

Ecological Fall, Resilience and Stability: Unravelling Eco-theological Didacticism in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*

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ABSTRACT: *The aim of this research paper is to explore the subcategory of environmental humanities i.e. eco-theology and argue that the conjunction of environmental humanities and the didactic nature of theology can prove fundamental in raising awareness about environmental degradation resulting from the anthropocentric approaches towards nature and can possibly lead to more environmentally sustainable behaviors. The objective of this research paper is to examine Asian American writer Karen Tei Yamashita's novel *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* for its eco-theological underpinnings. The researcher intends to analyze the plot structure of the novel to highlight how the Christian narrative of the Fall is reflected in the unfolding of the plot and in the symbolic presentation of the forbidden fruit and serpent in the form of the Matacao and American entrepreneur J.B. Tweep respectively. The chapters of the novel have been divided into six parts initiating the narrative with "The Beginning" that leads to "More Development" and "Loss of Innocence" revealing the exploitative relation of the characters to the Brazilian Amazon, which is fictionalized as an area called the Matacao. The plot structure reiterates the Edenic bliss of Adam and his ultimate loss of innocence which is reflected in the modern day loss of innocence at the hands of excessive technological advancements destroying the environment. Yamashita uses the last part "Return" as a silver lining emulating the didactics of religion which promise rewards after stating the severe punishments resulting from morally questionable deeds. "Return" normalizes the doomsday-like environmental havoc unleashed by Matacao eating bacteria. The earth resets its natural functioning with characters taking a recourse to an Eden-like place reflecting earth's resilience and inherent stability in ways that resonate with Canadian ecologist Holling's theory of ecological resilience and stability.*

Key Words: Eco-theology, Christian mythology, ecological resilience, environmental stability

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The Japanese-American author Karen Tei Yamashita's novel *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* stages the possible annihilation of world ecology by humans smitten with technological advancement and the scintillating appeal of consumerism through the example of Brazil's rainforest. The lives of an entourage of transnational characters, including Japanese immigrant Kazumasa Ishimaru, the tri-armed US American entrepreneur Jonathan B. Tweep who works for the conglomerate GGG, the tri-breasted French ornithologist Michelle Mabelle, the indigenous feather-healer Mane Pena, the radio evangelist Chico Paco and the pigeon-raising couple Batista and Tania DJapan, are enmeshed with the unnatural progeny of industrial waste dumped in the Amazonian rain forest- which is fictionalized as the Matacao. The fascination with the Matacao attracts all these characters there, where they wreak further havoc on the environment through indulgent and exploitative experiments with the Matacao plastic-- making artificial feathers to heal people, manufacturing edible products, and constructing buildings including an amusement park named Chicolandia.

In this magical realist novel, Yamashita unravels the devastating effects of the unhealthy relationship of humans toward excessive industrialization (of which Matacao is an undeniable result) through the collapse of the literary ecosystem she creates. As a typhus epidemic erupts and the bacteria gnaw at the Matacao, an ecological apocalypse takes place destroying all the plastic products made of its material and eventually leading to a massive killing of the birds to stop the spread of typhus. Hence, Yamashita's work is expressive of the horrendous repercussion of transnational human intervention with ecology and the booming growth of material lust

The novel has been approached through critical perspectives that raise several contemporary issues. For example, the novel highlights the streak of "gendered" discourse referring to the dynamics of the male female relationships and homosexuality in the novel (qtd. in Lee 11). Apart from this, the disastrous impact of

American capitalism, imperialism and globalization has also been explored, for instance, the archetypes of Asian American manual “railroad worker” that is parodied by Kazumasa’s character echoes the racial exploitation rooted in American capitalist society (Chen 605). Most importantly, the novel has been analyzed through ecocritical lens. Begona Simal in her article “The Junkyard in the Jungle: Transnational, Transnatural Nature in Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*” terms the fictional world of *Arc* as a transnatural world which resonates with posthumanist turn in literary studies. According to Simal, Yamashita presents a worldview where “we cannot but wonder whether the traditional natural- artificial dichotomy still remains in place in our postmodern, transnatural world” (10). This interpretation posits that the novel transcends the anthropocentric worldview and reinterprets the human and non-human dynamics by assigning agency to both of them.

