

Environmental Justice, Eco-cosmopolitanism and Neoliberalism as Reviewed in Select Indigenous Women Authors

**Alice Kurian
Dr K M Johnson**

Neoliberalism, in terms of the unrestricted financial flow and freedom of the market, gives complete autonomy to the individual and is the key to the origin and sustenance of the Anthropocene. The neoliberal state apparatus facilitates capital accumulation, unrestricted individual enterprises and the privatisation of public enterprises. In its varied manifestations, it compromises the collective justice of communities, primarily environmental justice and ecological justice. Such denial of justice engenders an anthropogenic world. This paper, in this context, taking its cue from the texts of specific indigenous women authors, tries to understand how the Anthropocene problematises the possibility of an all-encompassing existence. This all-encompassing existence - eco-cosmopolitanism - envisages a world environmental citizenship that can ensure environmental justice. The specific instances are drawn from Leslie Marmon Silko's *Garden in the Dunes* and Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* to illuminate how the neoliberal sensibility of the times undermines the idea of a sustainable environment and adds to the anthropogenic condition of the world.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Environmental Justice, Ecological Justice, Eco-cosmopolitanism, Anthropocene

Liberal Philosophy and neoliberal sensibility, which have been instrumental in the formation of the Anthropocene, argue that

individuals are supreme. Such individuals who are granted freedom of enterprise are indeed individual units who initiated the privatization of public enterprises. As observed in Harvey(2005), propagating the political ideals of human dignity and individual freedom as central values of civilization, neoliberalism reinforced the anthropocentric sensibility of the planet (p. 5). This anthropocentrism, with its free play for centuries has been the fundamental reason for many violent turns in history. Therefore, any thought or ideal that is capable of reinforcing anthropocentrism should be taken with a pinch of salt as it could have an ulterior intent despite the projected ideals and benefits.

Neoliberalism, being anthropocentric, reinforces the structural binaries and further inequalities and injustices. Inequality is “a condition of difference or unevenness. . . between different groups of people” (Walker, 2012/2019, p. 12). However, the significant question is whether we are still in a position or a period where inequality and injustice are just about and within the human domain of thought. This paper intends to argue otherwise, i.e., equality-inequality or justice-injustice should not be confined to or be about the human alone but should extend to the non-human others created by anthropocentrism and reinforced by the neoliberal state apparatus.

One popular illustration of the neoliberal state apparatus has been the one implemented by the US in Iraq. The imposition of this neoliberal state apparatus involved a mission “to facilitate conditions for profitable capital accumulation on the part of both domestic and foreign capital . . . freedoms it embodies reflect the interests of private property owners, businesses, multinational corporations, and financial capital” (Harvey, 2005, p. 7). Through such a state apparatus, the freedom granted or envisaged to the Iraqis here is directed towards an aim set by the dominant US administration, thus justifying Mathew Arnold’s definition of freedom as “a very good horse to ride but to ride somewhere” (Harvey, 2005, p. 6). This method of directing freedom in a particular direction, enforced by the dominant administrators, involved “full privatization of Iraqi businesses, full ownership of rights by foreign firms of Iraqi businesses, full repatriation of foreign profits . . . the opening of Iraq’s banks to foreign control, national treatment for foreign companies and . . . elimination of all

trade barriers” (Harvey, 2005, p. 6). This is essentially what we call neo-imperialism, which involves no act of colonization or conquering as such but domination and hegemony over the smaller units employing legal agreements to take over the economic power and enforce cultural influence. Enforcing various economic and cultural policies in a foreign land with or without unrest, by structuring a neoliberalist state apparatus that catered to the interests of a profitable few, the neo-imperialist regime of the US in Iraq, indeed led to the compromise of the justice of a community.

