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Life in the Anthropocene: Re-Thinking Human Identity

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Abstract

This paper argues that ecological imbalance in the Twenty-First Century has generated a concern about re-thinking human identity vis-à-vis other life forms and elements. Humans have alienated themselves from the environment and other life forms in their race for advancement and progress. The segregation of humans from trees, animals, and nature has resulted in a bio-threat. Thinking beyond human identity implies focusing on decentering the anthropocentric universe, giving way to other life forms, and making human identity more inclusive instead of reducing it to a four-walled, sanitized air-conditioned room. The extreme divide between humans and other life forms has threatened their adaptability, immunity, and survival capacity. Identity cannot be inscribed in one form or body but as an extension of this bodily existence, as a network of interlinked human-animal-plant life and their relationship to the ecosystem. This understanding and realization particularly becomes important for corporate sectors in understanding the nature of humans and their resources. Human beings are not only organisms but also a part of a network and shared existence linked with nature and other beings. The exploitation of resources (natural or human) may appear lucrative at one point, but it eventually leads to drastic consequences, often irreparable, in the long run. Natural calamities in the present millennium draw attention towards the long-established conflict between the human world and the world of other beings. One way to address this gap is by extending the notion of human identity, which is more assimilative and inclusive.

Keywords: Autopoietic, Sympoietic, Anthropocentric Process-Product Model, Anthropocene, Capitalocene

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Introduction

The Twenty-First Century started with the coronavirus pandemic and continued to be affected by natural calamities, wars, and global disasters. In light of such ecological imbalance, it is imperative for human beings to re-look, re-visit, and re-define our perception and approach towards our identity. Identity forms an intrinsic part of our existence and survival. It creates a sense of purpose in our lives. Different civilizations vary in their take on identity. Western civilization bases its notion of "bare life" and "a purported opposition between bios and zoē" (Aristotle; Agamben 1995, 2005, 2009; Finlayson, 2010). Eastern civilization has more or less continued to be pantheistic in its approach and spirit. On the one hand, Western Civilization struck the world with its Renaissance, Enlightenment, Industrial, Scientific, and Technological Revolutions, Colonization, and finally culminated in the global-capital-commercial order spreading in the world. On the other hand, Eastern civilization, following its Western colonizer, adhered to the market-economy model. Since the Renaissance, the extreme importance given to human beings created an anthropocentric global order, and this anthropocentrism was based on humans in power. The sense of identity thus formed was based on the "anthropocentric process-product model," in which the activities and products that were human-centric were produced and promoted. Human Beings derive their identity materially through the body and philosophically through the soul. Likewise, identity is derived from society, culture, and place, as is seen in various disciplines. In sociology, Emile Durkheim points out that humans are basically social beings. Aristotle has seen human beings as political animals. Economics is dominated by the idea of homo economicus, which sees humans as a resource. Anthropology classifies the current species as *homo sapiens sapiens*, meaning "wise, wise human".

This paper argues that while our focus remains on human beings as the locus, the other life forms (plants, trees, animals, nature) are subjected to ignorance. While human beings are seen as social beings, the sociality of plants and animals is often neglected. Sociality is described essentially as a human quality asserting the superiority of humans. In the thesis submitted to the Master of Environmental Studies in Planning, University of Waterloo, M. Beth L. Dempster contrasts between two types of systems, sympoietic and autopoietic:

> Autopoietic (self-producing) systems are autonomous units with self-defined boundaries that tend to be centrally controlled, homeostatic, and predictable.

> Sympoietic (collectively-producing) systems do not have self-defined spatial or temporal boundaries. Information and control are distributed among components. The systems are evolutionary and have the potential for surprising change. Since they cannot be identified by boundaries, sympoietic systems must be identified by the self-organizing factors involved in their generation. (v)

Background

There can be two propositions: Firstly, qualities so far thought of as human are not only human but natural, ubiquitous, and belong to all living beings. Secondly, it is not an independent, individual, and bodily attribute; rather, it is a quality of interaction, inter-dependence, or network that forms the basis of life. Human identity as perceived through continuous proliferation through stratification, classification, differentiation, and hierarchization cannot be inscribed within a system of qualifying and identifying human bodies; it has to be understood as a system of networks between other humans, animals, plants, and elements. This emphasizes the need to define identity vis-à-vis all life forms (including humans, animals, and plants). It is important for thinking, as Donna Haraway (2016) points out, "about rehabilitation (making livable again) and sustainability amidst the porous tissues and open edges of damaged but still ongoing living worlds, like the planet Earth and its denizens in current times being called the Anthropocene" (37).

