

Exploitation and Pharisical Proclivity: An Eco-Marxist Study of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion*

Dr. Rajkumar Bera

Assistant Professor of English, Midnapore City College

West Bengal, Email: rajkumarbera.bera@gmail.com

Subhadip Das

Research Scholar, Midnapore City College

West Bengal, Email: sbhdps1986@gmail.com

Abstract

Eco-Marxism is a political ideology that fuses the Marxist doctrine of anti-capitalism with ecology. Some of the basic principles of the ideology of Marxism, according to Marx and Engels, comprise the relationship between man and nature. The term 'Eco-Marxism' has evolved in an attempt to ecologise Marxism. Eco-Marxists and neo-Marxists believe that the fast signs of the environmental crisis emerged when the capitalist mode of production began. They also analyzed how capitalism accumulated all the natural resources, gave a stronghold over society's 'base' and 'superstructure', thus, creating a rift between man and nature in their effort to make more profit. This gradually destroyed the ecosystem and led to the social catastrophe. Abdulrazak Gurnah is a Zanzibar born British diasporic writer who, in his novels, shows straightforwardly how first the Omani Sultanate and later European capitalist imperialism exploited the nature and people of the land of East African coast. This article deals with his novel *Desertion* where exploitation and subsequent desertion of the people and natural resources of colonial Kenya occurs on various levels by European capital imperialism and even in newly independent countries. It also shows how commodities infatuated the superstructure of European capitalism and polluted the social environment and ecosystem thereby causing a social catastrophe.

Keywords: Ecology, Marxism, Eco-Marxism, Eco-Socialism, Base, Superstructure, Capitalism, Production, Environment.

In 1979, Ben Agger first applied the concept of ecological marxism in his book *Western Marxism*. It aims to analyse the root cause of ecological crisis in capitalism and seeks the ways to solve it. It deals with capitalism working to increase the profit of production thereby destroying, degrading nature and making the resources of nature only the source of their production thereby limiting it. Such Idea was brilliantly explained for the first time by German chemist Justus Von Liebig through the term 'metabolic rift' which in turn also influenced Karl Marx heavily. Marx said that the destructive side of modern agriculture had irreparably upset the metabolism between man and nature. Capitalist production disturbs the circulation of matter between man and the soil. Marx describes metabolism as the process of material exchange between man and nature which takes place in every form of production, not just in individual working processes but also at the level of the economic system as a whole. The simultaneous growth of large scale industry and Agriculture lies at the basis of what Marx referred to as the 'rift' in metabolism. In certain forms of production, however, the economic and the natural cycles become imbalanced.

Another dimension of eco-marxism occurs through the concept of 'the expropriation of the commons'. According to Marx, capitalism originated on the basis of 'primitive accumulation', the pillaging of existing resources and the plundering of those who are part and parcel of that nature and also have the most rightful claim to the natural resources. This is a historical process. This lay at the basis of various phenomena like--- the emergence of large scale capitalism and the Genesis of the modern class bourgeoisie and proletariat. This concept of class exploitation acquires the form of sexual exploitation, physical exploitation, intellectual exploitation and emotional exploitation too.

Zanzibar born diasporic writer Abdulrazak Gurnah chooses the less frequented diasporic line---the East African littoral---a field of various cultural amalgamation. Gurnah never shuts away from exposing the result of cruel exploitation of the land and its ecology, of the people and resources by the capitalist imperialism and European powers gradually leading to disaster and cultural catastrophe as well as environmental and ecological degradation. His novel *Desertion* exemplifies Eco-Marxist belief that the expansion of the capitalist system is the cause of social exclusion,

poverty, war and environmental degradation through globalisation and imperialism under the supervision of repressive state apparatus and transnational structures. This exactly happens in this novel.

Before the arrival of the Portuguese, African Kenya with all its pristine glory and natural resources was linked to its common native people--- that is the common unnamed producers. The means and conditions of production were controlled by the native people. Although traders from various parts of the world came there, the exchange process between human societal condition and the condition of natural resources was systematic. Capitalism's onslaught did not affect the mode of production. However, with the appearance of the Portuguese started what Marx stated as the 'private accumulation' of resources. Capitalist mode of production and expropriation of the commons commenced and, the unnamed seaside town once had been as prosperous as Mombasa started to decay. In this novel, Frederick, himself a representative of capitalist merchandised imperialism, says in chapter 4 about the Portuguese: "You know what they were like, plunder and loot and fanaticism." (Gurnah, 91). As a result, the social equilibrium was destroyed and the common native people were finished and by the time the Portuguese finished with the town, it was no more than a decaying coastal settlement. Then came the Sultan of Zanzibar, who acquired the forests and lands, privatized them and did plantations in the name of development of the land. The capitalist mode of production transformed the control of nature's resources, uprooted the indigenous people of their soil and started appropriating the condition of production privately by making plantations. The mode of labour too changed as the Sultan sent thousands of slaves to work in the plantation program. This disrupts the economy as well as the ecology of the land. With the end of the slavery and the advent of British imperialism, the nature and the people of the land became exploited beyond any limit. "The historical process of pillaging existing resources and the plundering of commons which began with the coming of the Portuguese era reached their heights."(Gurnah, 96). This motive of plundering and pillaging resources and nature inspired the capitalist initiatives of Sultan of Zanzibar too to revive the land and to make plantations all over it. This happens also in the case of capitalist European imperialism. In the words of Frederick, "The land is poor but productive enough, and we're introducing new crops all the time. There's a future I think." (Gurnah, 91). These lines resonate with Marx's notion that capitalism originated on the basis of 'primitive

accumulation', the pillaging of existing resources and the plundering of the commons. Frederick beautifully summarises the motive of British capitalist imperialism: "... to make sure Her Britannic Majesty gets her share in return for our calming presence among them ..." (Gurnah, 91).

