



A Metabolic Rift Within the Tides: A Marxist Ecocritical Reading of “Rise: From One Island to Another”

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Abstract:

This paper presents a Marxist-Ecocritical analysis of the poem “Rise: From One Island to Another”, by examining the effects of climate crisis and capitalist accumulation by drawing on the cheap nature model proposed by Jason W. Moore, the concept of fossil capital and the idea of metabolic rift developed by John Bellamy Foster. The study explores how peripheral island communities are systematically exploited and sacrificed to sustain metropolitan growth. Furthermore, it integrates the concept of slow violence as explained by Rob Nixon in order to articulate the gradual mechanics of submersion of the islands. Ultimately, by applying Donna Haraway’s Chthulucene, the analysis highlights an emergence of radical horizontal solidarity forged across dispossessed geographies as resistance against the environmental devastation that is inflicted upon them.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Metabolic Rift, Cheap Nature, Slow Violence, Chthulucene.

Introduction:

The global climate crisis is no longer a distant threat. It is a real, tangible rupture in the Earth's ecosystem which manifests itself through catastrophic wildfires, erratic weather-patterns, sea-levels rising at an exponential rate, ice-caps melting at an unprecedented speed and rapid destabilization of once-permanent ice sheets. While mainstream discourse around this subject continues to identify the primary instigators of climate crisis as technical aspects of production such as combustion of fossil fuels, deforestation at an industrial scale and burgeoning levels of greenhouse effect, these symptoms are often divorced from the socioeconomic engines that drive them forward relentlessly. By shifting the focus from individual consumption habits to examining the endless drive for industrial expansion in a relentless pursuit for profit, we soon come to the realization that environmental decay and the resulting climate crisis is not an accidental by-product of progress, but rather a core structural necessity for maintaining the current global order.

Contemporary discourse surrounding environmental collapse mostly deals with familiar abstractions of the Anthropocene, a term that identifies the entire human species as a singular, powerful and most importantly, undifferentiated biological force that is responsible for climate change on a planetary scale. By framing climate crisis as an inevitable result of human nature and quest for survival, important conversations revolving around deep historical inequities of colonialism and industrialization are flattened, trivialized and marginalized. Doing so effectively grants a species-wide pardon to the specific economic systems perpetrated by a select few. This abstraction functions as a conceptual veil which helps obscure the reality of the fact that climate crisis is not a universal human failing, but rather a localized product of the global elite and the capitalist structures they command. The poem, "Rise: From One Island to Another", a collaborative effort between Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Aka Niviâna, also refuses

such generalizations. Instead, it offers a materialist mapping of the melting glaciers of Greenland to the inundated shores of the Marshall Islands to the global economic base.

At the heart of this critique lies a theory which has evolved for over almost a century. Discussed in the article “Marx’s Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology”, the Metabolic Rift is a concept which explains the irreparable break in the cyclical engagement that occurs between humans and the planet caused by capitalist modes of production (Foster, “Marx’s Theory of Metabolic Rift” 366-370). In “Rise”, as the poets speak across a massive ocean, they not only lament the fast pace at which their homelands are reaching the brink of destruction, but also trace the flow of capital across the world that necessitates the commodification and exploitation of the natural world; their world. The poem sheds light on the violence of climate crisis and creates a great sense of urgency, leading to immediate concern for their respective islands. The poem also serves as a revolutionary text where Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna reclaim their land by bringing to light indigenous kinship by stressing vehemently on their inherent value and need for agency to be able to tell their own story out loud. By reading the poem through an Eco-Marxist lens, this paper intends to explore how “Rise” uses the superstructure of art to challenge the economic realities of the base through indigenous resistance.

From the very onset, Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna establish a strong trans-indigenous solidarity that transcends the geographic distance between their respective islands. By addressing each other as “sister”, they create a bond of sisterhood that goes beyond that of the two poets but also ties their homelands together, as if Greenland and the Marshall Islands were sister lands. The creation of this sisterhood is a radical step towards recentering from margins they have been pushed to and reclaiming their story, and their agency.

Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner introduces the “shells” from Bikini Atoll and Runit Dome – both of which are sites of catastrophic nuclear testing done by the United States of America in the

Marshall Islands (U.S. Department of Energy). Aka Niviâna introduces the “stones” from Nuuk in Greenland, which is suffering from a rapid retreat of melting polar ice sheets due to global warming and has the capability of increasing sea levels across the world by twenty-three feet if all the ice was to melt (Hanlon-Warren). By grounding “Rise” in material reality, the poets are able to link Marshallese atolls and the Greenlandic glaciers with a shared sense of identity, history, exploitation, fate and survival. When the poets invoke the stories of sisters from Ujae or that of Sassuma Arnaa while addressing each other as “sisters”; they rebuke the capitalist view of land. They show that their islands are not just vulnerable little pieces of land caught in the spiral of climate change, but also ancient land, alive with stories and whose spiritual depth directly contradicts the deadened view of nature. The poem demands a radical reimagining of geography, and acceptance of the fact that the world is bound be shared ecological and economic fates.

Metabolism of the Greenlandic-Marshallese Rift:

The 19th century soil exhaustion crisis had led to Justus Freiherr von Liebig, a pioneer in agricultural chemistry from Germany to put forward the argument in his book *Letters on Modern Agriculture* that capitalist forms of agriculture was inherently a parasitic system which extracted nutrients from the soil, without a care of sustainability, until the point of total depletion (182-186). Over time, this concept evolved with another revolutionary philosopher, Karl Marx theorizing in the first of his groundbreaking series, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume I*, about the way the “circulation of matter between man and soil” (Marx 329) is disturbed as a result of growing capitalist systems which create a concentration of population in cities. This leads to an irreplaceable gap between the farmlands in the countryside, which gets closer to death with every passing season; and the overcrowded cities, that begin overflowing with toxic waste.

The idea was later applied at a planetary level in *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (2000), a book by John Bellamy Foster where he identified multidimensional rifts in the deep bond humanity shares with nature – a physical disruption of nutrient cycles (162 – 163), a geographical rift resulting out of an imperialist style extraction of resources (154) and alienation of the human spirit from the natural world as a result of humans separated from Earth (72). The poem “Rise” links two disparate geographies – Greenland lying in the North Atlantic Ocean (Rasmussen) and Marshall Islands situated in the Pacific Ocean (Kiste) – as a way to show that the rift has moved beyond its humble origins in the farmlands and spread its tendrils across the globe, by manifesting itself in the carbon cycle of the planet as well as the consciousness of the very people that call this planet their home.

In “Rise”, the rift is manifesting physically in the shape of, “the tide / that comes for us faster / than we’d like to admit” (Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna, lines 61 - 63) and “our glaciers groaning / with the weight of the world’s heat” (Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna, lines 73 - 74). This image of a fast-approaching catastrophe connects the Greenlandic icy islands covered in snow to the sandy old beaches of Marshallese Island so intricately that, despite the huge distance between them, they come across as two fraying ends of a broken metabolic circuit. The “heat” mentioned here is a direct reference to greenhouse gases choking the atmosphere and rising temperatures due to uncontrolled capitalism based on fossil fuels. The “airports underwater / bulldozed reefs, blasted sands” (Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna, lines 65 - 66) are symbols of commodification of nature birthed from fossil capitalism in a globalised world. It is merely an obstacle meant to be decimated for the sake of real estate or infrastructure. These activities are literal scars on the rift surrounding the ecology of Marshall Islands. The poem tries to warn readers of the very real ramifications of such activities by painting a haunting image of a near future where inhabitants of the island will be forced to “imagine / turning ourselves to stone” (Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna, lines 70 - 71). It imagines a future where people will be so

cut off from their organic connection to the planet that they will end up becoming a part of the dead capital, the stone and the concrete, that is being used to build this economy.