Theoretically, this can be seen in the context of Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Eco-Technology, and 'Coronadamics.' Anthropocene is regarded as the geological time in Earth's history which led to the rise of humans and their influence and control on the climate and conditions of the earth (Lewis & Maslin, 2015; Angus, 2016; Moore, 2016; Figueroa, 2017; Denny, 2017; Fremaux, 2019; Reiss, 2019; DeLoughrey, 2019; Hornborg 2019). It is believed that it started from the invention of the wheel, the invention of fire, knowledge of metallurgy, the Columbian Exchange, Industrial Revolution, Technological and Digital Revolution which enabled humans to rule over earth, controlling its physical and ecological features leading to the irreparable consequences of climate change, global warming, melting of glaciers, extinction of other species, wiping out of forests, urbanization, depletion of resources, and the Corona-crisis in 2020.

Anthropocene can be seen as a misleading factor, for the real problem lies with capitalism and globalization (Moore, 2015; Moore, 2016; Fremaux, 2019; Lombard, 2019). How humans influence and shape the ecology and environment depends more on our

societies than biology. Different communities have transformed environments differently. So "wealthy urban dwellers can emit ten times or more per person than the rural poor. And Earth's poorest billion people emit almost no fossil carbon at all" (Ellis, 2018, p. 133-137). Henceforth, we come across the question that not all humans have affected Earth in the same ways. Wealth, capital, money, and resources, and who owned these resources, have played a vital role in bringing out this transition to the capitalocene.

There is a need to develop ecocritical perspectives in the corporations that balance the lopsided approach towards advancement. Ecocriticism means correlating disciplines and developing critical thinking for ecology (Glotfelty, 1996; Grrard, 2004; Slovic, 2015; Haag, 2019). Ecocriticism helps in enhancing our understanding of surroundings, atmosphere, environment, and ecology in a better way. Similarly, technological development needs to be critically correlated to other disciplines (Cooper, 2003; Shaw, 2008). Instead of looking at development only as an accumulation of invention and advancement, technological development has to be analyzed in correlation to personal, social, and ecological practices.

All beings have consciousness. The Indian philosophical thought and Western Transcendental thought emphasize this fact. The human society created classifications, subjects, and disciplines in a hierarchical order with extreme emphasis on the anthropocentric viewpoint. The plant and animal kingdoms were placed at the bottom of the hierarchy in this classification. It is important in Anthropocenic studies to understand how this human and other-life bond is seen because life on earth is based on the balance of this cycle. Ecologically, if there are no plants, there is no life, but reciprocally, if there are no humans and no animals, it means no life. The reason is the O2-CO2 Bond, which forms the basis for Earth's life.

At one point, humans were marginally struggling against the fate of destruction and the forces of nature. At that point, pantheistic religions emerged so that the sun, earth, fire, water, wind, sky, rivers, mountains, thunder, forests, oceans, trees, and animals became gods. Humans were then helpless to affect these forces, and forms of religions emerged: nature-worship, animism, manaism, and polytheism. But then humans gradually progressed, learnt not only adaptation and resistance but also ways to defy these forces. This marked the change from Theocene to Anthropocene. Then, the gods also became anthropomorphic. This transition from worshipping nature to worshipping anthropomorphic gods culminated in the world being controlled and regulated by humans, the present age. In this age, humans are gods, not nature, plants, animals, or celestial bodies. And, then there are innumerable stories

of tyrannical gods in Greek, Roman, and Indian mythology. When humans became gods, they became tyrannical gods. Juxtaposed to an abundant human population, there exists the bare fact of enervated, weak, emaciated, and slender beings living in reduced forests, almost in captivity. Often, the tyrannical gods themselves created reasons for their downfall. Likewise, humans suffered because of their own actions by creating a "damaged planet." If one recalls the old stories, paintings, or movies in which one sees a strong carnivore facing a group of humans who would run away or fall prey to its might. Today, these other life-forms have come to the same situation in which humans had found themselves at one point of time.

