JOURNAL OF NARRATIVE AND LANGUAGE STUDIES | ISSN: 2148-4066
NALANS
Journal of Narrative and Language Studies – December 2019, Volume 7 – Issue 13

Toxins Pervading Post-Industrial Ecology in John Burnside's *Glister*

Ulaş Özgün

Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey
ulasozgun@hacettepe.edu.tr

APA Citation:
Özgün, U. (2019). Toxins Pervading Post-Industrial Ecology in John Burnside's *Glister*. *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies*, *7*(13), 162-170.

Abstract

There has always been a tendency to demarcate disasters as natural or human-induced. However, in the age of the Anthropocene where humans take active role in shaping the Earth's geology and ecology, there are no such distinctions between the two, but a complex relationship between nature and culture, humans and their societal, governmental and economic policies over the fate of the world. In such a world, uninformed and often imprudent politicians of the world, and their failure in taking the necessary measures results in disasters that affect the poor, disadvantaged, and marginal communities more than the rich, advantaged, and affluent communities. Therefore, this article will analyse John Burnside's *Glister* through the lens of environmental (in)justice concept, endeavour to shed light upon the multi-faceted nature of environmental problems, and underline the need for collaborative approach by showcasing the example of the poor townspeople's exposure to the chemical toxins in the novel.

Keywords: John Burnside, Ecocriticism, Cli-fi, Eco-thriller, Environmental justice, Environmental (in)justice

1. Introduction

John Burnside's (1955 -) seventh novel *Glister* (2008) sets in a forgotten post-industrial town hosting a vast decommissioned chemical factory that once gave the people of this town hope and prosperity, but now is the source of environmental and humanitarian decay. In an examination of the reasons for environmental disasters, there is always a tendency to distinguish what is natural from what is human-made as if there is a boundary between the two. In reality, there is not any ontological divide here, but a complex interaction between individuals and societal, governmental and economic policies, between national policies and environmental disasters. In addition, these disasters are felt hardest by the marginal and poor people that are least able to adapt their lives to these rapidly changing conditions. From this perspective, the aim of this article is to analyse the complex relations among the society and the governmental bodies, economical concerns and politics in the novel *Glister* all of which will result in the poor townspeople's exposure to chemical toxins. The apparent failure of governmental bodies in neglecting the fact that human body is in constant enmeshment with the more-than-human world causes countless loss of human and non-human life and mental instability for the living.

2. Contextualising Disasters in the Anthropocene

In this regard, the book brings about an important issue to the foreground: reckless speeches of the politicians and government spokespersons are one of the biggest problems environmental activists face in today's world. These prominent figures justify the actions of multi-million dollar corporations that are undertaking deforestation for industrial products such as palm oil, timber and meat, depleting fish stocks aggressively, and reducing the bio-diversity of seas or polluting the air with hazardous smoke coming out of the unfiltered chimneys of factories. Currently, one of the most influential people on earth, the President Donald Trump, is taking an active stance against climate change, and often tweets about the matter claiming that "[t]he concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. [*sic*] manufacturing non-competitive" (2012). The recent cold weather in the United States has been taken as a proof of his statements as he tweets: "Brutal and Extended Cold Blast could shatter ALL RECORDS - whatever happened to Global Warming?" (Trump, 2018). As a result, his ignorance on the matter has been popularly mocked by newspapers since the term "climate change" is now the preferred term rather than "global warming," and "the effects of humans emitting heat-trapping greenhouse gases are more likely to manifest as extreme weather events rather than temperature increases alone" (Embury-Dennis, 2018). His mistaking weather for climate is also received with harsh criticism as one expert, Jess Phoenix, a fellow geologist at the Royal Geographical Society claimed: "Extreme weather like this is EXACTLY what climate models show courtesy of increasing global temps. Stop attacking science for your myopic ignorance" (as cited in Embury-Dennis, 2018). Nevertheless, all these reckless statements of politicians naturally affect the behaviours of the individuals in terms of their choice of using green energy or reduction of their carbon footprint.