The instance of Iraq is discussed here because it is a popular illustration of the implementation of neoliberal state apparatus. The concern of this paper is the effect of neoliberalism on the unknown, unrecognised and not-so-popular units within the planet, the indigenous communities across the nations, who are denied justice on multiple levels and become victims of the Anthropocene. Also, the paper intends to discuss how along with the indigenous, nature and the natural are problematised by the neoliberal sensibility of the Anthropocene. Thus, this paper addresses neoliberalism, not from the purview of being an economic and political apparatus of power, but from the perspective of how neoliberalism being an instrument in the inception of the Anthropocene turns away from the natural distribution of the planet, at the hand of development, civilization and free flow of capital across the globe. Despite the decline of the role of the US in implementing and effectuating neoliberalism, this ideological-politico-economic apparatus has become an extensive, normalised economic project and philosophy.

The concern here is how neoliberalism accentuates the Anthropocene and impedes what is called environmental justice through its various dimensions. Environmental justice is a term that cannot be confined to a single-handed definition. Fundamentally, environmental justice offers “the right to a decent environment and fair share of Earth’s resources” (Walker, 2012/2019, p. 9). As per the US Environmental Protection Agency, environmental justice involves

The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, colour, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of

environmental laws, regulations, and policies. . . achieved when everyone enjoys the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards and equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work (Walker, 2012/2019, p. 9).

This alternative definition of environmental justice, like all the available definitions of environmental justice, signifies the human factors of availability and fair access to resources for human beings. Justice towards humans and non-humans alike is addressed under what is called ecological justice. Therefore, what is required alongside environmental justice is ecological justice, which involves the fair treatment of all beings without discriminating between humans and non-humans. This is why David Schlosberg calls for a multivalent understanding of environmental justice and argues that it is not possible in the environmental justice movement to talk about one aspect of justice without mentioning or leading to the other (Walker, 2012/2019, p.11). The question of equal opportunity and space for all beings should be addressed separately, going beyond environmental justice, to include what possibly involves ecological justice. Ecological justice addresses and acknowledges the importance of entitled spaces and being of non-human beings.

We live in a world, rightly addressed as the Anthropocene which visualises the non-human within the human in a subordinated stature. As observed in Crutzen (2002), the term Anthropocene, in essence, refers to the present era which is in a “human-dominated geological epoch” (p. 23). This domination of humans over humanly othered beings has resulted in “rapism... the paradigm of all oppression...root and model of the nuclear arms buildup, racism, man-made poverty, chemical contamination” (Daly, 1974/1985, p. xvi). Converging to the exploitation of the resources of the planet aided by the capitalist regime across the globe, the Anthropocene “is blind to the power wielded by capitalism as a historical imperial system that has devastated and destroyed planetary ecosystems, involving human and non-human life forms, since its origins” (Satgar, 2018, p. 48). This means that, within the Anthropocene, every being is othered except for the privileged human elite, thus impeding the fair distribution of

resources and space to all beings in the world, denying all kinds of justice to all.

The effects of the Anthropocene thus necessitate the creation of a space where no being is othered but each being identifies their entitlements and spaces. These spaces are not supposed to be allotted spaces but spaces to which the beings belong. Such a scenario could be derived from what Ursula K Heise calls eco-cosmopolitanism. Eco-cosmopolitan spaces are all-encompassing spaces, a space that offers a world environmental citizenship, where all beings experience an equal sense of belonging towards the world. This in turn leads to developing a connection towards each other with a unified sense of place and sense of planet, where no being is an 'it'.

Man has always been a being of territories, rooting himself to a territory and allotting territories to all beings he has othered. In eco-cosmopolitanism, as observed in Heise (2008), this rooted individual is de-territorialised only to be re-territorialised as an environmental world citizen who works on a phenomenon called bio-empathetic receptivity, a condition that enables the human to reflect the human emotions to any being around, which are othered in the mainstream. In a scenario characterised by a wide range of bio-empathetic receptivity, the world becomes "an ecosystem that cannot be understood as encompassing anything less than the entire planet" (Heise, 2008, p.17). Such a state is capable of ensuring environmental and ecological justice and, as previously mentioned, leads to and includes multiple ideas of justice.

