

BEYOND HUMAN: A POSTHUMANISTIC ECOCRITICAL READING OF JOE D' CRUZ'S *OCEAN RIMMED WORLD*

Dr. B. Priyadarsini

Associate Professor, PG & Research Department of English,
Ethiraj College for Women, Chennai.

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Abstract

Joe D' Cruz is a well acclaimed Tamil novelist known for his authentic portrayal of the coastal life. His works voice for the marginalized fishing community of Tamil Nadu from which he hails. The study analyses how the novel *Ocean Rimmed World* challenges the anthropocentric hierarchies by establishing the ocean as the central character - an agential force that dictates the lives of the fishing community. The narrative interweaves the unremitting hardships of the fisherfolk with the broader history of the Parathavar community of the Tuticorin coast of Tamil Nadu. It also highlights the reliable connection between the humans and their non-human environment, by presenting the human being not as a distinct entity but as a part of the larger ecological system. The paper examines the symbiotic relationship between human and non-human marine life - the Kattumaram (the boat), the sea animals, the ocean currents that both sustain and threaten the fishermen. It also underscores how the novel proposes a posthumanistic ecocritical ethics of interconnectedness and mutual dependence, rather than human mastery and supremacy.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Fishermen, Parathavar community, Ocean, non-human entities.

Ihab Hassan (1977), a seminal figure in postmodern thought and literary criticism, coined the term "Posthumanism", in his essay "Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?". He apprehended that the traditional concept of humanism was undergoing both a crisis and a radical shift. He proposed the term "posthumanism" to characterize a new cultural epoch where human boundaries could be fundamentally redrawn, particularly with the rising technological integration and human-machine convergence.

Expanding upon Ihab Hassan's coinage, posthumanism developed into a diverse and highly critical field of study, that contests the conventional liberal humanist subject and critiques the established belief of human superiority. This shift was heavily influenced by theorists like Donna Haraway (1985) whose essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" introduce the cyborg as a powerful metaphor for eliminating the old, clear differences and boundaries that have historically separated and categorized human, animals, and machines from one another. N. Katherine Hayles (1999) subsequent work "*How we became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*" suggested that "The posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate. So that attending or replacing the body with other prosthesis becomes a condition of a process that began before we were born" (p. 3). She uses prosthesis to state that human beings are a material entity where boundaries are consistently shifted and whose identity emerges from its complex interplay with a variety of technological networks. In a similar vein, Cary Wolfe's (2013) work on animal studies, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* calls for a post-anthropocentric world view that extends ethics beyond humanity.

Moreover, the principles of ecocriticism reinforce this trajectory by supplying a necessary environmental dimension. Scholars such as Timothy Morton follow the post humanist line of reasoning. His work *Hyper objects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013) investigates the phenomena of climate change and illustrates that humans are not distinct from, but intricately woven into the ecological system. Collectively, these progression from cyborg theory to animal studies and environmental ethics forge a foundational structure for posthumanism, a philosophy defined by its rejection of human centrism and adopting an interconnected view of existence.

Ecocriticism and posthumanism converge in their crucial challenge to anthropocentrism, seeking to redefine humanity's place within the world. While ecocriticism traditionally examines the representation of the environment and non-human life in literature, posthumanism expands this analysis by deconstructing the core philosophical idea of the human subject as singular and inherently exceptional agent, consequently blurring the lines between machine and organism, and mind and matter. "Simply put, ecocriticism becomes post-human, post-natural, post-green in critiquing the taxonomy of the human and non-human" (Opperman, 2016, p. 23). In conjunction this lens - often called posthuman ecocriticism dismantles the fantasy of the humanist delusion that has accelerated ecological crises, contending that humans are not masters of the earth, but rather symbiotic entities inextricably entangled in its natural environment. By acknowledging the agency of the non-human elements, this combined theoretical approach promotes a new ethical framework highlighting the essential concept of interdependence and respect for all forms of life.