Largely, however, the apathy towards environmental disasters and climate change for the average citizen results from the misconception that these environmental phenomena occur independently from human practices and could not be prevented with human intervention. Yet, this view was challenged by scientists such as the Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2002. The two were the first to dub the current era that we are living in as "Anthropocene" because of the "major and still growing impacts of human activities on earth and atmosphere" (2002, p. 17). Formerly, the period of time encapsulating 10.000 B.C. until present was known as the Holocene, a warmer period of time after the latest ice age. However, after the early 2000s, the term Anthropocene "quickly entered the scientific literature as a vivid expression of the degree of environmental change on Earth caused by humans" (Zalasiewics et al., 2011, p. 835). It is difficult to pinpoint the exact date for the start of the Anthropocene: "Possible dates include James Watt's invention of the steam engine in 1784, the increase in background radiation from Cold War nuclear tests in the 1950s, and the beginning of human agriculture ten to twelve thousand years ago" (Trexler, 2015, p. 1). Yet, it is evident that human activity has altered the Earth so much that a new epoch had to be invented to refer to this impact.

Now, the epoch of the Anthropocene that we are living in has so drastically changed our conceptions that formerly believed clear-cut distinctions have lost their sharp edge, and become intertwined with each other. A clear and relevant example is the fact that the era of Anthropocene, as it is aptly pointed out by Timothy Morton, "ends the concept *nature*: a stable, nonhuman background to (human) history" (2014, p. 258). Instead, nature is perceived as having an inseparable connection between humans and the nonhuman world. What is more, in their introduction to *Material Feminisms*, Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (2008) perceive nature as "agentic," and argue that nature "acts, and those actions have consequence for both the human and nonhuman world" (p. 5). Natural disasters, in this regard, are one of the ways in which nature manifests itself as a part of the complex web of interactions between human and nonhuman world. Therefore, in her discussion about natural disasters, Nancy Tuana observes an inaccurate tendency to "separate what is 'natural' from what is 'human-induced,'" (2008, p. 193) and believes that this is the heart of the problem as there is actually "no sharp ontological

divide here, but rather a complex interaction of phenomena" (2008, p. 193) between citizens and societal, governmental and economic policies. In her article "Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina," Tuana demonstrates how the Hurricane Katrina that ravaged New Orleans in 2005 is, in fact, a complex amalgamation of the natural and human induced factors: Category Five hurricane that happened at that time of the year was largely the result of "surface waters in the Gulf of Mexico that were two degrees warmer than normal for the time of the year," (2008, p. 193) and this was a direct result of human practices of greenhouse gas emissions: The historical development of the city of New Orleans which was rich in resources during the colonisation period led settlements to be "built on land that is an average of six feet below sea level" (Tuana, 2008, p. 194). In order to counteract flooding, however, successive governments established levee systems, yet these flood walls were expensive, and politicians did not see building a wall that was resistant to a Category Five hurricane as a priority (Tuana, 2008, p. 197), and the municipality officials overlooked the gravity of the situation. Hence, all these and many other factors contributed to the tragedy that occurred in New Orleans.

In addition, these complex interactions do not only function on a phenomenological level but also function on a biological level since the human body is in constant enmeshment with nonhuman world. Stacy Alaimo, in her book *Bodily Natures*, explores this human "trans-corporeality" by emphasising that

> the material self cannot be disentangled from networks that are simultaneously economic, political, cultural, scientific, and substantial, what was once the ostensibly bounded human subject finds herself in a swirling landscape of uncertainty where practices and actions that were once not even remotely ethical or political matters suddenly become the very stuff of the crises at hand. This is especially evident in the case of global climate change: an individual, household, business, university, city, state, nation, or continent can calculate the carbon footprint left by the stunning range of human activities that emit carbon. (2009, p. 19)

In other words, there are bi-directional movements of matter in and out of the human body to the-more-than-human world. The most obvious example for Alaimo is our consumption of food "since eating transforms plants and animals into human flesh" (2009, p. 12) and human flesh is eventually decomposed by bacteria, the plants and animals in nature. Yet, even eating, a simple transition between material bodies, has the potential of making the human body a site that harbours toxic materials let alone environmental catastrophes such as Katrina in which this circulation becomes especially dangerous: "[t]here are [were] five superfund toxic waste sites in and around New Orleans, all of which were compromised by Katrina's flooding" (Tuana, 2008, p. 198), and people were gravely affected by these toxic wastes. Therefore, the simple act of tracing the movement of a toxic substance also opens up the global web of environmental degradation and social injustice.