In this context, this paper brings in a few literary instances from the texts of indigenous women authors to understand how the power apparatus of neoliberalism which characterises the Anthropocene, problematises the possibility for the existence of all-encompassing spaces based on environmental justice and sustainable development of the planet. The paper, through the instances from the texts of select indigenous women authors who are marginalised on multiple levels - as women, indigenous, non-mainstream and as once-colonized - attempts to bring in how neoliberalism results in the reinforcement of this marginalisation, subverts the natural distribution of spaces and thus impedes sustainable development. It also examines how the eco-cosmopolitan spaces, which are essentially feminist

continuums that go beyond human, nature and non-human, are undermined by the mainstream apparatuses of power that function on neoliberal principles.

The North American Pueblo author Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes*, tells the story of an imaginary tribe, the Sand Lizards, through Indigo, her sister Salt, her mother, and her grandmother. Parallel and connected to Indigo's story is Hattie, the white woman who protects and takes care of Indigo despite all odds. The original Sand Lizard space, which they call the old gardens, a space terraced on the dunes, is for them a space of freedom, instincts, nature and being. This space was an all-encompassing space where plants, animals, insects and all that was nature and natural had a fair shared sense of belonging. They treated plants as individuals, as their children, and said, "Don't argue or fight around the plants- hard feelings cause plants to wither" (Silko, 1999/2005, p. 14). Also, they taught their children lessons about sharing and the learning was as follows.

The first ripe fruit of each harvest belongs to the spirits of our beloved ancestors, who come to us as rain; the second ripe fruit should go to the birds and wild animals, in gratitude for their restraint in sparing the seeds and sprouts earlier in the season. Give the third ripe fruit to the bees, ants, mantises, and others who cared for the plants. A few choice pumpkins, squash, and bean plants were simply left on the sand beneath the mother plants to shrivel dry and return to the earth (Silko, 1999/2005, p. 15).

However, like everything nice and laudable, the Old Gardens were abandoned when the Sand Lizards joined their relations as they increased in numbers. Also, as noted by Silko (1999/2005, p. 15), with the advent of the 'aliens' to whom were attributed bloodshed and cruelty, disease, and fever, old gardens became their sanctuary, only to be abandoned later due to scarcity and lack of food. The alien whites' attempts to civilise and educate the Indian tribes including Sand Lizards did not please them, as the Sand Lizards, according to Silko, believed that their knowledge and practices were the best for them.

The connection they feel towards the earth, nature, and the natural is an illustration of the bio-empathetic receptivity previously

discussed as an attribute of eco-cosmopolitan existence. However, this bio-empathy is prevalent during their stay at the old gardens. At Needles, the town to which Indigo and her family relocated to earn a living to survive, they become part of the money-oriented mainstream society despite holding warmth for the old gardens and the Sand Lizard culture. They sell baskets and other handmade goods to the passengers on trains at the railway station. They let the white passengers take photos with the Indian kids, whom they call “pappooses” (Silko 1999/2005, p. 18). Nevertheless, at Needles, despite their struggles for living, they saved seeds of discarded fruits and vegetables to plant in the old gardens when they returned.

The disruption caused by the neoliberal sensibility of the whites on the Indian lives could be understood from the ways through which the whites impede the freedom of the Indians. For instance, to the indigenous minds that exist beyond money or a money-driven economy, the whites successfully injected the idea of money as essential for survival. This leads them to work hard to make a living in the city rather than enjoying their freedom relishing what is in store for them in nature and their land of belonging. This could be attributed to the power apparatus at work in the hands of neoliberalism.

The Indians are constantly in a state of flight like the Sand Lizards who are either driven away to the old gardens to where they belong but without resources or to unknown lands and prisons (Silko, 1999/2005). The place Needles, in the novel, illustrates a space within the mainstream where the de-territorialised indigenous people- the Sand Lizards, Walapai, and Paiute people- reach to make a living and not starve to death. Here, de-territorialisation stands for the situation of getting displaced from one’s territory and space of belonging. For this one could look into Silko’s observations on the intolerance of the whites towards the Indian gatherings for any cause or of any kind. Whenever the Indians gathered and danced to welcome their indigenous Messiah, a ritual they believed shall renew the earth and provide resources to the earth, the police/ the soldiers arrived to discipline the Indians by either driving them away or capturing and imprisoning them (Silko 1999/2005). Thus, the white man problematises

the Indian space of belonging with the fundamentals of his culture and civilization.

