
**Narratives of Scarcity: Comparative Ecocriticism in Paolo Bacigalupi's
The Tamarisk Hunter and *The Calorie Man***

Nayanjyoti Kalita

Research Scholar, Department of English ,Rabindranath Tagore University, Hojai, Assam

Postal Address: Vill & PO: Gosaigaon, Pin: 782446, District: Hojai, Assam

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative analysis of Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Tamarisk Hunter* and *The Calorie Man*. It claims that these tales are not simply ones concerning the depletion of resources, but rather are complex literary exercises in a future in which market logic will entirely absorb environmental and ethical systems. The analysis illustrates that Bacigalupi employs biopunk genre to satirize the commodification of life as such. In *The Tamarisk Hunter*, water shortage in the American Southwest is turned into a weapon, and conservation has become a predatory work. In *The Calorie Man*, genetic patents impose post-petroleum food scarcity, which reduces the basic code of life to a company property. Through these comparisons of these stories, this paper has been able to bring out a common vision of a world where survival has been re-defined as a brutal economic transaction. The heroes, a water scout and a genetic trader, are the new types of precarious labour, as they are moving through the systems which are created to exploit scarcity instead of mitigating it. Finally, it can be stated that Bacigalupi has made a significant contribution to literature by offering a grimly plausible extrapolation of the existing tendencies, a dark reflection of the social and ethical atrocities of anthropocentric capitalism in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Environmental, biopunk, economic transaction, literature, Anthropocene.

Introduction

Modern scholarship of the environment has learned to appreciate the complex dialectic of ecological crisis and legalized economic frameworks. Rather than simply reporting on episodes of resource depletion, modern authors ask questions about the more subtle mechanisms of control that underlie environmental narratives. In this regard the biopunk subgenre, a fantastic offshoot of science fiction, is an exceptionally appropriate

vehicle for such inquiry. Its speculative architecture allows writers to extrapolate prevailing socio- economic trends into dystopian, but plausible, futures. Paolo Bacigalupi, as a key figure in the movement, presents worlds where the ecological catastrophes are not passive background elements but active, market-driven ones. His short stories, *The Tamarisk Hunter* and *The Calorie Man*, are a good example of this criticism in a small, sharp sound. They serve less as allegorical cautionary tales about the exhaustion of natural resources, and more as sophisticated literary analyses about a reality in which market logic has subsumed both environmental and moral concerns. This paper applies the lens of comparative ecological criticism and argues that Bacigalupi provides a consistent and disturbing vision of the Anthropocene as a landscape in which biological life itself becomes the definitive frontier of capital.

Bacigalupi relies on biopunk's tropes to create a sharp satire on the commodification of life. This narrative strategy, sensitive to the implications of biotechnology in the hands of corporations, offers up a rigorous framework for considering the nexus of biology, capital and governance. In *The tamarisk hunter*, acute water shortages in the American Southwest are reconverted from a simple environmental condition into an instrument of statecraft and economic stratification. Conservation here is made to become a predatory labour that feeds an economy that relies on the perpetuity of the same ailment it is trying to eliminate. Similarly, *The Calorie Man* offers a vision of a post-petroleum world of food scarcity where genetic patents are owned by agribusiness corporations that has reduced the essentialness of life to a proprietary commodity. In both tales, Bacigalupi makes clear a central transformation: where scarcity was once a crisis swallowing up to be overcome, it became a market opportunity to be controlled and for its profits to be extracted.

Comparing these two stories side-by-side reveals the thematic heart of the two: how the reconfiguration of survival into rigid economic exchange. The protagonists, a water scout and a dealer in genetic material, represent new instances of precarious labour produced in depletions generated by engineering. They're not heroic figures struggling against an indifferent natural world; instead, they're participants going through systems carefully designed to exploit deficit as opposed to ameliorate it. Their individual struggles bring to light the biopolitical management of life in the Anthropocene, in which access to the basic necessities of life - water and food - are mediated through market mechanisms entirely.

Ultimately, this paper argues that Bacigalupi's great contribution to ecocritical literature is in his terrifying, but plausible extrapolation upon the present course of history. His work is a dark reflection of the social and ethical abominations inherent in anthropocentric capitalism, and portrays a future where the environment is both degraded and completely financialised, and where life is commodified into an object that can be bought, sold, and weaponised.

Methodology

In the current work, the paper uses a comparative ecocritical approach to question the discourse of scarcity in Paolo Bacigalupi in the stories *The Tamarisk Hunter* and *The Calorie Man*. Ecocriticism acts as a main prism as it allows us to engage in a strict analysis of the interaction of literature and the physical space. However, this question leads beyond a standard ecocritical reading, which may limit itself to the superficial descriptions of nature, but instead explores how the crises of environmental problems are engineered across the books. Comparing the two narratives, it will strive to find out the trends and differences in the critique Bacigalupi penned, thus creating a more powerful and more refined argument about his overall vision.

