



11th National Conference on Nature, Culture, Language and Literature: Narratives and Critical Practices held on 16th and 17th April 2018 at **The Department of English, SRM University**, Kattankalathur, Chennai, Tamilnadu

PERILS OF ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS IN CHERRIE MORAGA'S HEROES AND SAINTS: A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Pollution being a buzz word in the contemporary world, the hazards are analyzed extensively in recent past. In spite of the awareness created, the environment is at the threshold of catastrophe due to the practices of mankind in the name of advancement. The perils of pollution wobble the whole ecosystem, contaminating air, water and soil. Man started meddling with nature for his economic pursuit placing the Mother Earth under serious threat. Literature reflecting the lives of the people gives a clarion call for this burning issue. Writers take up the role of educating people about the dangers to be faced and the ways to curtail it through the works of art.

This paper traces the perils of spraying pesticides in the agricultural fields in San Joaquin Valley in California, through Cherrie Moraga's play Heroes and Saints. The play deals with the hazards faced by the Mexican farmers due to spraying of pesticides. The chemicals turn the fields into cancer cluster areas and the children are born with grave birth defects. The limp dead

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bodies of children are crucified in the farms command immediate attention. People hatch new ways of protest and become martyrs safeguarding nature as well as the future generation. The agony and trauma of the Hispanic community is poignantly portrayed by Cherrie Moraga. The rage and violent upsurge of the people goes to an extent of burning the fields. This paper elaborates the ways to manage the hazards of pollution and achieve environmental justice.

KEYWORDS: Pollution, Pesticide poisoning, Environmental justice

“Earth provides enough to satisfy every man’s needs but not every man’s greed”

– Mahatma Gandhi

Clean green and hassle-free environment is a vision of every human being on earth. Pollution-free planet is a distant dream which remains as a yearning for a utopian world. Pollution has become a global issue with the advancement of science and technology. Mankind is meddling with nature spoiling its serenity and thereby falls a prey to the hazards created by him. As an intruder of nature, man is the maker as well as the victim of pollution. Man’s selfishness, negligence and indifference to nature have blown the issue out of proportions. Pollution is a result of man’s lust for comfort and money. Over population, urbanization, deforestation, industrialization, technological development and huge unmanageable waste are the

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main reasons for pollution. There is no clean air to breath, water to drink and land to live, reinforcing the idea that humans must bear their own cross for their deeds.

The environmental horrors have piled up and the earth has become the most abused planet due to the massive amount of pollutants in the atmosphere. The pollutants intervene into nature causing imbalance in the eco-system. Even the layman would list out the effects of pollution in the present world - ozone depletion, global warming, chemical pollution, acid rain, extinction of some species of flora and fauna, and the list is endless. The disaster of environmental pollution defiles the purity of the environment leading to calamity:

Simply put, it is this: that environmental degradation is a silent and inevitable companion of industrialization – a caboose hitched on the train of progress that no one can unshackle. If we want refrigerators, modern medicines, cars, computer chips and polyester, then the price we pay is in toxic byproducts, industrial waste, chemical effluent, environmental degradation and occasional spectacular disasters. (Seager 70)

The problem which started as a tiny speck has bundled up into a snow ball, craving immediate attention.

People do not appreciate the gift of nature. They exploit it for their personal reasons. “‘Progress’ as defined by our modern economic system rewards and perpetuates environmental deterioration” (Seager 81). Technological and industrial advancement have pledged nature’s purity disrupting the balance of eco-system. The culmination of environmental pollution has health hazards in the living beings. The ecological changes disrupt the eco-system, so ecological

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balance should be achieved for a stable eco-system. Ecological praxis provides better understanding of the environment, management of resource and safeguarding human health. Ecological realities should be realized to curtail the thought of economical prominence. Ecological preservation would prolong the sustenance of the species and the planet.

Water is the most vital thing for living organisms to thrive. When water gets contaminated, it leads to many diseases in human beings and contaminate the land making it harmful. Contaminating water proves to be fatal for plants and animals. But water pollution gains immediate attention, since it is visible to the eyes. When land gets polluted it is not seen at hand. People do not anticipate the ill effects of land pollution, so it is always a setback. Population explosion ushers need for more food produce, which ingress extensive use of pesticides. The pesticides apart from killing the weeds are absorbed by the plants and the animals which consumes them. This pesticide poisoning proves to be dangerous, as the toxic chemicals reach the humans. When the top soil is washed away, even the water body gets polluted by pesticides. Pesticide poisoning leads to cancer and birth defects in children. Man's greed should be contained. There should be minimal use of pesticides and consuming organic food should be encouraged.