Hattie, the white woman who rescues Indigo from going back to the indigenous school run by the whites, finds herself in a marginalised position when her husband puts his and her reputation at stake by smuggling rare varieties of orchids and other plants and gets arrested for the same, leaving herself and Indigo in a tough spot (Silko, 1999/2005, pp. 321-330). As Silko observes, she feels dejected and marginalised when Edward, her husband behaves as if he does not owe her an apology or explanation. This unites the sensibilities of Hattie and Indigo, who from then on turn companions. When Hattie, in her mission to reunite Indigo with her sister Salt, stays with the Indian girls, a space of sisterhood is created where one cannot observe any differentiation between the white woman and the Indian girls. The way they belong to each other and understand each other's emotions as sisters mothers, and women make the space an all-encompassing one. This space in Silko's text is a feminist continuum that accommodates not just the women, but the baby boy of Salt, Linnaeus the monkey, and Rainbow the parrot.

The impact of such a space and sisterhood on a marginalised mind and body could be observed when Hattie sets the stable, which belonged to the white man and his managers who attempted to loot and violate her at Needles, on fire. As noted by Silko (1995/2005, pp. 470-473), into the burning stable, Hattie throws all the signs that bound her to the patriarchal marriage and widowhood, the belongings of her dead husband; and let the horses free from the traumatic domestication and sets herself free from those who came to rescue her from her so-called bout of madness. Thus, eventually burning the town of Needles. Hattie's action could be observed as a method devised by the perpetually othered, strengthened by the sisterhood that accommodates different paradigms of justice in a realm of bio-empathy and eco-cosmopolitanism, to escape and free themselves from the claws of rapistic tendencies of the neoliberal sensibilities of the Anthropocene. Her action becomes a statement of the re-territorialisation of the de-territorialised through a medium which is indeed a feminist continuum devoid of othering.

Edward, Hattie's husband could be understood as an illustration of the sensibility of the neoliberal human. Edward's smuggling of the plants, without considering the consequences it would have on his cohabitants, could be stated as an attribute of the neoliberal anthropocentric human who works towards the fulfilment of his needs no matter what befalls on those around him. He is a man who thinks in terms of profit and loss. As noted by Silko (1999/2005, p. 110), he took Indigo along on his journey to acquire the orchids in order to escape the attention of the customs officers, as having a child as the lady's/his wife's maid would help him evade suspicion. Edward's mission was to cater to plant hybridizers to create more resistant and yielding varieties. This mission of Edward could on one level be paralleled with the whites' mission to civilize the Aborigines/Indians. On another level, this mission to create a profit-yielding hybrid variety by altering the natural course of growth and the rarity of the plant species is an attribute associated with the neoliberal power apparatus where everything is based on private interests, and the sustainability of the natural is conveniently ignored.

One could observe in Silko how the eco-cosmopolitan space created by the sisterhood, mostly in terms of their mindscape rather than a physical space or label, is constantly compromised by the Anthropocene. Hattie's sense of belonging towards Indigo and Linnaeus despite her mainstream white belonging; Indigo's understanding of Linnaeus and Rainbow; the way in which all four of them- Indigo, Linnaeus, Rainbow and Hattie treat each other as individuals could be attributed to bio-empathy. However, when it comes to ecological justice and environmental justice, the act of caging the animals despite treating them as individuals complicates justice. This act of caging and restricting liberty could be attributed to the neoliberal influence that creates a hierarchy even among the marginalised. However, once Hattie and Indigo are back in Needles, with Salt and her baby, the cages are open and all are free. The eco-cosmopolitan space of sisterhood and justice shared by Indigo, Salt, Hattie, Linnaeus and Rainbow is a space constantly threatened by the Anthropocene. This tendency of the Anthropocene to infiltrate into realms of all-encompassing existence, intimidating such a space, becomes a reality

towards the end of the text. There, we see how “Strangers had come to the old gardens; at the spring, for no reason, they slaughtered the big old rattlesnake who lived there; then they chopped down the small apricot trees above Grandma Fleet’s grave” (Silko, 1999/2005, p.476). The destruction of the old gardens by the white soldiers could be understood as an illustration of destructive intimidations by the Anthropocene into the eco-cosmopolitan spaces of ecological and environmental justice, driven by the principles of neoliberalism.