R. N. Joe D' Cruz is a versatile literary figure whose contributions span literature, cinema, and maritime policy, with an exclusive focus on the lives of Tamil Nadu's coastal people. He is a renowned Tamil novelist who is known for his widely acclaimed works, *Aazhi Soozh Ulagu* (2004) (titled *Ocean Rimmed World* in English) and the Sahithya Akademi Award-winning *Korkai* (2008), both of which elaborately record the history, culture and struggles of the Parathavar fishermen community. Beyond his literary accolades, drawing on decades of experience in the shipping industry, D' Cruz has emerged as a national advocate, a sitting member of the National Shipping Board and the National Welfare Board of Seafarers. His body of work extends to documentaries, where he directed films featuring the plight of the fishermen, and promotes the development of a sustainable blue economy through his think tank, the Bharatha Culture and Heritage Trust.

Joe D' Cruz's (2018) novel *Ocean Rimmed World* offers a stark portrait of life between the 1930's to 1980's in Aamanthurai, a fishing village on the Tuticorin Coast of Tamil Nadu. The village is inseparably bound with the Parathavar community's identity, with its essence determining their very mode of living. Etymologically the name "Aamanthurai" derives from the Tamil word ammai, meaning- "turtle" and thurai, meaning - "nestling shore" or "turtle landing." In the novel *Gothra*, an elderly fisherman makes it clear to young Siluve "You know our burial ground, don't you? In those days, every summer, large groups of turtles crawled to the *theri* adjoining the burial ground to nest and lay eggs. Lots of turtles frequented our stretch of the coast and that's probably how our village got its name!" (p.4).

This nomenclature is pivotal to the fishermen's identity, as it roots their community's very existence in a historical relationship with the natural world of the ocean.

Joe D' Cruz exquisitely captures the symbiotic relationship, chronicling the indigenous knowledge and cultural practices that have enabled the community to live in harmony with the ocean for generations. For the fishing community, life is governed by the ebb and flow of the ocean, which they personify as mother goddess, the dual-faced deity who both provides and takes away life. Thomanthurai, a seasoned fisherman respectfully refers to the ocean as "Kumari Atha" a revered mother who is benevolent in providing for their sustenance, a fathomless hoard from where they draw all their wealth in the form of fish, yet her bounty is eternally twinned with her malice- the unpredictable tidal waves and storms, that they had to endure. The community's indigenous wisdom, embodied in the teachings of elders like Thomanthurai, that instil resilience and fortitude in the fishermen are passed down orally.

This sea-she is our mother goddess. Not this or that goddess, mind you, but our Kumari Aatha. Even now, who, do you think, stands guard over us on this journey to Surapaarai? She's the *Kaval Theivam* protecting the entire seashore, watching over her children who set out to sea. She has been feeding us through the ages. Has she ever denied us? She does get angry on some days. All the same, we must learn to smile and endure patiently. She bestows a different kind of fish on us every season, filling our bellies and lighting up our homes (p.31).

Their bond with the sea transcends simple reliance on the sea for survival, demonstrating a recognised kinship woven in the fabric of their actions and faith. Thumanthurai consoles his fellow fishermen when they encounter a large fish, he explains that the fish is not a threat, it is blessed by goddess Kumari Atha and its presence is a sign of her grace, not a harbinger of danger. He also believes that the non- human entities, from the fish to the ocean, possess their own 'dharma' and do not harm humans unnecessarily. He says:

But as our elders have been saying for hundred years, these creatures are bound by dharma. They are bound by Kumari Aatha, our mother goddess, who watches over us. Whenever we come upon a huge fish like this, all we need to do is pray to her, pleading to her to protect us. *Kumari Aatha we are your children. We promise not to trouble the fish in any way. So let it not harm us, Mother.* That's all we have to do. Besides these fishes never trouble any one unprovoked. (p.22).

The fishermen's supplication to their goddess displays the idea of co-existence under the protection of the same deity. This shared parentage erases the hierarchical distinctions between human and non- human species.