Contrary to the above mentioned interpretations of the novel, the literary scholars have not yet pointed out the eco-theological strain present in the novel. Although Yamashita does not make overt references to Christian mythology or other religions of the world, some characters in the novel engage with theological realms e.g. the Brazilian native Mane Pena initiates a cult after he finds a magical feather in the region of the Matacao which has miraculous healing qualities as the narrator tells the readers that the feather “worked wonders on his [Mane Pena] sleepless children” (18). It is due to the discovery of this otherworldly feather that Pena goes on to become a radio evangelist with pilgrims coming from all over the world to seek the magical assistance of his feather. Moreover, one of the characters, Batista, has been described as a “Christian” in the novel (11). Additionally, in the first chapter of the novel, the narrator refers to the “syncretistic religious rite[s]” observed in Brazil where the novel is set (4). Furthermore, it is very interesting to note the titles of the different parts of the novel. The first part is titled “The Beginning” which leads to “The Developing Worlds” and “More Development” showcasing the impending doom awaiting the characters as a result of their excessively

anthropocentric maneuvers that lead to “Loss of Innocence” finally culminating into “Return” to a world reborn after the typhus apocalypse. In addition to this, the Matacao acts as the symbolic forbidden fruit whose exploitation and avaricious consumption leads to the “Loss of Innocence” and “More Loss”. Therefore, one can see that the novel has theological underpinnings, though not very pronounced, and have been used to instruct its audience to engage in environment-friendly activities. There is an evident fall of mankind akin to the Fall of Adam after the consumption of the forbidden fruit. This purpose of this research paper is to highlight this eco-theological aspect of the novel and how the novelist engages in a didactic mission to depict the disastrous outcomes of extreme anthropocentrism.

Though the eco-theological aspect of *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* has not been talked about, the relationship between ecology and theology has been discussed. Religion, being an organizing phenomenon of human existence, has thrived for centuries now because it aids in “recognizing the limitations of phenomenal reality” and embedding humans in a world of “meaning, responsibility, transformation and celebration” (Adamson et al 172). This is how Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim describe religion as one of the forces that help humans make sense and assign meaning to the things around them. The entry of this definition of religion in *Keywords for Environmental Studies* edited by Joni Adamson establishes the fact that religion is employed as a conduit that connects humans with nature helping humans to nourish an authentic relation to “a larger whole, for example, the local bioregions, the Earth, and the cosmos itself” (172). Therefore, Tucker and Grim opine that it is through the worldviews that are generated by the marriage of nature and religion that religion gains vital significance in environmental studies. Tucker and Grim enlist examples of how theology has proved to be useful in the twentieth century to raise awareness and solutions to the ongoing environmental crisis. It has not only encouraged the environmentalist to take a religious approach to environmental preservation, but has also motivated the leaders of world religions

to converge and talk about ecological issues in the Parliament of World Religions.

Renowned ecocritic Lawrence Buell in his article “Religion on the American Mind” traces the undeniable presence of religion in the American literary studies, but pinpoints how “...religious studies were... strongly influenced during the late twentieth century as literary studies were by what has been called the secularization hypothesis...” (33). But in the twenty-first century, the ubiquity of religion can be observed for which the “academic humanists across board *ca.* 2000 were seriously unprepared for a world in which it is increasingly obvious that religious convictions can subsume secular interest as easily as vice versa” (Buell 33). Hence, owing to the encroachment of religiosity over secular interests, scholars are more interested in “lived religion inquiry”, and how the ongoing involvement of religion in everyday life shapes human beings (Buell 35). Leonardo Boff, for example, has equated the persecution of the poor, which is the focus of Liberation Theology, with the oppression of earth by human actors. He believes that “[b]oth lines of reflection and action stem from a cry: the cry of the poor for life, liberty and beauty ... in the case of liberation theology; the cry of the earth growing under oppression ... in that of ecology” (67).

