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Ecological Concerns in Popular Crime Fiction: Analyzing John Grisham's *The Pelican Brief*

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Abstract:

The traditional focus of crime fiction has been on individual criminal offences against society where the detective allows restoration of social order by recognizing and containing transgressive individuals. Ecological crime fiction centres on modern social anxiety around the degradation of the natural environment and the imminent threat human society is posing to the global environment. Patrick Murphy encouraged eco critics to focus on the study of “nature-oriented mystery novels—with or without detectives, and perhaps even without murders—in order to understand the degree to which environmental consciousness and nature awareness have permeated popular and commercial fiction”. In this paper, I will analyze *The Pelican Brief* by crime writer John Grisham, an environmental thriller that focuses on a corporate criminal conspiracy to acquire an environmentally significant marshland by an oil tycoon. The novel embodies a legal-suspense narrative that is common to Grisham's novels and details a political-industrial collusion where the environmentalist attitude of two Supreme Court justices leads to their assassination, highlighting the great political divide that exists around environmental activism.

Keywords: environmental thriller, crime fiction, popular culture, ecocriticism, detective novel.

Introduction

Crime literature occupies an ever-present space in popular culture. There is a consistent fascination with how crimes and criminals outwit the public and then get outwitted by the omniscient detective figure who fights from the side of injustice. Similar to the crime genre, thrillers consist of an exciting plot which consists of a crime or espionage which often has a major plot-point reveal towards the climax. A close intersection between the two genres occurs

in crime thrillers and legal thrillers which are prominent in popular culture for their exaggerated view of the crime world and the workings of the legal system. This chapter aims to analyze popular legal thriller writer John Grisham's *The Pelican Brief* in order to understand how this genre has evolved from writing about murders and espionage towards more particular crimes such as green crimes which concern societies as a whole and where our modern detective figure fit into a narrative where they no longer deal with singular villains but with larger government and corporate nexus.

The genre of crime fiction thrillers has a distinct oeuvre of sensationalist action which makes the reader feel confused at the beginning, it is only after a series of dramatic incidents that seemingly have nothing to do with each other that everything is explained in one go at the end of the text. It is the climax that ties the narrative together enough for the reader to be able to decipher the motive of the plot. Thrillers lack the distinct rules that govern the world of the detective genre where strict logical actions lead to the solution for the puzzle that the reader and detective figure attempt to solve throughout the text. Thus, plausibility of action is not necessarily present and often the resolution offered does not neatly tie up the loose ends throughout the plot. This penchant for action in crime thrillers also leaps into legal thrillers where the textual focus is more closely on how the judicial system deals with crimes and secures criminals instead of merely focusing on the act of crime itself. Legal thrillers thus have a larger purview than merely detailing how sensational crimes are executed, the larger discussion of the text focuses on how society deals with a certain kind of illegality and how it successfully contains elements that threaten to disturb the social order. What is established in legal thrillers is that despite the robust legal capacities of judicial systems of any nation, application of law remains a difficult task where different parts of government complexes must come together to ensure justice is delivered in practice. We can thus see two major scopes of legal thrillers, The first is to entertain the readers with a sensational plot full of drama and sudden turn of events; the second is to provide a popular version of how legal proceedings occur for the general reader where they can mentally partake in the high stakes world of crime and justice without getting lost in the legal jargon.

Green Crimes

Green crimes refer to the crimes committed against the environment, the term was first coined by criminologist Michael J Lynch in 1990 in his text *Green Criminology and Environmental Crime: Criminology That Matters in the Age of Global Ecological Collapse*. Green criminology is a transgressive criminology that breaks the traditional scope of the field

by not just focusing on the crime but also the concept of ‘harm’ that may occur in future when protective laws are broken. German sociologist Ulrich Beck coined the term ‘risk society’ in 1987 to establish the link between risk in modern society and globalization. Beck argues that as modern society produces newer technologies, it forms new risks that we are required to respond towards. These risks are interconnected with various social and natural complexes. This includes environmental and health risks which stem from global industrial development. In regards to the increasing global environmental awareness, Beck writes, “The new types of risk are simultaneously local and global, or ‘glocal’. Thus it was the fundamental experience that environmental dangers ‘know no boundaries’ that they are universalized by the air, the wind, the water and food chains, which justified the global environmental movement everywhere and brought up global risks for discussion” (Beck 70). We see an emerging concern with ecological destruction being caused by the rapid pace at which globalization is taking place and interconnecting the industrial economies and associated risks with each other. The idea of irreversible environmental damage was occupying not just the minds of academics and governments, it had also begun to permeate the consciousness of the general public. Increasing awareness surrounding ecological destruction was an issue that the global West had to actively address through various green policies and international pacts towards the end of the 20th century when globalization had hit its peak.