Far from seeking to subdue the sea, the fishermen, guided by their ancestral wisdom engage in a continuous process of reciprocal exchange with the natural world. They live in unison with their environment by understanding the sea's everchanging moods, carefully observing the behaviour of the fishes, interpreting the neevadu (water currents) and their nuanced patterns to navigate their reality.

The water current act as the ultimate arbiter of fate, reinforcing the precarious nature of the fishermen's lives. It shows that despite their skill and endurance; their destiny is not entirely in their hands but is subject to the indifferent and sometimes cruel will of a powerful non-human force. "There's a whiff of seaweed in the air... 'yes, looks as if the wind has shifted.' 'Soose, the *neevadu* will also change any time now. For all you know it might even rain. Let's head ashore in time,' urged Gothra Pillai" (p.2).

For Thumanthurai the fish and other marine animals are not merely sustenance but fellow souls traversing the vast ocean. When the fishermen hook and haul in a shark, Thumanthurai's gaze was captured by the steadfast loyalty of the partner shark. The mate's grief and refusal to abandon its companion was a sheer unfiltered expression of affection.

Mm... we tore the couple apart without a trace of pity and are now towing one away. After all, they have souls too. Just look at that, Gothra, what great affection that fish must have for its mate to keep following it like this. A whole night has passed. Even so, it's still behind us. We think only we humans are bound by ties and affection. If it's incapable of feeling love or affection, why is this fish still following its mate?...I don't know why, but somehow my heart is unbearably heavy, Gothra. It's a great sin to tear a couple apart. (p.42)

This scene truly moved Thumanthurai to a profound state of reflection, seeing in this wild creatures' love a soul as capable of feeling as any humans. A gnawing remorse began to consume Thumanthurai, since the memory of the loyal shark was a constant reminder of his role in their forced separation. This empathy of Thumanthurai surpasses beyond environmental awareness as it constitutes a 'companion species' relationship, an affinity for non-human life that is central to posthumanist thought.

The world's oceans, are home to a vast and diverse community of non-human entities, from the smallest micro-organisms to the largest marine mammals. Their residency is not conditioned on human stewardship, but is a fundamental aspect of this shared planet. Their function is crucial for the ecosystem and is not measured against human supremacy. They offer ethical guidance through their behaviour and demonstrate a complex interconnected way of life that humans must learn to respect.

The Ongals (dolphins) are regarded as the sea goddess's devoted and watchful sentinels. They guide the fishermen and form protective circle around them to ward off sharks, eventually saving them from their harmful predators.

The hand-wringing confessions of human culpability appear coated with a veneer of species pride. To think of the human species as having had a colossal impact, an impact that will have been unthinkably vast in duration, on something we externalize as "the planet," removes us from the scene and ignores the extent to which human agencies are entangled with those of nonhuman creatures and inhuman substances and systems (Alaimo, 2016, p.144).

The supposed glory and human dominance are a superficial façade, many non-human entities like the ongals and the squid exhibit high cognitive abilities that contest the idea of humans as the only inheritors of this capacity. The ongals use their acute senses to detect danger that humans cannot.

Thomandhurai's calming reassurance to his worried crew when faced with a pod of leaping ongals demonstrates that these sea animals are friendly and non-aggressive towards humans. "The ongals are very nice creature. Gentle like our Gandhi. Whenever a fisherman like us stumbles out of his maram and falls into the sea, it seems the ongals at once rush to rescue and surround him to protect him from the rascally shark that might be lurking about" (D' Cruz, 2018, p.20). The ongals protection is also a part of a reciprocal arrangement, with the benefit stemming from the deep reverence the fishermen have for the sea. It reinforces the novel's central idea that, when humans treat nature with respect nature will repay their kindness with their provision and protection.

The novel also describes the squids reflexive defence mechanism, They squirt ink into the water and get away. It's a sort of defence mechanism that God has given them-something to protect themselves from more powerful creatures. Like how He put the poison in a snake's fang, the sting in a jellyfish, He has given the squid its ink. When it wants to escape its enemy, the squid simply squirts its ink and manages to get away (p.337).