The methodological design is developed upon intensive close-reading of the two short stories, paying focus to three analytical categories which are closely related to each other. To start with, it follows the notion of commodification, in particular, taking a closer look at how the most basic biological needs, like water or genetic material, are being turned into an individual property and sold on speculative markets. Second, the paper questions the working methods, challenging the political and economic frameworks of each story that impose this commodification, such as water rights laws and genetic patent systems. Lastly, it considers the figure of the protagonist as a new mode of work in this form of systems. Through a comparison of Lolo, the tamarisk hunter, and the calorie man, Lalji, it looks at how people are forced to find their way and survive in an economy that thrives because of the scarcities they are supposed to solve. The systematic comparison of the ways these two narratives create their various worlds, the paper attempts to highlight the consistent and chilling critique that Bacigalupi is making against a future in which market logic becomes the only determiner of ecological and human survival.

Theoretical Framework

A combination of theoretical approaches directs the comparative analysis suggested in the methodology section. This schema is not a simple collection of ideas but rather a prism that all of the theories shed some light on a specific aspect of the stories, thereby leading to the ultimate interpretation of the critique by Bacigalupi. The framework consists of three main pillars, which are second-wave ecocriticism, the theory of biopolitics, and critique of neoliberal commodification.

Second-Wave Ecocriticism: Past the Wilderness

The theoretical prism to be used in this research is prompted by ecocriticism, which is a discipline characterized by Cheryl Glotfelty as the linkage between literature and the physical surrounding. This paper, however, draws a particular ecocritical approach, a second-wave approach, beyond the initial emphasis on wilderness writing and nature conservation. Other advocates like Lawrence Buell and Ursula, K. Heise, have turned the emphasis to the

urban, technological, and natural systems relationship to environment in a comprehensive manner. This is a viewpoint that is absolutely critical in the analysis of the work of Bacigalupi because his landscapes are not picturesque but highly engineered and politicised areas. This theoretical position is the direct cause of the emphasis on the methodology in terms of engineered and economised environments. It allows us to think of the dry Colorado River basin, and the patented sequences of genes, not as passive settings but as active, manufactured actors in the story, which is indicative of a world where there is no nature beyond the control of human (and corporate) manipulations.

Biopolitics: The Power over Life

In order to understand the particular type of power that governs these engineered spaces, this paper resorts to biopolitics, which refers mostly to Michel Foucault. Foucault noticed that there was a historical change of a sovereign power who is able to take life or even allow people to live to a biopower which aims to promote life or even prohibit it up to death. This is the authority to govern, optimise, and control the lives of people- the health, hygiene and procreation of the people. This framework is operationalised directly in the second analytical category of the methodology, the mechanism of control. In the stories of Bacigalupi, corporate bodies have gained the status of the major biopolitical agents. In both *The Tamarisk Hunter* and *The Calorie Man*, the water-rights regime and the genetic patent laws are not the laws per se, but rather biopolitical tools that dictate which types of life are allowed to thrive and the ones that are relegated to scarcity. This conceptual prism gives the language to explain how even life, at the scale of water and energy consumption, is transformed into the focus of the political and economic strategy.

Neoliberal Commodification: Enclosing the Commons

The logic of neoliberal capitalism that runs behind this biopolitical power is an engine that is studied by the neoliberal theorists like David Harvey and Naomi Klein. One of the ideas introduced by Harvey is the process of accumulation by dispossession that refers to how capital, in its neoliberal form, is re-creating new markets through privatising and commodifying public assets and common resources - a water system and intellectual property, to name only two. This theory is the immediate foundation of the first category of methodology analysis, which is named: commodification. It is a literary dramatization of this process by Bacigalupi. He portrays a world where the biological necessities of life are the last boundaries of enclosure. Scarcity is not something that is going to be solved but it will be run to make a profit. This reasoning lowers down all value to exchange-value, which is a procedure that the methodology traces through analysis of the figure of the protagonist. The human face of this complete commodification is presented by characters like Lolo and Lalji; they are not ordinary workers but rather precarious actors which exist within the framework in which their lives have become a process of survival.

Synthetically, these three components model provides an analytic model that is consistent and effective. Second-wave ecocriticism enables us to view the environment as a politicised structure; biopolitics uncovers the processes of power which governs life within the environment; and the critique of neoliberalism uncovers the economic rationale behind the whole system. Using this combined approach, the comparative approach can clearly show how Bacigalupi stories present a self-consistent and catastrophic vision of the future where the market eventually takes the power of life and death to dominate.

