



# Environmental Challenges in Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker*

Sreeja. M. J

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Sardar Raja Arts and Science College

Vadakkangulam

Affiliated to Manonmamiam Sundranar University

Tirunelveli

## Abstract

The research article entitled “Environmental Challenges in Paolo Bacigalupi’s *Ship Breaker*” emphasizes the future of a fossil-fuel dependent world. Carbon-based fuel exhausts in this future world and humans live on the scraps of old technology. This article presents the embodied simulation of a climate-changed world that can offer much more than simple entertainment. It also highlights the future risks of environment and its effects. The polar ice caps melt and New Orleans is under water, thus affecting the environment. The protagonist Nailer lives in extreme deprivation and survives by selling copper wiring from oil tankers, which have crashed during intense hurricanes, an outcome of environmental instability. Thus, this paper analyses the future risk of shortage of natural resources, which leads to many problems.

Keywords: environment, degradation, climate change, ecology, deprivation

Paolo Bacigalupi is an award-winning author of novels for adults and young people. He is an American science fiction writer. He has won the Nebula, Hugo, John. W. Campbell, Crompton Crook awards. The novel *Ship Breaker* was awarded the Michael L. Printz Award for the best book written for teens and was nominated for the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature.

*Ship Breaker* is a young adult novel that is set in a post-apocalyptic future. Human civilization is on decline because of ecological degradation. This study highlights the environmental issues addressed in the novel and make readers realize the importance of ecological balance in this world. The polar ice caps melt and New Orleans is under water, on the Gulf Coast nearby where humanity reverts to survival mode and a small economy grows from the scavenging of washed up oil tankers for bits of copper and valuables.

The relationship between science studies and ecocriticism has been the subject of many debates. Ecocriticism has been accused of not being informed by ecology, evolutionary science or, the philosophy of science. Ursula K. Heise, an ecocritic in her article “Science and Ecocriticism” mentions that science has an important role to play in all ecological debates and that “green criticism risks condemning itself to irrelevance if it ignores the contributions as well as the challenges that the scientific description of nature holds out to aesthetic articulations” (33). Glen Love, an ecocritic in his article “Science, Anti-Science and Ecocriticism” highlights that it is “an ecologically expanded awareness of the social and biological context which encloses the literary act” (75).

Vandana Shiva, an environmental activist, in her article “Ecological Balance in the Era of Globalization” opines that the environmental crises such as global warming, climate change, resource depletion, desertification and extinction of many species, are increasing intensely, leading to “global growth by the destruction of the environment” (55). In this critical time, the proliferation of young adult eco critical literature has been of monumental importance with several young adult authors making increased efforts to write novels in which environment crisis appears as a major theme. The novel *Ship Breaker* brings out the story of Nailer, an impoverished child laborer who lives in a world where oil has exhausted. Bacigalupi explores poverty, class differences, and the conflict between loyalty and survival.

Paolo Bacigalupi in the novel illustrates environmental degradation and its effects. This novel is set during an age, which has witnessed climatic catastrophes of melting ice caps and drowning cities due to global warming. The protagonist Nailer lives in extreme deprivation and survives by selling copper wiring from oil tankers, which had crashed during intense hurricanes, an outcome of ecological imbalance. At a certain point, Nailer saves Nita, the sole survivor of the crashed clipper. Nailer decides to reunite Nita with her father, a wealthy industrialist while weathering enormous industrialists.

The novel uses dystopian frameworks to portray the critical condition of environmental degradation and it reformulates the ideas of power and identity, community and ecology. A dystopia is a community or society that is frightening. It often deals with dehumanization, environmental disaster, or other characteristic features. This eco-crisis happens due to American policy-makers’ overzealous drive for urbanization and economic growth is being carried out at the cost of ecological destruction. Due to this, the young generation is forced to live in a harsh environment. In the novel, the character Nita attributes the deplorable condition of New Orleans to extensive landscaping, which made it more susceptible to hurricanes and reduced the city’s infrastructure to “crumbling edges of concrete and brick undermined by sinkholes” (197).