This increased public knowledge of ecological crimes and concerns had permeated the popular culture where emerging texts began to address the issue of environmental destruction as a serious possibility. The concept of ecological crimes began to hold an active space in popular imagination where they must be swiftly dealt with to effectively neutralize the threat against society. Critic John Storey provides multiple definitions of what constitutes popular culture in which he offers multiple definitions of what constitutes popular culture, whether it is mass culture which is popular, or products of high culture that remain limited for consumption to certain sections of society. His final definition includes Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony in cultural production where he theorizes popular culture as a site of struggle between the ruling class and subordinate classes to resist the imposition of the dominant ideology. Storey writes, “Popular culture in this usage is not the imposed culture of mass culture theorists, nor is it an emerging from below, spontaneously oppositional culture of ‘the people’. Rather it is a terrain of exchange and negotiation between the two...” (Storey 11). Storey’s definition of popular culture is significant in the context of this research as it establishes that the genre of popular fiction has implications beyond being a form of mass entertainment, it allows the readers a site of resistance against the dominant culture pushed on

them and creates a space for heterogenized discussions on issues of conflict. These issues of conflict discussed in popular fiction address the concerns that have already permeated their collective consciousness.

Crime fiction in particular addresses threats that plague the public imagination, provides a safe space to play out the threats that plague the mass concerns and have them neatly resolved through a detective figure who restores balance by protecting the larger interests of the society. The detective figure thus becomes the enforcer of justice who will ensure scales are tipped back in balance by employing his physical and mental acumen to avert and thwart dangers posed by existing and new coming dangers to society. The above discussion on green crimes and popular culture brings us to the point of intersection between the two where ecological concerns are not a matter of discussion limited to either texts of high culture and academia which uses complex theoretical arguments that the general public may not grasp or show interest in, nor is the issue limited to policymakers who were addressing the issue on national and international level. What we see at the end of the 20th century is a permeation of ecological awareness in popular culture and popular fiction where bestselling authors such as John Grisham decide to incorporate it in their legal thrillers as the central plot point. John Grisham, a lawyer himself, is known for his gripping paperback novels which feature lawyers as the detective figures unravelling complex conspiracies and often involve government and legal agencies as major players. Grisham wrote his first novel in 1984, *A Time to Kill*, and subsequently released *The Firm*, *The Pelican Brief* and *The Client* consecutively each year from 1991-93. All four texts made it to *The New York Times* best-selling list and were adapted into major motion pictures. *The Pelican Brief* was released in 1992 and immediately became a bestseller, and was adapted into a motion picture in 1993 with the same name starring Denzel Washington and Julia Roberts which too went on to earn \$100 million in the domestic market.

The Pelican Brief centres on a criminal conspiracy at the heart of which lies a legally protected marshland with a delicate ecological system. The novel begins with the assassination of two U.S. Supreme Court judges, Abe Rosenberg and Glenn Jensen. Rosenberg gets shot in his own home while Jensen is choked to death in an adult theatre by a hitman Khamel. The novel is a thriller in the true sense and does not limit itself to merely legal courtroom drama and right away moves into the action front. The novel then begins to lay out the details of our protagonist, Darby Shaw, who plays the detective figure in the thriller. In the absence of a traditional police person or detective, journalists and lawyers are often written in as detective figures who pursue justice regardless of personal costs. She discusses the murders of the two judges with her boyfriend and law professor Thomas Callahan and then tries to piece together

the potential connection between the two murders. When Darby comes up with a plausible theory she shares it with Callahan who then enlists help from an old friend and FBI agent Gavin Verheek. The common thread of legal establishments and crimes around it runs through each of Grisham's novels including this text. The rest of the book is a pursuit of the deeper conspiracy that threatens to shake the justice system and how Darby Shaw exposes the collusion between the government and big businesses which stand to profit by altering and influencing the course of the legal systems. The ecological threat this book uses as the central crime is the extinction of a protected species of pelicans.