Moving Forward

How to affect and anticipate life in the Anthropocene is a big question. It is important to understand that in the Anthropocene, we stand at a juncture where we need to transition our sense of identity from anthropic to omni-beings. Omni-beings imply that we are part of the lives of other human beings, animals, plants, and birds as much as we are part of ourselves. It was believed that humans have elevated consciousness, so they were seen as the mediators for all kinds of life. It is noted in recent studies on other life-forms that they, too, exhibit elevated consciousness. The human consciousness has always felt this connection with them. It is not so that the earth exists only because of one kind of being. It exists because of the relationship between those beings, which is mutual and not exclusive of one or the other.

There is a need to revise and redefine economic terms like "capital" and "profit." As humans, we want to improve our output, so we promoted the concept of Human Resource Development. As a result, we kept on exploiting our natural resources, and when there occurred a danger of depletion, we resorted to the conservation of depleted resources. Though there is a focus on Natural Resource Management, the time has come to move a step ahead towards Natural Resource Development. Humans are proponents in the development of natural resources just like other beings. Capital is not only physical or digital currency. Our resources, both human and natural, are capital as well. The better our capital, the better the long-term profit. As Timothy Walker (2012) suggests:

> it does not matter which tree species is growing and absorbing carbon so long as a tree is growing. It has been calculated that the value of these ecosystem services is approximately $33,000,000 millionper annum. This is a strange, sterile calculation

> because if you had$33,000,000 million in your wallet, where would you go to buy theseecosystem services? (p. 90).

Secondly, it is important for corporates to revise, question, and modify the policy of "use and throw" which has become signature stamp of the Age of Information and has deeply transformed the attitude of the people. This can be tackled by creating durable and sustainable products. This will reduce the burden on resources and help in improving our uses of resources and manufactured products.

"Idea of standard" has to be revoked. The idea of a standard lifestyle has now been limited to a narrow air-conditioned space isolated from the rest of the world. Creating and maintaining a few facilities that appear Eden-like is not sustainable and practical in the long run. It just creates an illusion of luxury by compromising various other aspects like sensitivity and regard for other people, beings, and plants in the surroundings. There is a need to develop a greater eco-social relationship. What has replaced our natural growth and development in recent times is the "culture of fear" (White, 2004); "extinction of experience" (Pyle, 1993); and biophobia. In addition to this, we have also transitioned to the digital age where the screen may provide the image of lush and green forests, beautiful and majestic animals, colourful plants and trees, but at the same time, they are reduced to a screen (Chawla, 1994; Pyle, 2002; White, 2004). As M. C. Harrison explains in the context of 'narrative empathy,' the screen "serves as an escape from the real-life ethical demands, allowing readers to congratulate themselves for feeling with fictional characters while simultaneously doing nothing for people in need" (Harrison 259). The same may happen in the case of virtual experience, which may result in digital empathy or identification, but cause nothing substantial in our real-life world. Therefore, it becomes important for humans to remain in contact with the real world and the natural environment.

In the age of globalization, the market becomes a global force while governments remain the national force, so what governments fail to do, perhaps markets can. The need of hours is eco-economy where ecology remains the center. Likewise, green technologies can be used and workplaces can be maintained by ecosystems rather than technology alone, transforming them into an "eco-workplace" (Billatos, 1997; Sobha, 2008; Arceivala, 2014; Singh & Kumar, 2017). Markets can be based on natural and ecological models, enhancing the natural surroundings for the market. There is a need to promote the idea of Eco-Capital, where capital is not seen in isolation merely as an object of investment, but also how its

investment will affect the other capitals related to the environment. Then we can advance towards Eco-Metropolitanism, building Ecological Metropolises, rather than merely the jungles of bricks and concrete, reducing the landscape to an urban desert.

In one of the essays, feminist scholar Virginia Woolf (2001) said women should have a room of one's own. As we shifted from a joint family to a nuclear family, the formula was applied not only to one's room but to everything one should possess. The market promoted this idea of having everything for oneself: a room of our own, a car of our own, a flat, a laptop, a mobile, a bed, AC, a cabin, a cupboard, and whatnot. And in this wild goose chase, everyone drifted away from the basics. Strikingly, Ruskin Bond struck the idea to have "a tree of our own," as he says: "But now, alas, even the hallowed groves are disappearing, making way for the demands of an ever-increasing population. A pity, because every human needs a tree of his own. Even if you do not worship the tree-spirit, you can love the tree" (Bond, 2015, p. 103). Likewise, spaces can be developed in our surroundings for birds and other creatures. Some spaces can be left for planting trees. This will enable us to keep our omni-identity in contrast to the isolated, anthropocentric, and narrow identity of the luxury and virtual world we have created around us.

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