This scene advocates for a respectful re-evaluation of our relationship with such minds, this small creature's action is a definite indication of nature's power and its resistance against encroachment. The squid evading, is a micro-cosmic reflection of the larger, often unseen battles that nature wages for its protection. It is a reminder that the ecosystem has at its disposal a wide array of defence mechanism that challenges the notion of human control over the environment.

A compensatory movement needs to emphasize human dwellings as habitats, revealing our interconnections with nonhuman nature and the possibilities for a multitude of sustainable pleasures. Conversely, we must recognize animal cultures, animal memories, animal pleasures, and animal homes, making space for them within all-too-human landscapes, as it is no longer possible, within the Anthropocene, to imagine they will survive somewhere else (Alaimo,2016 p.30).

The sea is no mystery for the fishermen, perhaps it is an extension of their home. Their admiration for the eels, jelly fish and sea cucumbers, and their act of joyfully swimming for pleasure speaks volumes about their integral connection to the sea and its creatures.

We are going to swim and play in the sea across the flagstaff.... there are a lot of jellyfish near the rock pools.... he was catching sea cucumbers. That worm-like thing which we throw up in the air and play with if it happens to slither under our feet...there are eels in the rock pools on that side of the shore.... The beach down the flagstaff of the Anthonyar Koyil was the best place to bathe and play about the sea. This stretch of the shore was rock-free and full of fine, powdery sand that felt nice and '*koru koru*' to touch (D'Cruz, 2018, p.341).

The rich tapestry of life, with creatures of all size, showcase the strong and healthy ecosystem that sustained the fishing community. Their admiration for the ocean's beauty demonstrated that they appreciated its spiritual and aesthetic worth apart from its material wealth. This perspective directly critiques the commercial fishing practices that views the ocean only as a resource to be plundered.

The villages traditional ways of fishing methods using kattumaram and harmless cotton nets were upended by the arrival of mechanized boats. Modern fishing technology and the incursion of large-scale commercial interest were fuelled by a humanistic paradigm that considers the ocean as an exploitable commodity. The novels essential pathos resides in the rupture between the traditional covenant with the sea and the cold, extractive calculus of technological niche. This emergence of a newfound veneration for resource- plunder constitutes the novels core tragedy.

As far as anyone could remember, the Parathavars of this region had been riding the sea only on kattumarams. Fishing with mechanized boats was simply unthinkable in Aamanthurai or, for that matter, in any of the neighbouring thurais. There's no committee in the village now, and if at this time, these fellows strip the sea non-stop like this, what can we do...what'll be left for us to catch?...The net these boat fellows use is like a conical bag. And such small meshes. Not even our tiniest nethili can escape once it goes in (496).

The relentless output of large nets wielded with technological impunity leads to widespread ecological disruption. This impertinent powerplay destroys the symbiotic heritage, resulting in both rapid degradation of the environment and cultural alienation of the fishing community. The narrative interrogates the Anthropocene governance and reveals the barbarism lurking beneath its civilized veneer as it fails to recognize the material limits and the non- human rights. However, the Parathavar's conventional wisdom and ethos act as a counter narrative to the doctrine that humans stand at the apex of all creatures and is therefore entitled to utilize and control every aspect of the natural world without ethical limits. Yet posthuman ecocritical stance resets our relationship with nature by enforcing us to embrace new bioethical protocols when extracting resources.

The ocean commands both awe and terror, luring human ambition into its depths, and constantly reminding us that it is a breathing force possessing a personality that shapes human destiny. This biocultural symbiosis affirms a tenet that nature and culture are not separate entities but 'natural cultural' forces that collaborate to define our global future. *Ocean Rimmed World* is a seminal early exploration of this posthuman condition, where it delineates how humans emerge from and is dependent upon a colossal non-human system. Joe D' Cruz (2018) through his dispositions invites the readers to adopt a unified decolonized perspective, to delve into a post-anthropocentric reality, and urges a serious reappraisal of the human's place in the borderless realm of a world rimmed by the ocean.

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