Detective Figures in Ecological Crime Fiction

The book features two major detective figures who try to unravel the conspiracy surrounding the assassinations. First is law student Darby Shaw, later in the plot she is introduced to an upstanding journalist from the Washington Post named Gary Grantham whose help she enlists to prove that her theory regarding the assassinations is correct. While neither of the characters are traditional detectives, they take their place in moving this legal thriller forward. The classic detective tale has stock roles that feature in each story, most significant to establishing justice being that of the detective and their sidekick. The key development of the traditional detective figure occurs with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes which influenced the development of the golden age detective fiction and the crime fiction genre. Susan Rowland in her paper, 'The "Classical" Model of Golden Age' describes what the traditional detective figure comprised of, "Golden age crime writers placed their faith in the detective, who dominates the plot, organizes the reader's perceptions (or permits his sidekick to do so), and solves the mystery. In some sense "he" always glances back to his literary ancestors, the two, great nineteenth-century detectives, Edgar Allan Poe's C. Auguste Dupin and Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes" (Rowland 118). Rowland's observation applies to the characters of Shaw and Grantham who too imitate the traditional detective figure by relying on their exceptional intelligence to solve the mystery. Shaw, who is only a law student, is shown to have the acumen to connect the two assassinated judges through their ideology regarding environmental conservation. *The Pelican Brief* does not reveal the key information Shaw figures out till much later in the text, keeping the readers guessing as the cat-and-mouse game to hunt and kill Shaw begins.

Detective figures play a specific role within the crime fiction genre which includes legal thrillers. Their mission within the narrative is to correct injustices that are caused by criminals for whom personal gains supersede the larger good of society. Darby Shaw has no personal

connections to the matter of assassinations and thus fits the key bill of a selfless crusader who risks personal safety for the sake of justice. Lee Horsely writes about how detective figures reflect traditional Holmes-esque characters even as the genre diversifies, "Among Doyle's numerous imitators – varying the formula and establishing different character types for the figure of the detective – there are several who in their own ways disrupt the neat pattern of death - detection - resolution, bringing to the fore the divergent possibilities contained within the genre" (Horsley 30). Her place in the text along with journalist Grantham is that of the modern detective who may not deal directly with government and legal agencies but they nevertheless unravel the criminal's plot while trying to evade the professional hitman who wants to kill and silence them at any cost. Thus, even as *The Pelican Brief* does not fit into the traditional detective narrative set-up, it does perform as a divergent narrative of the same genre where the objective of the story is to establish the rule of law back in society after upheaval.

G.K. Chesterton in his essay 'A Defence of Detective Stories' writes:

By dealing with the unsleeping sentinels who guard the outposts of society, it tends to remind us that we live in an armed camp, making war with a chaotic world, and that the criminals, the children of chaos, are nothing but the traitors within our gates. When the detective in a police romance stands alone, and somewhat fatuously fearless amid the knives and fists of a thieves' kitchen, it does certainly serve to make us remember that it is the agent of social justice who is the original and poetic figure, while the burglars and footpads are merely placid old cosmic conservatives, happy in the immemorial respectability of apes and wolves. (Chesterton 22)

Chesterton conceives the detective figure as the one who defends society against dangers outside our society and the ones brought up within, reminding the readers of the ever-present dangers that need to be neutralized. His role is not merely to catch criminal forces but he becomes a symbol of bravery and justice that the society must strive for. On one end of detective narratives, we have the "apes and wolves" who give into baser urges of personal greed and notoriety and on the other end we have the enlightened detective who overcomes not only self-serving interests but also his self-protection to fight for the social order. However, the traditional detective figure has fought against crimes of murder, greed, passion and criminal organizations. A pertinent question arises how does the modern detective figure deal with crimes of nature and crimes committed not by a single enemy or organizations but by larger corporate conglomerates and political communities; how is justice to be delivered when the source of crime is itself elusive? Green criminology and our understanding of green crimes has majorly occurred in the later half of the 20th century, thus its permeation in popular culture has

been fairly recent. Most notably, Scandinavian crime fiction has focused more prominently on green crimes as the central narrative with writers like Peter Høeg and Kerstin Ekman. American crime fiction has not placed a similar emphasis on the issue, however, John Grisham's three environmental crimes-based thrillers all stand to signify a movement towards ecological consciousness.