The Violence of Capitalism:

Jason W. Moore critiques anthropocentric thinking in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the crisis of Capitalism* (2016) where he invokes the concept of Green Arithmetic which relies on a flawed dualistic belief that society and nature are two separate things and suggests that as long as we see them as separate systems, we will never be able to understand how they intertwine with each other to form a single, integrated web of life (2-5). By connecting the nature/society dualism to other kinds of binaries such as racism and sexism, Moore likens the former to tools of violence and exclusion.

The poem “Rise” rejects the society/nature dualism and presents the world as an inseparable, bleeding whole. By treating the island of sand and the island of ice as part of the same being, the poets are able to connect the melting ice in Greenland to the rising sea level of Marshall Islands and show the metabolic flow of water as a geological event, a cultural event and a catastrophic event. It also goes on to show that the two are linked together by the heat of capitalism. The Cheap Nature model (97-109) proposed by Moore can also be used to understand the systemic oppression faced by the islands and the islanders themselves. An analysis of the profitable system of capitalism exposes how both the islands have been “cheapened” by global powers when they were treated as empty frontiers of nuclear testing and resource extraction.

The poem keeps the sites of Runit Dome and Bikini Atoll in the centre of their narrative which helps showcase them as a strong symbol of imperialistic powers violently trying to maintain their hold over those they deem less, and exploiting the cheapened nature, life and labour in the process. While on one hand, the world is lost in a haze of “oil-slicked dreams”, the Cheap Energy model (Patel and Moore) goes on to show that these dreams serve as the

engine of the capitalocene. The loss of animal habitat and the very real threat to their homes invokes the concept of the Wasetocene (Moore) where environments and human beings are both laid to waste to keep the capitalist economy running while the rift keeps widening. By invoking the “colonizing monsters” and the “beasts”, the poets also align with the theory of racial capitalism (Robinson) which postulates that extraction of value from earth has always been based on colonial and racial hierarchies. These beasts who have the power to decide who lives and who dies are the agents of an oppressive system that view these islands as resources to exploit and consume. Because the Global North has historically framed life in colonized regions as racially inferior, it simultaneously reduced their lands, lives and status to status of the sacrificial.

The artificial divide that has been constructed between society and nature acts as a psychological blindfold that makes the cheap nature model seem not only logical, but also inevitable. The line “as I watch this land / change / while the world remains silent”, (Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna, lines 78 - 80) acts as a haunting reminder of the fact that people have become conceptually insulated to the very real and damaging ways in which climate crisis is unfolding and that anything can even be done about it. The poem is a refusal to stay a prisoner to the society/nature dualism. When Moore describes the capitalist engine that runs the world, in his article, as a three-pronged mechanism of “world-money, world power and world ecology” (Moore, “The Capitalocene, Part I” 614), one is forced to acknowledge the ways in which empires, enterprises and markets have re-engineered the relationship between nature, money and power to maintain a global hegemony. The poets draw the reader’s attention to landscapes that have been permanently forced to change due to a capitalist economy. The “colonizing monsters” mentioned in the poem are the ones that profit from metabolic rift while the islands are the first ones to pay the physical price of the fossil fuelled luxury.

The violence shown by the poets in “Rise”, is not just physical but also ontological, as it shows how the machinery has decided to place the value of one person’s dream to live in the lap of luxury created in the pits of fossil economy is more important than another’s erosion of home and imminent death. By centering the voices of indigenous women, it could be said that the poem re-values what capitalism had deemed to be inferior and cheap. It rejects the either/or organization of society and shows that the cheapening of the Arctic ice is leading to the destruction of the pacific islanders. On a more ominous note, the indigenous voices also point out that their destruction would not be an isolated event that the world can conveniently forget about. They warn that though the destruction approaches the islands faster, the hubs of power and capital are also set to meet a similar end, if no action is taken and attitudes are not changed. The poem demands that we view the water, the islands, the islanders and everything and everyone else on the planet not as cheap resources, but rather as interconnected nodes entwined within the planetary ecosystem.