The proliferating concerns regarding religion in conjunction to environmental issues can be calculated as one such “lived religion inquiry” (Buell 35). This idea can be witnessed in the indigenous American communities whose reverence of nature as part of their spiritual belief systems have implications of ecological conservation. Kristna Tiedje discusses this aspect in her essay titled “The Promise of the Discourse of the Sacred for Conservation (and its limits)”. She cites an example of the people of Garhwal Himalaya in India who consider the Himalayas the homes of gods. Resultantly, this religious/spiritual association with the groves on the mountains have helped in the prevention of “overexploitation of natural resources” (Tiedje 331). This further authenticates the

irrefutable role that religion and the consequent culture has to play in saving the biodiversity of different regions.

The confluence of religion and environmental studies is not actually an advertisement of any religion itself. Instead, theology is used as a medium to propagate and inculcate the indispensability of environmental protection. Consequently, eco-theology is one of the solutions to the transgressions committed against the world environment. It uses religious studies as its base to build a case for responsible, environment-friendly activities so as to maintain a balanced relationship between man and nature. In this regard, Buell in his seminal book *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* clarifies the concept of eco-theology in these words, “The purpose of this project is not to make these faiths out to be ecocentric in spite of themselves, but to foreground the strains within each that give aid and comfort to a mental reorientation toward green thinking” (106). Considering the above mentioned detailed background on eco-theology, I am interested in showing how *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* uses the myth of the Fall of man as an underlying framework on which Yamashita fashions her moralistic and didactic fiction. By exhibiting a blissful, idyllic world after an allegedly irreversible ecological collapse, Yamashita performs the task of a preacher. She teaches through example, and reveals the consequences of human actions on the environment in order to instill a modicum of fear in people. Her aim is to rectify their actions.

As she echoes the religious practice of teaching through narrative, Yamashita employs the biblical narrative of the Fall to make a larger, transnational argument that recognizes the larger importance of Christianity in the world. While the novel reiterates some of the structures of religious teaching, it actually inverts the sequence of biblical narrative. In *Arc*, the Fall precedes the ascension of humankind back to Edenic bliss. This inverted trajectory is symbolic of the topsy-turvy and apocalyptic status of the world presented in the novel. This inverted religious discourse

also resonates with Canadian ecologist C. S. Holling's theory of ecological resilience and stability. In his work, Holling delineates two behavioral patterns of ecology; stability and resistance that parallel the reversed Christian mythology in *Arc*, where world order is restored to normal before everything falls apart. This paper will first expound upon the plot structure of the novel and the symbols which echo the Christian Fall of Adam followed by the commentary on "Return" which will be substantiated by Holling's theory of resilience and stability. Employing Holling's theoretical framework will further strengthen the eco-theological interpretation of the novel; didacticism through the ultimate destruction and later restoration of earth's ecosystem in order to instill hope in the readers that all is not lost if timely redemption is sought.

The literary ecosystem that Yamashita creates is a compound of two properties resilience and stability. According to Holling in his essay "Resilience and Stability of Ecological Systems", resilience posits "the persistence of systems and their ability to absorb change and disturbance," and the capacity to continue to function despite the instability (14). Beyond the point of resilience, any further change is irrevocable and leads to the "loss of structural integrity of the system" (21). The first five parts of the novel capture this essence of ecological resilience, while the last part titled "Return" expounds upon the notion of stability, which Holling describes as "the ability of a system to return to an equilibrium state after a state of temporary disturbance" (Holling 17). He begins the essay highlighting two ecological perspectives. The first standpoint views the ecosystem in terms of extinction of species, hence the loss of components that formulate an ecosystem. He is more inclined towards the second worldview which purports the idea that instead of focusing on the extinction of species i.e. the quantitative data, one must incline towards the qualitative because "... if we are dealing with a system profoundly affected by changes external to it, and continually confronted by the unexpected, the constancy of its behavior becomes less important than the persistence of the relationships" (1). Therefore, the notions of resilience and stability

of the ecosystem become fundamental in understanding ecological behaviors. Holling gives ample empirical evidence in his essay to prove that resilience and stability are two vital characteristics of earth.