The second text under discussion, Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book*, tells the story of Oblivia, the girl who was pushed into the dark tree hole after being gang raped and remained inside the tree hole for years. As observed in Wright (2013/2016), Oblivia’s existence was forgotten like that of Rip Van Winkle by the time she was pulled out of the tree hole by the old lady Bella Dona. During her dark days inside the tree hole, in trauma, Oblivia seems to have forgotten her original human speech, thus turning mute to the human world. Oblivia’s numb and mute behaviour after being rescued could be read as her protest towards the world that violated her. The world chose not to know her, conveniently forgot her existence and declared her dead. This convenient forgetting is inevitable in the Anthropocene where everything unfavourable is erased or neglected from the mainstream. The novel is set in the swamp where Oblivia is rehabilitated after the rescue. The swamp could be read as an eco-cosmopolitan space that is constantly problematised by the neoliberal power apparatus.

Wright (2013/2016) portrays the swamp, the land by the lake, as the land of the Aboriginals, who were the caretakers of the land. However, the Aboriginals were constantly threatened by the military. The Aboriginals, until the advent of the strangers, “had felt secluded in their isolation, even invisible to the outside world. . . interested in singing praise to the ancient spirits for the seasons lived alongside eels, fresh-water mussels, turtles and other aquatic life” (Wright, 2013/2016, p. 9). With the advent of the strangers, the Aboriginals fled for safety only to come back later and find the swamp as a place of floating junk. Later, as Wright observes, the swamp was renamed Swan Lake and was filled with detention centres under the army, that accommodated Aboriginal terrorists who were declared as against

the collective Australian law as they claimed ownership over their land. Therefore, the swamp became a zone of the other, away from the mainstream. The life of the swamp people could be summed up as “living the warfare of modernity like dogs fighting over the lineage of progress against their own quiet whorls of time” (Wright, 2013/2016, p. 12).

The people of the swamp had many stories regarding Oblivia’s missing and her recovery by Bella Dona. However, their judgements of her never really reached her for she thought she should remain silent “if words were just a geographical device to be transplanted anywhere on earth” (Wright, 2013/2016, p. 23). Wright observes how with time Oblivia was rooted to the swamp where swans came and went constantly, making it part of her life. The mute girl felt more connected with the swans than humans. Even though the people of the swamp considered Oblivia’s existence as a shameful one, the space shared by Oblivia, Bella Dona and the swans was an eco-cosmopolitan space driven by bio-empathy. It was beyond any shame or guilt bestowed by the mainstream on the othered ones. As observed by Wright (2013/2016, p. 17, 25, 28), Bella Donna’s stories of the swans drew Oblivia closer to the swans and urged her to share her thoughts and communicate with the swans.

Unlike Silko’s old gardens, the swamp was not an all-accommodating, non-discriminatory space. However, Oblivia’s sense of belonging to the swamp, the connection she shared with the black and white swans and her dreams that travelled beyond time and space leading her to avenues unknown and beyond the so-called normal understanding are the factors that make the space eco-cosmopolitan. The bio-empathy at work between Oblivia and the swans makes the swamp an eco-cosmopolitan space. This could be seen when Oblivia feeds the swans with adequate food believing that by helping the swans survive the pollution in the swamp she might learn from them lessons to fly away and escape the perils that haunted her and the land to which she now belongs (Wright, 2013/2016, p. 69).

However, this space is problematised with the arrival of Warren Finch into Oblivia’s life to take her as his wife. Wright (2013/

2016) sketches the character Warren Finch as an individual with an ambiguous identity, brought up by a set of Aboriginal elders with the hope and expectation that he would grow into the saviour of the Aboriginals. Like Oblivia, his original lineage is unknown, yet he is brought up to be the most powerful man, as the head of the Aboriginal Government Nation of Australia. However, instead of getting rooted in the land that brought him up, he wants to run away from them, unlike Oblivia who found her roots in the swamp.