The novel projects the future effects of slow violence of environmental deterioration in the race of modernization. It is not only an isolated phenomenon but also projected as a problematic outcome of the interlocking forces of capitalism, commodification, consumerism, competition and discrimination. The character Pima in the novel uses the worn-out mask to protect him though it suffocates him at times, “even though he felt like he was smothering every time he sucked humid tropic air through the clogged breath-wet fibers” (3).

The character Pyce underscores factories’ systematic abuse of power to exploit the environment to get profit. Pyce is Nita’s uncle and a major shareholder in Patel Companies. He misuses the company machinery to refine tar holdings and sells them illegally to other countries. In doing so, he accumulates great wealth, but at the cost of environmental deterioration, since refining tar generates a high amount of greenhouse gases and contributes to global warming. Through Pyce’s character, Bacigalupi criticizes the capitalist system which promotes the individual pursuit of opportunism and avarice regardless of its environmental issues. Vandana Shiva, an environmental activist, in her article “Ecological Balance in the Era of Globalization” highlights the ecological destruction which becomes “a major environmental and social subsidy global trade and commerce” to provoke readers to critically question the ramifications of liberalized trade politics (55).

Nita claims that her father is ethnically pure since his company does not deal with tar sands development, but Nailer counters this claim by stating that the same company buys their “blood and rust out on the wrecks for recycling” (194). This process endangers the health and well-being of the workers involved, thereby harming the human environment. In doing so, the novelist clearly shows that the companies are pursuing eco-friendly practices but at the cost of human suffering. Nailer and his friends are forced to earn their livelihoods through ship breaking, which forces young children to crawl into unprotected poisonous oil tankers to extract metal wiring that can be later sold for profit to multinational corporations.

In the current situation, the impulse for development and industrialization demands the exploitation of natural resources. Robert P. Marzec, an ecocritic in his article “Speaking before the Environment: Modern Fiction and the Ecological” mentions that “the drive to ‘overexpose’ the environment for purposes of total control, technological manipulation, economic development creates a world of increasingly dangerous and globally-consequential” events (425). The over use of the environment becomes predicated on the use of force, therefore becoming a prelude to the discussion of a militaristic approach toward the environment.

Nailer is aware of the environment but he does not take any direct action to clear the environmental issues. In doing so, Nailer is accused of being a passive character who resigns himself to the system. The novel evaluates environmental issues in a real-world framework by projecting biological ruin as an outcome of systematic flaws and institutional injustice. It brings out the spillover effects of ecological devastation by focusing on its psychological and physiological impacts.

Thus, the novel *Ship Breaker* offers a more complex rendering of how ecological degradation manifests itself on the social, economic, physiological levels without necessarily casting the issue in a moralistic light. It establishes the importance of eco dystopian young adult novels as effective literary platforms for raising critical awareness about the environment. This study attempts to trigger the eco-consciousness amidst human beings by explicating the destruction done to the environment and thereby enhancing the mutual relationship between the human world and nature.

#### Works Cited

Bacigalupi, Paolo. *Ship Breaker*. Little, Brown and Company, 2010.

Marzec, Robert P. “Speaking before the Environment: Modern Fiction and the Ecological”. *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 55.3 (2009): 419–42. Project Muse.Web. 18 July 2012.

Heise, Ursula. ‘Science and Ecocriticism.’ *Mots Pluriels* 11 (1999): n. p. Web. 20 Sept. 2016.

Love, Glen A. ‘Science, Anti-Science, and Ecocriticism’. *ISLE* 6.1 (Winter 1999): 65- 81. Print.

Shiva, Vandana. “Ecological Balance in an Era of Globalization.” *Global Ethics and*

*Environment*, edited by Nicholas Low, Routledge, 1999. pp: 47-69