Tracing Theological Underpinnings through Plot Structure and Symbols

The novel's part one titled "The Beginning"- which introduces all of the characters- suggests the inception of the Fall of humankind. The titular significance is evoked here, and readers are prepared to experience the opposite of what they expect. The implication of the title is elaborated in the prelude to the novel, in which Yamashita writes "I have heard Brazilian children say that whatever passes through the arc of a rainbow becomes its opposite. But what is the opposite of a bird? Or for that matter, a human being? And what then, in the great rain forest, where, in its season, the rain never ceases and the rainbows are myriad?". Through this question, posed in the very beginning of the novel, Yamashita prepares the readers for the worst to take place. In this sense, the title "The Beginning" reeks of irony as the start of a literary world seems apocalyptic and dystopian. It is the beginning of a nightmare where ill-boding events forerun the serenity that prevails in the end of the novel.

The first sign of the Fall occurs in an incident related to Kazumasa's childhood in Japan. Yamashita connects this Fall with an uncanny ecological disaster that she infuses with religious vocabulary. She explains, "Kazumasa felt the Divine Wind ripple through his hair... Suddenly, an enormous crack of thunder echoed across the shore, and a flying mass of fire plowed into the waves" (3). This mishap results in Kazumasa's unnatural attachment to a whirling ball, which attaches to his face. As we find out much later in the novel, the ball is made up of the same components as the Matacao and thus points to ecological destruction that may seem to be localized in Brazil, but clearly has had transnational implications on a character growing up in Japan. While the ball

brings Kazumasa economic and occupational success, it causes a disruption in his relation with his mother: “All of a sudden, a ball... had come between her and her son, destroying the bonds of parent and child, literally setting them a world apart” (5). This alienation is caused by environmental changes due to human’s interference with world ecology.

Another character, Mane Pena, first discovers the Matacao in the southern region of the Amazon Basin, which serves as another symbol of man’s Fall. The Matacao is “an enormous impenetrable field” that is uncovered by the inundating rains (16). Instead of sprouting plants, though, the rains uncover an alien substance, which has developed as a result of the devastating treatment of the environment. It is revealed later on in the novel that this plastic-cum-magnetic substance emerged as a result of the “enormous landfills of nonbiodegradable material” that underwent great pressure and was then converted into a “molten mass,” which was then transported through “underground veins” to the Amazon Forest- “one of the last virgin areas on Earth” (202). This Matacao has been used by the novelist as a symbolic forbidden fruit that would entice the characters from, not just Brazil, but also from the United States of America to capitalize on this alien substance at the expense of nature and the human characters. This exploitation has been presented in the second and third part of the novel “The Developing World” and “More Development” respectively.

The character of the American capitalist J.B. Tweep is of utmost importance in setting off the environmental apocalypse. His capitalistic endeavors echo the American colonialism and associated exploitation in Brazil. He has been given a very specific physiognomy which sets him apart from the rest of the characters: he has three hands. Yamashita describes his character in these words: “[a]s far as J.B. was concerned, he had entered a new genetic plane in the species. He even speculated that he was the result of Nobel prize-winning sperm. He was a better model, the wave of the future” (30). It is genetically modified Tweep who serves a pivotal role in accelerating the causes of the Fall. His obsession with the Matacao makes him “[a]nxious to duplicate