Findings and Discussion

On the dust-choked canyons of Bacigalupi's future American Southwest and on the pathogen-laden rivers of his post-petroleum Mississippi, the massive change has occurred. It is a change that goes beyond the scarcity of resources into something more disturbing of life itself in which the very reason of the market has redefined life. Applying an ecocritical, biopolitical, and neoliberal lens to these stories together, one can see a frightening trend. These are not mere stories about trying to survive in a broken world; but how it is possible to survive in a world that has been carefully broken in certain ways to make profits. Calculation, control and commerce turn the environment, the body and the very code of life into places of calculation, control and trade, compelling a new precarious existence of those who now inhabit the rubble of a richer past. This part will show how Bacigalupi combines all these elements in the way his dystopias are not fantasy, but are, however, frightening, logical extensions of the present.

The Engineered Environment: Ecology to Economic System

An ecocritical point of view of the second wave immediately shows that the landscapes in these tales are not natural in any way. They are, rather, extremely politicised artefacts. The environmental imagination has to deal with a world where the natural is more and more a human creation, where the landscape is more and more manufactured, a product of the human imagination (Buell 23). This idea is clearly brought to life in *The Tamarisk Hunter*. The desert is not an inanimate but an active, controlled environment. The main rivalry is between a bureaucratic creation, the Colorado River Compact. Such a regime of law has removed a life river and turned it into a sequence of gallons to be counted, setting up a value chain of preference and access. Lolo, the main character, lives in the fissures of this system and his inner monologue shows how ridiculous it is:

According to their accounting, "The problem was that 4.4 million acre-feet of water were supposed to go down the river to California. There was water; they just couldn't touch it." (Bacigalupi 134)

It is a potent concept of this accounting. It means the total transfer of the hydrological cycle into an economic account where Ursula K. Heise in her book *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* may call the deterritorialization of

nature, where local ecologies are restructured as a result of global economic, legal abstractions (Heise 55). The actual water is relegated to legal and monetary expression of water. The resulting artificial shortage is then armed using the intruding tamarisk. The plant is a living organism which is registered as the legal antagonist into the economy, and it is worth the entire sector of elimination. Lolo is labouring under the assumption of the existence of the plant; the system needs the problem in order to perpetuate the solution. Instead, the environment is not victimized but is a non-innocent partner in its own financialization, which is a marked contrast to the first-wave ecocriticism with its emphasis on untouched wilderness.

This is the theme of biological engineering in pursuit of economic control and it is purest in *The Calorie Man*. In this case, the whole world food web has been systematically reconfigured into a closed system, which is proprietary. These agribusiness giants did not patent seeds, they have patented fertility using Genetic Use Restriction Technologies (GURTs). This produces what we would call a post-ecological world, in which a technosystem that is managed by corporations replaces natural processes. Lalji, the main character, being a trafficker in outdated genetics, knows how brilliant and horrifying this model is. This is the final artificial environment. Scarcity is neither a soil nor climatic condition but an inherent quality that has been pre-programmed in the genome. The inherent life, death and birth cycle that constitutes the basic cycle of agriculture has been suspended and has been substituted by the linear, transactional model. The person needs to go back to the corporation, season after season, not because he wants to but because he needs to on biological grounds. This is because the market logic has completely swallowed the environment in a way that it has become unable to operate outside of the market logic. This is a similar concern of Buell regarding the interpenetration of the biological and the political (Buell 45), but Bacigalupi goes a step further, to the interpenetration of the biological and the corporate.

Bio power and the corporate control of life

When applied to constructed environments, a new type of sovereignty appears whereby Michel Foucault defined it as biopower, the ability to either facilitate life or not up to the extent of death (Foucault 138). In the stories under discussion, corporate actors have taken this power uncontested, and since they do not act on behalf of the common interest, but to ensure their profit margin, they control biological life. In *The Tamarisk Hunter*, biopolitical people are a hybrid of state and capital, who have water rights as their tool. The system does not only act as a disproportionate distributor of water, but a determiner of which communities, and in turn, which life is recognized as viable. The fragile life of Lolo is therefore a day to day bargaining with this biopower. The discovery of a huge, corrupt federal water project is one of the revelations of his deepest biopolitical truth:

It was a federal water project. A big one. "Calies may call them water ticks, but fuck them.

If it

weren't for people like him and Annie, they'd dry up and blow away the same as everyone else. And if Lolo moves a little bit of tamarisk around, well, the Calies deserve it, considering what they've done to everyone else." (Bacigalupi 139)

This disclosure re-contextualizes the whole story. The tamarisk as a species is not an invasive one, but rather the biopolitical order that uses the very concept of the tamarisk to hide its own parasitic mining. It is not the federal government that conserves a common resource; rather, it actively disallows the inland populations and actively fosters life among other people, evading in collaboration with the coastal metropolises. Here Foucault's idea of a power that has a positive effect on life by controlling it (Foucault 136) is twisted; the so-called positive effect is imparted upon a chosen group of people, whereas others are depriving of their possessions in a systematic way. The last act of sabotaging the pipeline is a desperate, biopolitical counter-strike - an effort to regain a level of control over the circumstances of his own life, and an anarchic, raw reaction to a system which has failed to express its biopolitical responsibility to him.