Fossil Capital and the Mechanics of Submersion:

Fossil Economy has been theorized to be a tool used to maintain class power (Malm 15 - 68). And in doing so, the capitalist enterprises have detached themselves from the constraints of nature. “Rise” makes a bold request from the world through the lines “we demand that the world see beyond / SUV’s, ac’s, their pre-package convenience / their oil-slicked dreams” (Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna, lines 120 - 122). By referring to these material artefacts of fossil capital (Malm 58 - 59), the poets highlight the class politics and the way these conveniences have become an integral part of people’s lives in developed nations. The cost of this once again is the widening metabolic rift.

The evocative “oil-slicked dreams” is a strange juxtaposition of the human state. While on one hand, dreams would suggest something abstract, incorporeal and metaphysical in nature; the oil refers to a very real and corporeal truth which can be extracted from deep within

the Earth's crust. While dreams are light and are born in an instant, the oil is a result of geological compression of massive amounts of prehistoric organic matter and pressure over eons. The fact that both are in a state of "flow" only adds to the irony of the conundrum humanity has found itself in. In order to keep the abstract dreams of humanity alive, a system has been created in the shape of capitalism that allows it to swallow this ancient force of nature – leaving a dead Earth in its wake.

It is, however, crucial to recognize that capital generated through fossil fuels, cheap labour, relentless extraction and reckless attitudes have triggered the mechanics of submersion, a fast-approaching calamity the poem cautions the world against. The submersion is also on a psychological level where people have accepted the narrative set afloat by capitalism that destruction of the planet is a small price one has to pay for development and growth of humanity. It has become somewhat of an impossibility for people to dream of a future without dreaming of the energy that builds it; even if that energy eventually drowns the dream.

Slow Violence of an Invisible War:

An important reason as to why people are unable and unwilling to understand the true cost of fossil-fuelled dreams is because the kind of violence carried out by capitalist excavators of the Earth is so gradual and cumulative in nature that they lack the visceral spectacles one generally associates with traditional forms of warfare. This idea is explored in Rob Nixon's definition of slow violence in his book *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor* where he calls it a phenomenon that occurs "gradually and out of sight...dispersed across time and space" (Nixon 2). As a result, they are not picked up by media cycles that thrive on sensational news for a society whose attention spans are declining by the day. The environmental destruction of Marshall Islands and Greenland has been unfolding over a long span of time and lacks the spectacle. However, the poets in "Rise" use potent visceral imagery, a sense of urgency and grim warnings about the fate of the world, that makes the invisible, visible.

Nuclear detonations executed by the American Government between 1948 and 1958 on Marshall Islands as a testament of the violence committed against a people and their home on a temporal and geographical level have been discussed by Nixon (7). The poem talks about several injustices that have occurred against the indigenous land as a result of foreign meddling. Right from “wars” that were “inflicted” on the people like wounds that have yet not healed to their nuclear waste infested waters and glaciers that are groaning, as in pain, under the weight of the ongoing violence of capitalism; the poem bridges the gap between historical military trauma and contemporary ecological collapse. This is a brand of violence that began decades ago when nuclear tests were conducted in the Pacific, and that continues even today in the shape of rising water levels that threaten their existence with every passing day. By bringing these two disparate islands together, the poets force the readers to see the cumulative impact of “slow” catastrophes. This challenges the narrative set forth by the fossil economy about climate change being a natural inevitability of growth and development, rather than a direct consequence of industrialized economic warfare. “Rise” manages to represent “slow-violence” in a way that demands urgent political action by juxtaposing their “years” and “months” not as a distinct abstract future but as a ticking countdown to a second sacrifice of indigenous lives.

The Global City and the Sacrificial Countryside:

The relationship between the global cosmopolis and the rural periphery is observed, studied and critiqued in the pivotal *The Country and the City* (2011) by Raymond Williams. Through this text, Williams deconstructs the division of the world into the idyllic rustic rural past and an industrial urban future. He argues that urban centres maintain an exploitative relationship with the countryside, as shown effectively in the poem “Rise”. The city/mainland and urban centres have a habit of portraying places like Marshall Islands and Greenland as remote islands; pristine and untouched by humans. However, the poem shatters this misconception by bringing to light historical evidence of exploitation and geological trauma.