GGG's New York offices at the Matacao" (76), which leads to the further destruction of this region. The offices that GGG Enterprise builds close to the Matacao to fully exploit its resources comprise of twenty-three floors where "the great mechanisms of the business world were churning" (19). The company intends to revolutionize "the plastic market with one incredible novelty after another" (142). By exploiting Kazumasa and his ball, which has the ability to locate other Matacao-containing regions and can imitate any substance, GGG creates many other plastic objects. The incredible spectrum ranges from magnetized credit cards to plants, toys, jewelry, clothing, furniture, facial and physical remakes and even artificial food, thereby infiltrating every walk of life. Tweep serves as a metaphorical serpentine character who creates an aura of seduction around the forbidden fruit- the Matacao, and its resultant products. His futuristic vision echoes the over-ambitiousness of Icarus who longs to reach the sun despite having heat-sensitive wax wings, and adulterates the natural with the unnatural, which Simal explains as the erosion of the "boundaries between the natural and the artificial" (10).

Yamashita titles the sections of the novel dealing with Tweep's enterprises as "More Development", "Loss of Innocence" and "More Loss". These titles chronicle a progression towards gradual downfall. Just like the devouring of the biblical forbidden fruit had unexpected ramifications, when the plastic that makes up Matacao is harvested, this wreaks unimaginable havoc. While the formation of the plastic in the Matacao illustrates a form of ecological resistance, its harvesting brings out an epidemic of typhus and "rickettsia", while the overuse of plastic feathers unleashes "severe hallucinatory effects" on people (198).

Additionally, feathers made of Matacao plastic also pave the way for enormous "birdicide" that endangers half of the world's population of birds (199). The facial rebuilds that use the Matacao plastic deteriorate as a result of a bacterial attack, and those who ate Matacao hamburgers and French fries grow ill. Indeed, the descriptions of this bacterial attack evoke scenes from horror

movies. At this moment, ecological resilience which is defined by Holling as “large [ecological] fluctuations” that “introduce a resilience and a capacity to resist” (15) is pushed to extreme limits as the “... persistence of systems and of their ability to absorb change and disturbance and still maintain the same relationships between populations” is no longer viable (14). At this point, when Tweep’s fanatic economic and technological advancement is about to irreversibly terminate what Holling called the “structural integrity” of the environment (21), Yamashita renders the Fall as *Felix Culpa*. The flaws of the characters show how the sin of Adam was destined to “bring about the blessedness of Redemption” (*Oxford Dictionaries*). The plot implores the readers to rectify their relation with the environment. It raises a dystopian what-if situation by reminding what might have happened if there was no point of return.

Ecological Stability and Resilience as Means to Restore Man-Nature Relationship

The idea of *Felix Culpa* as referred to in the previous paragraph brings attention to the idea that the purpose of eco-theology is not just to save the environment from the hazards of excessive technological advancements and the manipulation of nature for capitalism. It also works towards restoring the old, pastoral relation between humans and nature when scientific discoveries had not yet conquered the human mind; a time when situating one’s self within nature was considered as transcendental. Robert Nadeau in *Rebirth of the Sacred: Science, Religion, and the New Environmental Ethos* expounds on the aftermath of the chasm that has appeared between man and nature as a result of excessive industrialization and the overuse of natural resources that has relegated nature to an exploited commodity. Due to this master-slave dynamic reflected in man-nature relationship, global climate has significantly changed leading to extreme climatic conditions and even wars to lay claim on natural resources like oil, which in turn contributes to polluting environment. The aim of Nadeau’s book is to hope for a dialogue between science and religion that would help in creating

an “environmental ethos with a profound spiritual dimension that can be embraced by people in all of the great religions of the world” (8). The initiation of such an environmental ethos would have a worldwide reach to “resolve the environmental crisis” (Nadeau 9). This ideology is reflected in the last part of the novel “Return” which can also be supported with the Canadian ecologist Holling’s theory of resilience and stability.