The modern detective figure is no longer dealing with singular criminals and organizations whom they must defeat in order to restore legal balance. As in the case of *The Pelican Brief*, Darby and Grantham are never able to deliver justice as was done in traditional detective fiction. Traditional detectives like Dupin, Holmes and Poirot are shown to have succeeded at the point of apprehending the criminal or stopping their criminal act from succeeding at the very least. Darby and Grantham are never able to deliver such justice, and Mattiece is shown to be in collusion with the highest office in the nation wherefrom he can't be touched. Throughout the text, not one appearance is made by Mattiece, he is a criminal who never evokes danger through his presence. Justice delivered in regards to Mattiece is also vague with no one knowing his exact location and with the potential of obtaining his arrest warrant. FBI Agent Voyles informs Grantham, "We believe Victor Mattiece to be the prime suspect in the assassinations of Justices Rosenberg and Jensen, and at this time we are attempting to locate him" (Grisham 394). He goes on to add the unlikelihood of justice being delivered, "We'll try to find Mattiece, but it'll be difficult. We have no idea where he is. He's spent most of the past five years in the Bahamas, but owns homes in Mexico, Panama, and Paraguay" (396). The resolution to the text thus remains vague at best. The resolution of the novel is to place the president's office under investigation and to bring to light the reason behind the assassination of the judges. While it is established that the expose regarding the pelican brief would be published in the newspaper, bringing to the public how an intricate conspiracy and assassination was planned in order to commit green crimes in an ecologically sensitive marshland, from the perspective of ecocrimes, no justice is served and no resolution is provided apart from bringing to public attention the importance of aforementioned marshland and the protected species in its habitat.

The one criminal aspect which is punished in the text is not of ecocrimes but that of assassination. Khamel, the hired hitman, is killed by a hired operative of the Central Intelligence Agency before he can assassinate Darby. As an extension of Matteice's criminal agency, we see Khamel's death as a restoration of balance in the scales of justice. However, his death provides no conclusion to the environmental crimes of the text. Grisham leaves the fate of the marshland open-ended with the publication of the investigative report on Matteice's

conspiracy to obtain access to the marshland but no answer is provided as to what actions are taken to actually protect the contested piece of land and its ecosystem. The ecological crime in itself goes unpunished and no sustainable action is mentioned in the text that would be taken to prevent this particular or other such lands from falling into the hands of corporate conglomerates for resource exploitation. Grisham's larger message with the text seems to be towards the side of despondency regarding environmental protection. He uses the text to underline the idea that while the modern detective does fight the good fight, they are not capable of entirely defeating the newer forms of criminality where power is not merely illegally amassed but also maintained legally by unfair political manoeuvrings such as using money to buy influence within the government systems. At no point, Grisham answers how this particular environmental crime is resolved, if there is any legal or political solution provided to this particular case and what is the larger solution to these environmental crimes. The climax of the novel leaves us only with the comfort of the knowledge that appropriate legal actions may be taken in future given the conspiracy has now become a public issue with the printing of Grantham's investigative report. Grisham does not seem to place complete faith in the modern detective figure to be able to resolutely deal with the newer forms of criminality, the reach of the detective remains limited. Ultimately, it is Darby Shaw who flees the country and moves to an unknown location to protect herself from future assassinations that Mattiece may attempt. In Grisham's world, the corporate conglomerates and their heads do not pay the price for their environmental damages but instead, the detective has to deliver some form of justice and then suffer an unjust punishment, in this case, an exile due to fear of life.