Profit is the only motive of the big wigs of the corporates and they disregard environmental safety. When monetary benefits are brought to the forefront the environmentally destructive practices are abound:

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Profit-driven companies are constantly trying to stay one step ahead of the competition introducing continuously “never” and “improved” and “better” products. The petrochemical industry, for example introduces hundreds of new pesticides and other chemical products into market place each year, many of which are only cursorily tested for environmental safety. The rapid journey from laboratory to market place usually means that there is little time for realistic assessment of the environmental impact of the new product, let alone a realistic assessment of whether the new product is really needed in the first place. (Seager 80)

The corporate leaders are insensitive to environmental degradation and are least bothered about the health hazards of people. Economic accounting is the primary concern and the ill effects on nature are whittled away in the name of economic progress.

Nature strikes awe provoking sublime thoughts for the humans, whose lives are enmeshed with the same. Literature reflects lives of people and educates them giving a fresh outlook to the mundane things. Writers explore the relationship of nature with mankind which is always at conflict. Environmental concerns are propagated through the works of art. The writers give a red alert demanding immediate attention by their eco-centric perspectives in writings. Cherrie Lawrence Moraga is a Chicano writer, an activist and a playwright. Her play *Heroes and Saints* written in the year 1994, chronicles the lives of Hispanic population working in the fields poisoned by the pesticides. The play is set in San Joaquin Valley in California and focuses on the hazards faced by the Mexican immigrant farmers due to spraying of harmful pesticides. The

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whole community turns into a cancer cluster area and the children are born with grave birth defects due to the pregnant mothers working in the pesticide stricken fields.

Cerezita Valle is the pivotal character of the play, who is a classic example of the ugly reality of pesticide poisoning, with head and no body, as her pregnant mother worked in the contaminated fields. She is seen as analogous to Virgin Mary by the people of community. Moraga emulates Cerezita's character from the reality of Mc Farland community of Mexican farm workers in California. Pesticide poisoning took a strong toll on people's health causing a lot of birth defects which lead to the release of a short documentary, *The Wrath of Grapes*, depicting a child with no limbs, which formed the key for the central character in Moraga's play. Cerezita equips herself by reading medical books about Neuroblastoma and Leukemia. She is independent. In spite of her disability she is positive and is willing to fight for her people. Cerezita's mother Dolores confines her daughter within the house and stops her from participating in the protest. Cerezita remains positive and proves to be pioneer to overcome the charity role model of disability that forces them to be the victims.

Religion propagates a different thought regarding the people with disability. There is superstitious belief that disability is the punishment given to the sins of the past life or the sins committed by the parents. It is believed that the disabled children are a symbol of punishment from God. People of San Jaquin valley also believe this idea. Dolores believes that Cerezita is given as a punishment for her husband's sins. On the contrary, Cerezita oppose this view to Juan, the priest of the pueblo. Cerezita neither blames her father nor God for her disability, she accepts it without any regrets. Thus she proves to be a strong women fighting for larger cause.

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Cerezita's sister Yolando has a baby suffering from malignant tumor, when she undergoes the pain Dolores consoles her daughter saying, "I know what you are feeling. I know what it feels like to have a sick baby. When Cerezita comes out of me, I didn't want to look at her, I told the doctors to put a blanket over her head to suffocate her, but she screams and screams so loud, the doctors couldn't do it. They told me, the baby wants to live with all its heart and soul" (HS 131). From birth Cerezita breaks the prejudices of a disabled person and stands as a testimony of strength.

The agricultural sector in the name of improving the yield exploit the water and land leading to misery. A strong social change should be recommended by the people to change this grave situation. Demonstrations, strikes and protests are organized by the social activists to alleviate the distress of the people. Pleas to the notice of the government and the media are achieved by different measures. People fight for a cause and adopt different methods to achieve success. In *Heroes and Saints*, the affected farm workers' device novel ways to command the attention of the government. The dead limp bodies of dead children are crucified in the farm as Amparo, the activist in the area says, "They always dead first. If you put the children in the ground, the world forgets about them who's going to see them, buried in the dirt?" (HS 94). The crucifixion of the dead bodies is a potential social protest drawing immediate attention. The dramatic protest attracted media attention and Anaperez, the news reporter covers the entire mishap.