There are instances of resilience mentioned in the previous arguments showing how despite the ecological transgressions wreaked by the human actors in the novel, the earth shows tough resilience in the face of it e.g. the “metal cemetery” situated deep into the Amazon rainforest in Brazil consists of various forms of aircrafts and vehicles that were parked here in the late fifties and early sixties, which suggests that the ecosystem of the novel has been subjected to a long process of environmental degradation and finally collapsed. In this metal parking lot, which Begona Simal terms as “the junkyard in the jungle” (13), is a frightening mishmash of technology, zoology and botany, where plants, insects and rodents find an affinity with machinery. As Yamashita writes, “there rare butterfly only nested in the vinyl seats of Fords and Chevrolets and that their exquisite reddish coloring was actually due to a steady diet of hydrated ferric oxide” (100). While this description illustrates the damaging effects of man-made technology on the ecology, it also shows the stubborn persistence of nature against this metallic intrusion. Or to put it in Holling’s terms, “large [ecological] fluctuations may introduce a resilience and a capacity to resist” (15).

Holling’s second category of ecological behavior- stability- which he defines as “the ability of a system to return to an equilibrium state after a state of temporary disturbance” manifests itself in the last part of the novel titled “Return” (17). The rapidity of this return to a pastoral, edenic bliss which is a reversal of the traditional narrative of the Fall lives up to Holling’s explanation as he posits, “the more rapidly it returns and the less it fluctuates, the more stable it would be” (14). The Fall of man resulting from massive

exploitation of the Matacao combined with capitalistic lustfulness created by the serpentine character of Tweep gives way to an Edenic return only to serve one purpose; to teach the readers through theology manifested in the division of the novel into parts, the symbolic forbidden fruit of Matacao and the serpent in the form of an American entrepreneur. Yamashita has struck a balance between presentation of an ecological disaster and ecological recovery. If the focus had been solely on the disaster, it would have affected the audience differently. In this manner, Yamashita preaches ecologically responsible attitudes.

In “Return”, after losing the ball, Kazumasa is able to reconnect with Lourdes, his maid and romantic interest, allowing him to feel the “old happiness about love and life in Brazil” (211). He moves Lourdes and her children to a “farm filled with acres and acres of tropical fruit trees and vines and a plantation of pineapple and sugarcane, sweet corn and coffee,” which gives an impression of an environmental reboot (211). Ursula Heise has interpreted this blissful return as a solution to “the global age by a return to pastoral cliché” (138). Though she is critical of this ending, arguing that it is too simplistic for the novel’s complicated plot, she argues that it “resolves the problems the plot had raised” (138). This allegedly simple and idyllic ending has a deeper significance. The ending functions as the end point of Yamashita’s fictionalized sermon on treating the environment fairly. Ending the novel on this point enables the strategic reversal of the mythic Fall to render its influence on the readers by teaching them the phenomenon of cause and effect.

By highlighting the extremities of an excessively technological and power hungry human world, Yamashita banishes the artificial, anomalous and those guilty of ecological destruction from her literary ecosystem (that is why Tweep commits suicide to cleanse the system). She also establishes in the union of Batista and Tania, and of Kazumasa and Lourdes the essence of life where humanity is at peace against the backdrop of “crumbling remains of once modern high-rises and office buildings” and a world “pursuing the

lost perfection” (Yamashita 212). Thus, the ecological system in the novel again becomes stable which highlights earth’s natural ability to restore itself

Conclusively, Yamashita overlays Christian discourse onto her ecological narrative. The intent to employ an eco-theological framework is to outline for her readers the pernicious effects of technological and economic boom that is translated into environmentally destructive activities. In a tussle between Nature and technology, Yamashita assigns victory to the natural world by showing its inherent resilience during the process of the Fall and a tendency for stability in an Edenic return. The juxtaposition of the end of resilience and the miraculous return to bliss calls for an immediate action when the Earth still has the quality to naturally repair itself. Yamashita’s fictional sermon leaves the readers with a hope that their relation with the environment can still be repaired. Had Yamashita ended her novel on a disastrous note, it would have implied a bleak and irremediable future for world ecology. The reason why critics have not yet noted the eco-theological interpretation of the novel is because they view the ending of a novel as simply a plot device that resolves the predicaments raised in the story, and also because the use of Christian mythology has become naturalized in Western literature. Viewing the ending more critically can unveil the rationale behind the deceptively simple ending.

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