This prospect brings the matter to the environmental (in)justice problem since, in the face of an environmental catastrophe those who are affected the most are the ones that would struggle to live in these changing conditions. In this regard, Greta Gaard aptly observes that the poor, ethnically and sexually discriminated or marginalised people, women and children are the ones that are mostly affected from these disasters as they "are more likely to live in unplanned, temporary settlements, which are erected on unsuitable land-prone to the risks of flooding, storm surges, and landslides" (2014, p. 281). These people lack the necessary education, set of skills such as swimming or applying first-aid to themselves and others, or they lack the opportunity to leave these disaster-prone areas, which makes them the immediate subjects to these impending environmental disasters.

3. Toxic Ecology in John Burnside's *Glister*

To raise global awareness for the environmental problems, literature is one of the most effective mediums for showcasing the gravity of ecological disasters to people, governments, politicians and civil servants. The power of a good story have been used effectively since the dawn of human history, and we may trace ecological concerns in literature from the earliest phases of written history with examples such as *Epic of Gilgamesh*, yet it is safe to say that the potential of literature began to be employed mostly in the twentieth century. According to Adam Trexler and Adaline Johns-Putra we can detect a "trend toward ecological themes from the 1970s onwards" (2011, p. 186). Especially, in the twenty-first century novels that deal with these environmental catastrophes and their effects on humans and the nonhuman world have taken up momentum. Some serious authors such as Cormac McCarthy with his novel *The Road* (2006), Jeanette Winterson with *Stone Gods* (2008), Margaret Atwood with *The Year of the Flood* (2009) have tried their hands in novels that foregrounded ecological themes.

However, the majority of the books that have been produced fall under the genre fiction. Cli-fi is the popular term that has been applied to these novels after Dan Bloom's coinage of the word in the late 2000s (Trexler, 2015). The term generally applies to the body of literature that prioritises ecological disasters and their immediate effects on humans and nonhuman world. Nevertheless, there is not any clear boundary to safely map a book as cli-fi novel, and there is a "significant confusion about climate fiction's relationship to the dystopian, science fiction, future speculation, and 'literature'" (Trexler, 2015, p. 8). In addition, Gaard (2014) directs an important criticism to the genre by highlighting that the significant portion of the stories is about the energy production and consumption methods of the first-world countries, and the actions of the multinational corporations that result in a global catastrophe. Only at the bottom of this hierarchy of narratives are there the stories of those marginalised people who are affected by these calamities the most. In this respect, John Burnside's novel *Glister* offers a vivid example of the intricate relations among the political, societal, economic bodies from the perspective of an environmental (in)justice movement by tracing the unequal distribution of environmental benefits and harms to the rich and the poor in the novel.

The novel itself defies any ready-made categorisation, but if an attempt is made, it may well be summed up as in the line of a fantasy genre mixed with horror elements and eco-thriller. The setting of the novel is a derelict post-industrial town hosting a vast decommissioned chemical factory that once gave the people of this town hope and affluence, but now is the source of environmental and humanitarian decay. As a consequence, leaking poison and deadly toxins have altered the flora and fauna of the town causing the local people to suffer from cancers and inexplicable illnesses. Burnside's novel mostly pictures a "masculine world, where women are withdrawn, alcoholic or absent. The men are no pillars of power either: children watch their fathers broken by chemically induced degradation" (Kovesi, 2008, para. 2). What is more, the atmosphere of hopelessness and impending danger is worsened by the introduction of a serial killer who prey on teenagers that are bored by their parents' indifference "either through illness, misery, booze, TV or through having fled the town" (Clay, 2015, para. 32). They are mostly left to fend for themselves. As a result, they turn to each other's bodies as a kind of solace, show fits of violence to the world around them, and explore these hazardous ruins in order to pass time.