Ecological Crime in *The Pelican Brief*

Darby's legal brief details a complex speculation that the two Supreme Court judges were murdered despite their different ideological leanings because of their common interest in protecting the environment. In chapter five, Darby comments on the most significant lack of commonality between the two judges, she says, "That's why they were killed, Thomas. Someone or some group wants a different Court, one with an absolute conservative majority...Kill them now, a year before the election. Makes perfect sense, if one was so inclined" (Grisham 45). Darby and her boyfriend Thomas both discuss the assassination from the perspective of their ideological leanings and how it may impact future governments and the larger legal developments in the country. There is no mention of their opinions on the environment and the strictly political reasoning for the killings could be labelled as a red herring which is found in all types and sub-types of crime and detective literature. The novel

has no interest in right away revealing the idea that it is an ecological crime that is driving forth this criminal enterprise right away, the author is more interested in letting the readers assume that the sinister reason behind these killings was no more than a political conspiracy designed to shift the larger ideological leanings of the Supreme court for creating bias legal policies for coming years.

The entirety of the pelican brief is revealed in chapter twenty-nine, the second half of the book. It is also the first instance where the reader is described the nature of the marshland and its ecological importance. Grisham writes, “The marshlands were a marvel of natural evolution. Using the rich sediment as food, they grew into a green paradise of cypress and oak and dense patches of pickerelweed and bulrush and cattails...The coastal plain was a sanctuary for wildlife” (249-50). There is an establishment of scientific facts regarding the importance of the marshland, there is however a quick shift to underline the resource value of the area which is driving forth the conflict between oil companies and an environmental organization known as Green Fund. Not much is established regarding the history or background of Green Fund but only the fact that their lawsuit had caused massive damage to Matteice’s oil companies’ ambition of dredging a channel through the marshland to allow faster access to oil rigs. Grisham uses sharp commentary to describe the exploitation that began as soon as oil was found in the area. He wrote, “Then oil was discovered there in 1930, and the rape was on” (250). He continues that the drilling began to find oil and the area was “dredged like maniacs” which trapped the saltwater from the Gulf in the canals and released it in the marshland leading to tens of thousands of acres of wetlands being “devoured by the ocean” and the loss continued every year. Grisham’s use of words like “rape” and “devour” signal the violence unleashed upon this land in order to extract all available resources.

Grisham goes on to chart the details surrounding the lawsuit in Louisiana marshland describing Mattiece as using every weapon in his arsenal to gain back control over the oil deposits. He is described as filing motion after motion to dismiss the lawsuit or be allowed to dig while the lawsuit is pending in order to justify the existing investment in the area. Grisham defines the legal process surrounding the dispute to relay the sentiment that the law can be abused by the rich and powerful for their personal benefit. He then introduces the second environmental crime in the marshland which is the near extinction of Louisiana brown pelican due to contamination by DDT and other pesticides. The protection of this highly protected endangered species is used by the plaintiff Green Fund to defend the lawsuit. The issue of species endangerment is not highlighted in the text in the same intensity even as it forms the linchpin of the plotline. Darby’s legal brief is centred on the theory that the protection of the

Louisiana brown pelican is of immense environmental importance and the judges would never allow the oil companies to dredge the land and put the species in extinction. To prevent further delay in this resource extraction and to capture as much of the marshland as he could, Mattiece decided to assassinate the Supreme Court judges, knowing the present judicial bench would never vote in favour of activities that threaten the endangered species. Thus, species extinction due to chemical and pesticide poisoning along with extinction due to human destruction of natural habitats become another prominent environmental crime discussed in the thriller.

Grisham uses geographically accurate locations of Louisiana coastal wetlands which have been disappearing into the Gulf of Mexico due to oil dredging, excessive loss of sediment deposition and increasing sea levels. As recently as 2013, Louisiana officials filed a lawsuit against multiple energy companies for damaging the marshland and affecting the natural ecosystem of the area. The New York Times reported, "The board (Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-East) argues that the energy companies, including BP and Exxon Mobil, should be held responsible for fixing the damage done by cutting thousands of miles of oil and gas access and pipeline canals through the wetlands. It alleges that the network functioned "as a mercilessly efficient, continuously expanding system of ecological destruction..."(Schwartz 1). *The Pelican Brief* may be a fictional work but the environmental crimes it underlines are very real and damaging even 20 years after the publication of the text. The continuous destruction of the marshland has led to thousands of acres of land disappearing in water and most of it is credited to the pipelines dredged for oil and energy companies like BP and Exxon Mobil. Thus while looking at the environmental damage described in the text it cannot be divorced from the reality that these environmental crimes continue even till today. The despondent ending given to the thriller is reflected in the reality of the continuous exploitation of the marshlands, justifying the author's wariness towards finding a strong and sustainable solution to this ecological exploitation.