Warren Finch, though not white, like Edward in Silko's text, represents the neoliberal human, who turns coloniser despite belonging to the colonised. As observed in Wright (2013/2016), Finch, the half-blood man claims to take Oblivia, the indigenous victim of violence, as his wife out of his love and dream of her as the flying woman. However, as noted by Wright, the truth of the matter was that Oblivia was just an instrument for him to project the image of a saviour who saved the devastated girl from the swamp. It was necessary to take Oblivia away from the swamp, as she was the only impediment for him to implement the developmental policies of the state in the swamp. So, like the man of neoliberalist sensibility, the man belonging to the Anthropocene, who gave importance to civilization and individual motives over the justice of a community, he took Oblivia as his own and gave the land to the government for destructing the swamp that was home to many swans and once the land of the caretakers.

Oblivia, from the moment she is taken away by Finch, could be seen yearning for the swamp, despite becoming the first lady of the nation. Finch's presence as her husband and the president constantly disrupts her yearning for the swamp as hallucinations (Wright 2013/2016). The intrusion of the half-blood Finch into the indigenous swamp and Oblivia's existence is an illustration of how the potential spaces of eco-cosmopolitan sensibilities, physical and mental, are constantly disrupted by depriving it of the justice it deserves. Wright's method of portraying Oblivia's yearning in terms of hallucinations could be understood as how any possibility of all-encompassment is no less than a dream in the Anthropocene that constantly problematises not just the existence of environmentally and ecologically justified

community existence among humans and non-human beings but the dream and hope for the same.

The old gardens in Silko's and the swamp in Wright's are potential eco-cosmopolitan spaces that are constantly destabilised by the Anthropocene and governed by neoliberal sensibility. The literary scenarios are indeed reflections of reality. A real example of an eco-cosmopolitan space problematised by the neoliberal power apparatus could be Auroville in Puducherry, India. Initiated and visualised as a land that belongs to none in particular but to all who came and settled there; built on an economy devoid of money; with forests growing wild and heavy vegetation; Auroville was an all-accommodating space until it was disrupted by the governing body appointed by the central government with the recent encroachments into Auroville despite the protests from the inhabitants. This could be observed as a part of the civilising mission of neoliberalism, which appropriates the eco-cosmopolitan and other ecological spaces to cater to private needs.

To conclude, one could say that the Anthropocene, driven by the neoliberal apparatus of power, has constantly destabilised and undermined the ecological being, an all-encompassing world environment citizenship, through its privatisation drives and civilising missions. The need of the hour is a complete re-examination of the philosophy of anthropocentrism and its corollaries such as capitalism and neoliberal policies. A conscientious move towards an eco-cosmopolitan philosophy and living is necessary to avert an anthropogenic catastrophe that awaits humanity in the near future.

References

- Crutzen, Paul. J. (2002). Geology of Mankind. *Nature*, 415, 23. <https://doi.org/10.1038/415023a>
- Daly, Mary. (1985). *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Boston: Beacon. (Original work published 1974)
- Harvey, David. (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Heise, Ursula. K. (2008). *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Satgar, Vishwas. (2018). The Anthropocene and Imperial Ecocide: Prospects For Just Transitions. In Vishwas Satgar (Ed.), *The Climate Crisis: South African and Global Democratic Eco-socialist Alternatives* (pp. 47-68). Wits University Press. <https://doi.org/10.18772/22018020541.8>

- Silko, Leslie Marmon. (2005). *Gardens in the Dunes*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks. (Original work published 1999)
- Walker, Gordon. (2019). *Environmental Justice: Concepts, Evidence and Politics*. Abingdon: Routledge. (Original work published 2012)
- Wright, Alexis. (2016). *The Swan Book*. Great Britain: Constable. (Original work published 2013)

Alice Kurian

Research scholar, Department of English
Sacred Heart College, Kochi, Kerala, India

Pin: 682013

Ph: +91 9061265301

Email: alicekurian@shcollege.ac.in

ORCID: 0000-0003-8486-7625

&

Dr K M Johnson

Associate Professor and Research Guide
Sacred Heart College, Kochi, Kerala, India

Pin: 682013

Ph: +91 9447187501

Email: kmjohnson@shcollege.ac.in

ORCID: 0000-0002-0161-830X