Despite the novel's apparent emphasis on the serial killer mystery who mutilated and killed six teenage boys in bizarre sacrificial rituals through the course of eight years, the underlying sin that is emphasised in the novel is the apathy by the townspeople towards a huge environmental disaster that ravages the inhabitants of the city and the lack of empathy towards those suffering innumerable pains due to the disaster. In an interview with John Burnside, he reveals the tendency of these people as follows:

> I think of that thing Donald Rumsfeld said: 'we know what we know, we know what we don't know, but there are things we don't know that we don't know'. Well, there are also things that we know we don't *want* to know, and in our

> society that's huge. I exaggerated with the community in the book, here *everyone* doesn't want to know what's going on. They feel powerless and don't know what they can do about it anyway. But they don't want to acknowledge what's happened, because they'll feel culpable. (Clay, 2015, para. 22)

The direct reflection of the author's attitude has repercussions in the novel's protagonist, Leonard, who at the final pages of the book highlights this sin of not wanting to know as he says:

> The sin of knowing everything and not doing anything about it. The sin of knowing things on paper but refusing to know them in our hearts. Everybody knows *that* sin. All you have to do is switch on the TV and watch the news. … [I]t's just that we don't feel anything at all other than a mild sense of discomfort or embarrassment when we see the broken trees and the mudslides, or the child amputees in the field hospitals – and it's unforgivable that we go on with our lives when these things are happening somewhere. It's *unforgivable*. (Burnside, 2009, p. 250)

Therefore, this apathy which has seeped through the collective consciousness of the townsfolk and rendered them paralysed towards the environmental disaster happening beside them or anywhere in the world is also the reason for the lack of action towards the disappearances of the children throughout the book.

The negligence of the townspeople is only one side of the problem at hand. If a genuine solution to such kind of environmental disasters is pursued, an understanding has to be established in terms of the "complex interaction between social structures – class, governmental emergency reactions, and . . . thousands of humans and nonhuman animals" (Tuana, 2008, p. 206) because only a proactive correlation between the people and governmental, political and economic bodies representing the country can counteract the negative effects of the environmental disasters. However, in the novel, it is suggested that there is a deep disconnection between the governmental bodies and the local people as the narrator highlights:

> Nobody wanted to take on the job of cleaning up after the Consortium. … It was politics, pure and simple. Nobody out in the wider world cared about the people in the Innertown, or the environment, or the employment opportunities that might be created by attracting new investment to the eastern peninsula, but it was in all their interests to have somebody local – somebody like Brian Smith – make good show of developing and regenerating the area with subsidies and grants they made available. … Nobody checked to see if Homeland Peninsula could deliver a safer, cleaner Innertown; what mattered was that Brian Smith created the illusion of preparedness, the illusion of competence. (Burnside, 2009, pp. 39-40)

As a result, the poor townsfolk, animals and plants are left to live in environmentally hazardous surroundings. The government displays only a façade of genuine interest by offering subsidies to deal with the problem. However, these subsidies only make the local opportunists like Brian Smith rich. In turn, these petty capitalists make use of the money they gain from the government to spread corruption even more by bribing the local police force as in the case of Constable Morrison. He was formerly the security officer of Brian Smith, and after the death of the local police officer Constable Fox, Brian Smith suggests Morrison to take the job. Thereby, Brian Smith aims to secure the flow of money from the government to his pocket and in the meantime, he prevents any scandal to disrupt his agenda by controlling the police force. Morrison even covers up the murder of the first child in the novel since Brian Smith thinks that a murder case would attract too much publicity to the town, and could hinder his private agenda.