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The pesticides are sprinkled on the fields by helicopters, the sound of which surges the anger of the women. The parents protest against the school which denies free drinking water for the school children. The reason for the disaster is given by Anaperez:

They believe local tap water contaminated by pesticides to be the chief reason of the high incidents of cancer among children in the area. They claim that the extensive spraying causes toxic chemicals to mix into the public water system. The majority of residents are from a nearby housing tract of federally subsidized housing. It has been alleged that the house was built on what was once a dump site for pesticides with the full knowledge of contractors. (HS 110)

The play is sprinkled throughout with Spanish to create empathy among the people. The play has numerous layers to be analyzed as the environmental and agriculture policies, public health, poverty and illness, violation of human and civil rights and rule of church in the issue.

The mothers who lost their children lineup for a protest holding the picture of a dead child with a placard with details of the child's name, age, ailment and the date of death. The policeman tries to stop the protest lead by Amparo, who is hurt. The demands of the people are voiced by Anaperez thus:

They believe that the federal government should pay for their families' relocation to an environmentally safe community, since federal moneys subsidized the building of their housing tract. They further demanded that the well which provides tap water for the area to be shut down and never again used for drinking water. And finally they urge the

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governor to see the establishment of a free health clinic for affected families and to monitor the growing incidents of cancer in the region. (HS 132)

The protestors have a clarity about their needs and strive hard to save their people especially the children, who form the future. The play begins and ends with a political demonstration achieving the required dramatic effects.

The bond between life and death is exemplified throughout the play loaded with emotions of rage, fear and revenge. Moraga informs the audience about the peaceful measures of protest with ethical and moral responsibility. The idea violence begets only violence is suggested, when the choppers start firing at the workers in the field. The whole community is in a rage to retaliate against the violence imposed on them. They develop Topophobia, a fear of the habitat which is no longer safe. Cerezita's resilience paired up with priest Juan, takes up new dimension in the protest when they become martyrs. Death becomes centralized theme in the play and takes up different interpretations. Cerezita's words of wisdom in the final scene gives a clear picture about the wounded souls of her Chicano community:

Put your hand inside my wound, there is a people. A miracle people. In this pueblito where valley people live, the river runs red with blood; but they are not afraid because they are used to the color red. It is the same color as the sun setting into the scerras, the same color of the pool of liquid they were born into. They remember this in order to understand why their fields, like the rags of the wounded, have soaked up the color and still bear no fruit. No lovely red fruit that el pueblo could point to and say yes, for this we

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bleed, for this our eyes go red with rage and sadness. They tell themselves red is a necessary as bread. (HS 148)

Media brings visibility to a subject. Though people speak volumes about an issue, the desired result is achieved with the intervention of media. Media is the major catalyst in creating a sea change in the society. Media should be authentic in staging the problems and should be just enough without any bias. The play begins and closes with the media coverage and the story unfolds with series of flashbacks. The power of spectacle and media coverage brings the necessary changes in the pueblo. The crucifixion of dead bodies, the protest of Cerezita and Juan in the vineyards knowing their destiny making the dead bodies as public commodities, make death meaningful. A different means of ecoterrorism is applied towards the closing of the play as the people burn the vineyards. Though ecoterrorism is not always the answer in extreme condition, stringent measures are called for. In fact, ecocatastrophe which dawned on people's minds make them fight back by all means.

The persistent use of pesticides to increase the yields of agricultural crops, contaminates the land in an adverse way. The ecologist is concerned about the potential hazards these chemicals could create in the environment as well as in the living organism. The residues of the pesticides pose serious health issues in humans. Exploring the economic and social conflict between the Hispanic community and the factory owners, Moraga brings to light the grim reality of the situation. Moraga's dramatic vision voices the trauma of the Mexican farm workers and the need for environmental justice which is to be attained so that people could prevent apocalypse of the planet, providing a safer zone for the existence.

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