacity, restoring their ancient cultural practices, values, sense of belongingness, and indigenous identity. One of the most powerful imageries in the poem, the “hands” metaphor aptly encapsulates the legacy of Indigenous resistance and resilience, “hands reaching out/ fists raising up/ banners unfurling” (Jetnil- Kijiner 62-64) or, through “and there are thousands out on the street / marching with signs/ hand in hand/ chanting for change NOW” (Jetnil-Kijiner 79-82).

Based on the complex dynamics between climate colonialism and forced displacement, the paper demonstrates how colonial and racial method of control and violence pose an existential threat to the culture, ethnicity, and identity of indigenous communities across the Global South, as forced displacement reduces the capacity of self-determination and adaptation. While climate change’s disproportionate impact heavily falls on the post-colonial coastal and Small Island Developing States (SIDS), much like the low-lying Marshall Islands, the question of what is at stake always pops up in the discussion of climate-induced displacement. And this discussion can’t be simplified through the scientific explanation solely; the engagement of literature is requisite in this conversation. Environmental activist Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner’s poem “Dear Matafele Peinam” is a manifestation of Marshall Island’s long history of colonialism, trauma, racism and forced

displacement. As the the poem advances, the readers can feel the heaviness of climate colonialism, the resultant wounds, resistance and resilience to tackle this Anthropogenic metamorphoses. Therefore, it can be argued that speaking about climate colonialism is essential in confronting fossil-fuel capitalism and over-consumption. In the words of Kingsley Shacklebolt, “Every human life is worth the same and worth saving” (Rowling 540). It’s crucial to listen to Indigenous voices and their stories, which often include suffering, violence, loss of livelihood, and the struggle for self-determination.

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