The discrepancy between the priorities of a capitalist and the local townsfolk confirms Gaard's concern about the environmental (in)justice implemented on the sexually, socially, politically and economically disadvantaged people. She propounds that the effects of ecological

disasters hits the "marginalized people first, with economic and cultural elites best able to mitigate and postpone impacts" (2014, p. 282) for themselves. Hence, only the poor and those people who do not have any choice to move to another place are exposed to the effects of the poison leakage from the chemical plant. Leonard emphasises this social discrepancy between the rich and poor people of the town as the city is basically divided into three large vicinities. Outertown is the most distant vicinity of the town to the chemical plant which hosts

> Elizabethan and ranch-style villas with wide, miraculously green lawns and hedges. Then there's the former golf course, conveniently situated so as to divide the good people in the nice houses from the ghosts and ruffians of the Innertown, now nothing more than a ghetto for poisoned, cast-off workers like my old man. Finally, virtually nothing to separate it from the town, what remains is an industrial wilderness where the plant used to be. (Burnside, 2009, 61)

It is apparent that people who are not rich enough to secure themselves a healthy place in the Outertown of the city are under direct exposure to the toxins and poison emitted by the chemical plant. As a direct consequence, Leonard observes that "[a] large percentage of the people who worked in production at the plant are either sick or dead now" (Burnside, 2009, p. 70).

The apparent negligence of governmental bodies for not realising the fragile human body's enmeshment with the more-than-human world causes insurmountable suffering to the point of insanity for the living and lead to numerous deaths in the book. Stacy Alaimo explores this human "trans-corporeality" by emphasising the movement across different material bodies that "acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors" (2009, p. 2). Toxins and other hazardous actors are also the part of this circulation and during such a transition among material bodies, human body naturally becomes a site that harbours the toxic materials and hazardous waste produced by humans or found naturally in the environment. The Innertown, however, is especially toxic because of the leaks from the decommissioned chemical plant. The fact that government and political authorities do not take any comprehensive action to prevent the local people from being exposed to these toxins makes these bodies the primary culprits in what befall to the people of the town. As a result of being exposed to these toxic wastes, people of the Innertown begin to experience rare cancers and untreatable illnesses. These hazardous materials are said to affect even the mental state of individuals as there has been "a sudden and huge increase in depression, a blossoming of what, in the old days, would have been called madness" (Burnside, 2009, p. 12). The most apparent example is Constable Morrison's wife, Alice, who suffers from fits of depression and sees hallucinations that reduce her to a mentally unstable, unhappy person. Even the fertility rates decrease as Elspeth reveals that "a lot of men round here have dead sperm, because of what is in the ground around the plant" (Burnside, 2009, p. 97). Thus, what happens to the inhabitants of the Innertown is the direct result of the toxic traffic among the corporal bodies in the town. Leonard aptly remarks on this issue:

> But then, who knows if I'll even get older. Some kids don't even make it to twenty, and when they die, nobody knows what was wrong with them. So I have to be realistic. I have lived here for fourteen years. Fourteen and two-thirds. I have breathed and swallowed and digested the smuts and tainted dust and blackened rain of the headland for around seven million minutes. … With every breath I take the world into my lungs, with every swallow I take in, not just food and drink, but everything that it contains, all the traces and smears and soot falls, all the threads of copper and nickel and . . . who knows what else. (Burnside, 2009, pp. 69-70)

Another example of the hazardous effects of the toxic traffic in the Innertown manifests itself in the local fauna and flora. There are abnormalities throughout the town, and the townspeople are used to these occurrences. Accordingly, the depiction of the town at the

beginning of the novel offers a blatant example of the blend of nature with toxic waste and human debris causing animals and plants to mutate:

> You could see evidence wherever you looked of the plant's effects on the land: avenues of dead trees, black and skeletal along the old rail tracks and access roads; great piles of sulphurous rocks where pools of effluent had been left to evaporate in the sun. A few keen fishermen found mutant sea creatures washed up on the shore, where those great boats had once been loaded with thousands and thousands of drums of who knew what, and some people claimed that they had seen bizarre animals out in the remaining tracts of woodland, not sick, or dying, but not right either, with their enlarged faces and swollen, twisted bodies. (Burnside, 2009, p. 11)