The Calorie Man provides an even more brutal picture of corporate biopower without any more pretence to the well-being of the population. The law is not a social contract but a purpose of property over biological necessity. The framework proposed by Foucault, which was originally state-focused, is, therefore, revised in the spirit of the neoliberal era; the sovereignty has been privatized.

The Human Cost: Survival in the Precarious Economy

Those people who cross through such systems of artificial scarcity and bio-political regulation are the embodiment of the end stage of neoliberal commodification; the subject of personal survival is constantly exchanged. These protagonists are the living embodiment of such a concept as accumulation by dispossession developed by David Harvey, which is the process of forming new markets in the capitalist system based on the privatization and commodification of public or common goods (Harvey 74). They form the human rubbish of this cruel mechanism.

Even the profession that Lolo does is a result of the commodified market in water. He is a water scout, yet his success only refers to a system failure. His work is inherently self-destructive and risky, an academic fantasy of what anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing calls precarity, which is being exposed to continual destabilization with no future of stabilization (Tsing 20). His work makes no long-term community wealth, no infrastructure and no future. It only allows him to buy his perpetual existence in the process temporarily in the system that requires his occupation.

Lalji, however, is working on a more abstract plan of this commodified world. He is a predator of biological information, a trade in relics of the plague, the genetic lines which have become obsolete and were tried to be erased by the corporate system. He is painfully

conscious of his own hypocritical status in the cycle of dispossession in which he is involved in Harvey, trading in leftovers:

“He closed his eyes and in his mind he saw a field: row upon row of green rustling plants, and his father, laughing, with his arms spread wide as he shouted, ‘Hundreds! Thousands if you pray!’” (Bacigalupi 131)

He is acutely aware of his own paradoxical position within Harvey's cycle of dispossession, profiting from the fragments left behind. Lalji can be translated as a parasite that incorporates the legacy of a previous ecological order that was pre-corporate, existing as a spectre through the machineries of pervasive commodification. There is a difference in his precarity when compared to that of Lolo since it is based on the unstoppable assault of corporate enforcement agencies the so-called Trade Men who attempt to close the holes in their proprietary world. The denouement of the story is immensely ambiguous and probative. He has not dodged the market but has merely purchased a better product with which to bargain out his survival in the market. His final end highlights the dark persistence of the market form, which is able to consume and appropriate the tools of its own destruction, and thus makes even the protest of resistance become incorporated into a transactional model.

Combining these very different stories, Bacigalupi is not interested in giving a moralizing critique about the exhaustion of water or food; he tries to question how such crises might be used. In the prism of ecocriticism, nature is recreated as a controlled economic input. With biopolitics, life as such becomes corporate strategy. Under the neoliberalism critique, the human subject is downgraded to an unstable point of an inhumane web of exchanges. The real dystopia is not, then, simple depletion of resources, but instead the elaborate, formally institutionalized mechanisms that develop to handle that depletion to turn a profit, transforming living things into unsecure economic commodities and making survival the sole, exhaustively significant, kind of work.

Conclusion

To conclude, the crucial ecocritical analysis of the works, both *The Tamarisk Hunter* and *The Calorie Man*, helps to understand that Paolo Bacigalupi has made an immense contribution to the modernization of environmental writing. Using the combined prisms of the second-wave ecocriticism, biopolitics, and neoliberal theory, one will realize that his stories are more than mere depiction of resource depletion; they are more about a complex exploration of the worlds where the logic of the market is not merely present, but all-embracing and engulfing the environmental systems and moral demands as a whole. Bacigalupi skilfully shows that the end dystopian danger is more in simple depletion of water or food, but more in the development of complex processes designed to make money on the said depletion.

A grim alchemy is described in the texts: in the American Southwest, the lack of water becomes weaponised; it is an abstract legal game; but in post-petroleum North America, food scarcity is directly coded within the biology by patenting genomes. In both cases, life-giving factors are turned into commodities and the power of corporations takes a biopolitical aspect that dictates the type of life that can be nurtured and the one that is then prohibited. The human cost of this order, Lolo and Lalji, are the protagonists, as they are precarious employees, and their commodity is even their survival itself.

Finally, the intellectual resource of Bacigalupi is in his austere credible extrapolation. He projects a gloomy reflection of our present onto the Anthropocene, what anthropocentrism capitalism could lead to. His works are important significant crafts, which make us reconsider our path, before market forces completely absorb life, making survival a transaction without getting out.

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