Green crimes rarely hold the same level of gore and thrill as would crimes like kidnapping, assault and murder. Crimes committed against larger institutions and organizations, even society and the environment at large, do not evoke the same sensationalism as personal crimes like murder or assault. Personal crimes allow the readers to connect with the victim, and empathise with their naivete or helplessness, it also allows the readers to understand the motivations and psychological processes behind the criminal's actions as these are interpersonal crimes allowing a clean placement of blame at the perpetrator. This lack of sensationalism and personal connections explains why most crime fiction and true crime writing is largely around the subject of murder and not crimes against larger groups of society.

This issue holds relevance to our understanding of green crimes as a subject of popular crime writing. This lack of personal and relatable victimization in texts like *The Pelican Brief* would make the reading too dull for the average reader who has grown to expect the thrill associated with interpersonal conflict, thus with a subject like green crime the author has to embellish the narrative with other scenes of action and violence to keep the reader engrossed. John Grisham, a lawyer himself, had become a phenomenon in fiction writing in the 1990s, his crime thrillers featuring on the *New York Times* bestseller list for most of the decade. His first novel *A Time to Kill* was about an African American father avenging the rape and murder of his young daughter by two white supremacist men in a town filled with racial tension. His first bestseller *The Firm* is about a young lawyer who gets caught up in a lucrative job at a legal firm who works for the Chicago mob. *The Rainmaker* and *The Client* similarly have a central character who is at the heart of the narrative. An injustice to a central character spurs the modern detective figure of the lawyer into action against the criminal or the criminal syndicate. What remains static in most narratives are the three key aspects of a wronged victim, a criminal and the detective character who takes it upon himself to resolve the injustices. *The Pelican Brief* differs from the above-stated texts by Grisham as the central victim is not the judges who are assassinated, it is a legally protected marshland. The victim being an inanimate entity complicates the narrative as it can neither defend itself nor can we relate as closely as we can to a living being. The novel thus initiates the narrative without right away delving into the complexity of environmental exploitations at the hands of the government and private organizations. We instead see a narrative that puts assassination and a hitman's crimes on centre stage in the beginning so that the expected momentum of a thriller is maintained. The green crime of the narrative serves as the final stop to a series of murders and adrenaline-filled action and chases, maintaining the urgency of jumping from one suspense to the next associated with the thriller genre.

Placing Ecological Crimes within Crime Fiction Genre

Grisham has written two other legal thrillers which focus on environmental crimes. *The Appeal* was written in 2008 and focused on the environmental crime of carcinogenic pollution due to a chemical company knowingly seeping its toxic pollutants into the water supply of Mississippi City. The novel follows two attorneys who fight on behalf of a woman who lost both her son and husband to carcinogen pollution and how the potential Mississippi Supreme Court justice nomination Ron Fisk continues to side with the chemical corporation even after grave personal costs to protect his image and new found wealth. Fisk is dealt as a pawn similar

to *The Pelican Brief*'s Supreme Court justices; the plot centres on how the justice system can be manipulated to allow environmental crimes to go unpunished and how larger policies around environment protection and conservation can be changed. The novel deals with the subject of corporate responsibility towards the environment, green crimes committed by large corporations for institutional profit and lastly the issue of personal responsibility towards the environment and society. The larger question Grisham poses through the text is whether personal gains can outweigh the larger environmental costs, the novel ends with now-appointed Supreme Court judge Ron Fisk willing to live with the consequences of defending the chemical corporation even as his son passes away to avoid looking like a fool who got tricked. The second text on environmental crimes by John Grisham is *Gray Mountain*, published in 2014. *Gray Mountain* focuses on coal mining as the central environmental crime in the Appalachian Mountains in the U.S.A. The novel follows lawyer Samantha Kofer who fights on behalf of coal mine workers in the area, many of whom have worked themselves to the point of falling sick and the lack of safety measures from the business' end has led to the deaths of a few workers. What further worsens the situation is the contamination of the town's water supply from coal mining waste. The novel thus explores the theme of direct labour and environmental exploitation as well as degradation and contamination of natural resources due to unlawful practices.