At one point in the novel, the narrator tells how the press focuses only on the devastated individuals on TV whenever an environmental disaster ravages a city; however, this destruction affects not only the lives of the people, but also the local fauna and flora. There is no mistaking that these beings also suffer terrible pain, since they are bereft of proper medical or psychological treatment in comparison with their human counterparts. In one instance, Leonard and Elspeth encounter such kind of an animal that has mutated and apparently in sheer physical pain before it dies:

> I pick myself up and go over to where the thing is lying. It's quite big, but I don't know what it is. I've never seen anything like it before. It's about the size of a small dog, with a piggy-looking head and big, staring eyes. It's obviously in a bad way because, even when I get close, it doesn't do anything. It just lies there, staring at me and panting. (Burnside, 2009, p. 139)

In this post-industrial world where Leonard lives, his environment is swarmed with waste and debris produced by the plant, the cars, and the city. Still, Leonard and the people around him cling on to the life they have and assume a way of life that Patricia Yeager calls the "celebration of detritus culture" (2008, p. 329). In her article, Yeager defines this attempt with the following words: "If ecology has been defined as the study of organisms and their environments and has evolved to mean environmental preservation or conservation, then rubbish ecology can be defined as the act of saving and savouring debris" (2008, p. 329). Similarly, a form of celebration of this "detritus culture" is embraced by Leonard in order to counteract the psychologically challenging results of this environmental pollution. He expresses this idea rather poignantly: "Still, if you want to stay alive, which is hard to do in a place like this, you have to love *something* and the one thing I love is the chemical plant. … The thing is, I know everybody says it's dangerous, that it's making us all sick, … - and that's all true, I know that, but you still have to admit that it's beautiful" (Burnside, 2009, p. 60). Similarly, most of the teenagers in the town spend their free time in the vicinity of the plant despite the fact that it is the very thing they should avoid. However, they organise expeditions of hunting and gathering. Even they visit the place to meditate, an action that helps them to forget about the desperate condition they are living in.

Apart from the toxicity pervading the pores of every living thing within the vicinity of Innertown, there is the main plot of unsolved murder mystery. This aspect of the novel is connected to the subplot of environmental disaster through the character of the Moth Man who is frequenting the plant and is a friend of Leonard. He seems to be a harmless man who collects moths on a yearly basis in order to conduct experiments about the toxic levels of the animals. Yet, his real intention is revealed at the end of the novel: to activate a portal that has been left unfinished by his father. To achieve this goal, he has been murdering innocent children in a time span of eight years, and using them in a bizarre sacrificial rituals to activate the time portal. His final victim becomes Leonard who decides to flee the town after his sick father's horrendous death before him by coughing up blood, and his involvement with the murder of an innocent man. The ending connects the beginning of the novel via the contrivance of the time

portal, thereby suggesting that the crimes committed by the authorities against nature against humans and nonhumans will continue in an endless spiral if the institutions don't act collaboratively against it with commitment and genuine enthusiasm. In an interview with the author, John Burnside explains his own take of the ending cyclical ending:

> I wanted to write a story with what I call a Schrödinger's Cat ending, where two endings that are mutually exclusive have exactly the same valency, as it were, when you get to the end. … I wanted my character to come to a point where he could be murdered in this horrible way or he could be released in some way from this world that he is in. (P. Gallagher, personal communication, May 21, 2015)

Indeed, the last thing Leonard sees before going through the portal is his charred body in immense physical pain; however, the fact that his final words are transported to the beginning of the novel poses a form cyclical nature of life, and implies the regenerative aspect of nature and life.

4. Conclusion

The problem of environmental catastrophes is a multi-faceted issue, and it requires a diligent analytical process in order to assess, counteract and keep the environmental hazards to the minimum. John Burnside's *Glister*, in this regard, grasps the gravity of the issue, and foregrounds the interconnectedness of societal, political, economic and governmental policies affecting the outcomes of the impending environmental disasters. The book presents a poignant story of how in the case of an ecological crisis, those affected are the ones least able to make adaptations to these changing conditions. As a result, the bodies of those affected are subjected to the pool of toxins and chemically hazardous materials. *Glister* presents a perfect example to this fact and blatantly portrays the grim reality of what poor people – voluntarily or involuntarily – face in the world.

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