This alienates an already marginalized land, its resources, its bio-diversity and its people even further.

The poem centres the lived realities of these regions. It shows glaring intrusions in the form of “wars” and “bulldozed reefs” and “glaciers groaning” and “mourning landscapes”. A sense of looming threat of rising sea levels and the impending doom of all life that resides on the islands is ever-present throughout the poem. The idyllic nature of the western pastoral is countered by the “rage” with which nature reacts against her aggressors in the poem. These depictions force the reader to recognize the fact that these landmasses are not as disconnected from modernity as one was led to believe. It however, also acts as the very site of raw violence of global industrialization as well as the hidden price that humans pay for modern technologies.

By listing cities like “Miami, New York, Shanghai, Amsterdam, London”, the poets directly juxtapose global financial hubs against the drowning marginalized islands, which helps throw light on the issue of uneven development across the world. These cities, which form a part of the important power centres of the Global North, are not merely a product of strong institutions backed by meritocracy, but have in fact sustained and flourished through appropriation of physical resources from the Global South in what can be described as a process termed as “unequal exchange” (Hickel et al.) While the poem accuses the Global North of reaping the benefits of the capital, the islands are relegated to merely “the land / of survivors” who are constantly bearing the brunt of this ecological fallout. The poem, thus exposes the deep-seated connection between air-conditioned luxury apartments in London and New-York to the melting ice caps in Greenland and structural erosion of Marshallese islands.

With regards to Jason W Moore’s Marxist ecocritical idea of Cheap Nature which critically studies the systematic devaluation of “labor-power, food, energy and raw materials” (Moore 285), it can be argued that while the Marshall Islands have been used as a cheap laboratory of nuclear testing, the melting ice-caps of Greenland is being treated like a cheap

indicator of climate change that the west can observe from a distance and remain untouched by it. These islands are sacrificial zones essential to the survival of the capitalist city but excluded not only from its benefits, but also its protection.

Rising Collectively: A Horizontal Alliance of the Dispossessed

Although the poem, “Rise” is a lament of the destruction of indigenous land and life, it is also underscored with a strong sense of resistance against the capitalocene which aligns profoundly with Donna Haraway’s concept of the “Chthulucene” in her radical work *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) which describes it as an era of “ongoingness” (Haraway 3) where the task is to recognize and reclaim the Truth that there exists a deep level of interconnectedness between everything on the planet on a molecular level and that this level of interconnectedness causes organisms, species and places to live and die with each other.

Haraway’s framework emphasizes that nothing and no-one is truly isolated in this world. The literal and metaphorical journey from one island to another functions as a poetic enactment of this. By weaving together the struggles of different geographies, separated by great metabolic rifts, the poets refuse the capitalist logic of them being sacrifice zones for the sake of their own development. What they propose in its place is a kind of global solidarity of the dispossessed that finds strength in shared vulnerability. The seeds of this solidarity are also further fortified by Immanuel Wallerstein’s “World System Theory” which is defined as a “social system, one that has boundaries, structures, member groups, rules of legitimation, and coherence” (qtd. in Martinez-Vela 3). As the world is structured between the core and the periphery, this bifurcation is maintained through what Wallerstein terms as “unequal exchange” where the surplus is transferred from a labour-intensive periphery to high-technology core zones (Goldfrank, qtd. in Martinez-Vela 4). However, this dominant exploitative relationship is not to last forever.

As hegemony is temporary and subject to class-struggles, the system faces a revolutionary break where the exploited organize themselves across borders which suggests that the internal tensions of the world-system swirling between imperialist accumulation and global class struggle will eventually foster a trans- border solidarity powerful enough to smash through hegemonic structures. A close reading of the poem hints at the fact that when the poets engage in conversation with each other and their readers about the capitalist transgressions against them and theirs, and tries to and tries to bridge the rift by showing solidarity towards one another, is a brazen suggestion of the fact that the ultimate challenge to capitalism will come from the Global south once they recognize their shared position as the systemic victim.

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