The Pelican Brief cannot be simply classified as a legal thriller or crime fiction alone, the text does involve murder but it diverges from the traditional path of crime detection to find resolutions for larger concerns around environment and politico-corporate collusion. Green crimes and green criminology do not figure in any other popular writing of John Grisham, this text thus features a notably riskier plot setting where the real criminal motivation is not direct destruction of a person, place or institution but rather a slow corrosion of a natural habitat of a protected pelican species. When the danger is not imminent but rather a slow policy change that would lead to a corporate acquirement of a piece of land, one can argue how it fits into a genre where a quick succession of events is what allows a traditional experience of thrill and fascination. Oil has been an issue of great political turmoil in the United States of America. U.S. foreign oil dependence has been blamed for many wars waged in the East, wherefrom its fuel is sourced. This resource war has had an excessive impact on nations' domestic and foreign policies. Jeff D. Colgan writes in his text *Oil, Conflict and U.S. National Interest* that one-quarter to one-half of interstate wars since 1973 have been linked to oil-related conflict. He also underlines how the U.S. in particular has seen public speculation regarding whether wars were fought for just causes or as a garb to hide oil interests. He writes, "In U.S. public debates

about the 1991 and 2003 Iraq wars, both sides focused excessively on the question of whether the United States was fighting for possession of oil reserves; neither sought a broader understanding of how oil shaped the preconditions for war” (Colgan 1). While we cannot get into the broader policy analysis of oil-related wars, we must focus on the cue of how the public perception of these wars was formed. In the 1990s, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait led to an oil price shock in the U.S. where oil prices rose and there was an acute shortage, this was resolved only after U.S.-led coalitions led military interventions against Iraqi forces in 1991. This would have led to public anxiety regarding resource availability both domestically and abroad, oil being an essential commodity would have affected the everyday lives of U.S. citizens.

Crime fiction can be viewed as a response to social disorganization. When there is unrest in society, the reader seeks order and social stability through the resolution of fictional crime and chaos. Thus the stability that is not available in fact can be experienced in fiction. The oil crisis of 1990 in the U.S. followed by the Iraq invasion in 1991 would have created chaos in public lives, a response to which can be found in the popular writings in the coming years in the United States of America. John Grisham falls within this purview, as does *The Pelican Brief* which deals with ‘petro-crimes’ right after the oil crisis of the nation. ‘Petro-crimes’ can be defined as crimes that centre around the illegal extraction of oil or crimes committed to stealing and possession of oil resources. They feature in crime fiction and often in war fiction where oil resources are a fundamental reason for military engagement. *The Pelican Brief*’s criminal has the primary motivation of being able to extract oil and profit from the sale of oil resources. It could be extrapolated that the preceding circumstances of the oil shortage in the nation may have impacted the novel’s popularity; the text would have provided a narrative on a subject fresh in the public memory. William H. Simon writes in *Moral Pluck: Legal Ethics in Popular Culture* about how popular culture portrays lawyering as different from reality by creating cases where the protagonist lawyer takes an anti-establishment stand against the corrupt government and private corporations. Simon argues, “The authoritarianism of Conformist Moralism implies a consistently benign and reliable state. But popular culture warns that the state is often incompetent or corrupt and draws attention to the frightening and unjust consequences of its failing” (Simon 425). Simon’s argument fits with Grisham’s treatment of government and legal institutions, all of which overlook the obvious crimes being committed right under their nose, or worse the institutions condoning the crimes.

The text creates a contempt for not only governments but also big businesses and corporates which become larger-than-life entities who attempt domination via criminal conspiracies. Victor Mattiece, the owner of the oil corporation in *The Pelican Brief* is

characterized as a politically powerful businessman with seemingly vast powers to control government policies. Grisham writes, "Because Mattiece had money, he was a popular man with the politicians and bureaucrats. He played their game skilfully. He sprinkled money around where needed" (Grisham 251). In a later discussion between Grantham and his colleagues Feldman and Keen, the discussion over Matteice's reach in a political circle is brought up again. When asked about how much Mattiece must have paid the current president, Grantham responds, "Millions. Virtually all of it through a myriad of PACs that he controls. This guy is very smart. He's got all kinds of lawyers, and they figure out ways to funnel money here and there. It's probably legal" (Grisham 266). Mattiece is almost a ghost figure, never seen nor acting directly in the text, Darby talks about how he has dropped out of sight and is "now believed to live in several places" (258). This creates an aura of the criminal being unreachable and feeds into the grandiosity of the criminal conspiracy.

Conclusion

All three of Grisham's environmental thrillers follow the common thread of bigger corporations posing risks to the environment and causing deaths due to negligence of environmental guidelines. Two of the texts, *The Pelican Brief* and *The Appeal* also follow similar ideas of the legal institutions being influenced and governments being coerced to overlook green crimes and collude with the corporations. This may reflect the popular anxiety in public discourses about the legal and government elected officials overlooking the larger good of society for personal benefits. This leaves the morally sound up-and-coming lawyer to become the agent of justice who will protect the people's interest when government bureaucrats prove to be inefficient and arrogant. Green crimes thus become more complex than personal crimes due to it being a part of public governance. these are not matters resolved between two warring individuals or groups of individuals, these are public matters with heavy financial interests invested in them. Author Laura Westra in her text *Ecoviolence and the Law: Supranational Normative Foundation of Ecocrime*, attempts to place ecological crimes as "just crimes" that require punishment to deter them and places the responsibility on the legal courtrooms to provide a systemic solution to prevent environmental crimes. Westra writes, "(ecocrimes) should be viewed as an attack on life, a form of violence to natural system's structure and functions, hence, to all living things at the macro level, and an assault on human life..." (Westra xiii). Her argument functions in tandem with *The Pelican Brief's* treatment of green crimes where nature is regarded as the victim by courts but it is only after there is human victimization in the form of assassination that the grave nature of ecological violence is brought

back into focus from backburner. Westra further argues in *The Corporation and the Environment* regarding the delayed effects of environmental crimes where the resultant damage is visible only years later, allowing current practices to manifest without intervention. Wester argues, “There is a correspondence of sorts between “normal” industrial accidents and failures in biodiversity conservation. Unfortunately, rather than manifesting themselves through sudden disaster, failures and accidents in conserving biodiversity, like human health effects, take months or years to appear” (Westra 669). Westra’s argument can be built upon to extrapolate that delayed legal response and lack of prioritization given to green crimes may be due to the delayed effect of the crime; it is tougher to generate a public and legal response when the result of the crime is not existent yet. In the text, Darby and Grantham discuss the slow and complex process through which the lawsuit on the contested marshland would move and when asked how long the Supreme Court would take to give its final decision, Darby responds, “Anywhere from three to five years” (256). It is when the case finds human victim representation, the legal response is swifter and sterner with potential arrest warrants for Mattiece and investigations launched into the collusion between the president’s office and the oil corporation.

Through *The Pelican Brief*, John Grisham offers a fast-paced thriller on the subject of environmental crimes which have not found popularity in the genre due to its slow pacing and lack of relatable human victims. The text offers a blend of concern for modern environmental crimes along with the necessary twists and turns expected of the thriller genre, allowing a turn towards modern forms of crime that are capable of causing equal harm to society as traditional crimes even if there is no direct, outward violence. The text allows the readers to find a detailed yet understandable version of ecological crimes that may otherwise not be easily understandable. It also allows the reader to reflect on the growing concerns in the public arena regarding the consequences of unchecked industrial development at the cost of environmental negligence. In this sense, popular crime fiction such as Grisham’s work helps to not only understand the current concerns regarding social disturbances but also simultaneously allows the readers to understand complex social and environmental crimes without the message getting lost in a deeply linguistic register of scientific or legal jargon. Further, through the modern detective figure we see how popular crime fiction is attempting to find responses to these newer forms of criminality where neither guilt can be squarely placed on a single individual or organization and neither is delivering justice a simple task of revealing the criminal attentions and bringing it to the authorities. There is a deeper apprehension in eco crime texts regarding finding a just response to ecocrimes where the government and other

protective agencies may be in collusion and the future of environmental policy-making may be more dependent on profit-making than the actual task of environmental conservation. Thus, we can safely conclude that ecological crimes have found an exploration in popular crime fiction where writers like Grisham are trying to write the modern detective as a figure of limited hope, however, the growing environmental concerns ensure that more space would be provided to deal with such modern forms of criminality which threaten existence of not just one particular society but all of humanity.

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