Regarding the exploitative and manipulative system of capitalists, John Bellamy Foster points out in his book : "Central to destructive dynamics was capital's inherent drive to accumulate on an ever greater scale. Capital as a system, was intrinsically geared to the maximum possible accumulation and throughput of matter and energy, regardless of human needs or natural limits." (Foster, 2015). This shameless profit making industry relentlessly brings forth the 'metabolic rift' (to use Marx's term) between Colony and imperial headquarter as well as between societal condition of production and natural resources. This is ahistorical process starting from Portuguese Monopoly through the plantation program of the Sultan to imperialist venture of the British that cost the separation of the producers from the means of production in the most effective way. For Marx, however, this process is not just about a separation of the workers from the means of production which became private property but also from the natural conditions of the production process. Whereas native East African farmers used to work on a small scale being tied to their ecological niche having their decentralized control over natural resources and production. Previously in religious and socio-ecological context mode of production consisted of stopping producing as soon as genuine needs are satisfied. However, the capitalist market of commodities coupled with Imperial strongholds gathered both labour and resources of wealth with monopoly. The built in superstructure in the name of 'white man's burden' made the British capitalist enterprise seem justified and holistic. In the words of Frederick, "I do have a responsibility to the natives, to keep an eye on them and guide them slowly into obedience and orderly labour." the exploitative nature of the ideology of the British capitalist imperialism was not to protect the sustainable development of the people and ecology of the land but to conquer a safe mode of production for themselves i.e to create an underpaid, uncared and continuous chain of resource of labour besides having complete control over the other natural resources. Interestingly, this is far away from the neo-Marxist's attempt to ecologise Marxism the motto of which is that a nation or even all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the globe. " They are only

its possessors, its usufructuaries and like boni patres familias, they must hand it down to succeeding generations in an improved condition." (Marx, 776).

Previously, the Sultan of Zanzibar brought slaves and Indian Warriors to work in the plantation and guard their productions. But the British abolished the slavery and gave scant wages to the labourers to work for them. Thus, they transformed the mode of production and outwitted their competitors. As a result bonded labourers worked in the British estate for a small livelihood. All the European imperialist powers divided, in this way, the natural resources of the continent among themselves. One of the state manager Burton's talks was all about the Uganda protectorate and their interior highlands and the lakes, and all the great estates that were going to be created there after completion of the railway. According to Burton, this was the whole point of the protectorate. The Uganda protectorate and the railway were only to secure the headwaters of the Nile against French mischief. To Burton it was to open up the beautiful high country in the highlands, always intended for European occupations, caring a fig for the ecology or native African Africans. Thus, the whole strategy was to feed the capitalist imperialism's insatiable thirst for profit which in turn created poverty and pollution.

The British also unjustly exploited the native traders in the name of 'custom duties'. In the shipyard the agents of British imperialism weighed everything being traded by the native merchants and lab heat custom duty. Interestingly the produce manufacture through the British capitalist mode of production went straight to the European market without any such custom duty.

Neo-Marxists or eco-socialists like Michael Lowy, Cornelis Castoriadis or Paul Burkett believe that large parts of current production apparatus need to be dismantled and replaced with a decentralized model that makes more democratic participation possible where the immediate producers, consumer movements and local communities take care of this management roles. In this light, either the Sultanate of Zanzibar or the Portuguese settlers or more recently British capitalist imperialism should have contributed, in the Colonial East Africa, to a social model in which production and consumption are not just reduced, but above all changed to a 'moral economy' which is based on non monetary and extra economic criteria. Then the reparation and extension of the commons are vital. However, the Omani sultans or the British imperialism did

exactly the opposite. Instead of giving workers control with regard to environmental aspects of the production process they viewed the labour force and the raw resources of African nature as distinct sources of wealth and exhausted them. Although labour which forms the base of a society and nature appear to be distinct entities in capitalism, cannot actually be separated. Capitalism's tendency to make abstraction from the dependence on Nature inexorably led to the more dependence thereby to the exhaustion of nature. As a result of this, people once having a primordial bond with their natural surroundings became waged labourers in the city or small shopkeepers. They were often exploited at the hands of the bourgeoisie class and capitalist imperialism. Rehana's first husband Azad is the representative of the capitalist system who plays tricks with an innocent local girl like Rehana and people like Hassan Ali for just sexually exploiting Rehana. After he succeeds in doing so, simply forlorns Rehana and returns to where he came from i.e India. Azad was the agent of the captain of the trading ship from India, who was staying there in Africa to acquire profitable goods for business. He, thus, not only accumulates profits as much as possible but also exploits the natural and pure beauty of the environment in the form of Rehana.

Martin Pearce was another representative of the European capitalist imperialism who ruined Rehana for the second time. He falls in love with her, makes her pregnant and ultimately deserts her in Mombasa. Rehana, like any other exploited victim of capitalism, was exploited. She, once a courageous and independent girl, became a single mother deserted by her own husband, forced to go into another relationship to feed herself and her daughter. This is also a pollution in the emotional sphere of the ecology of Africa in addition to the ecological disruption created by capitalism under the supervision of repressive state apparatus and transnational structures. Rehana gets social exclusion and becomes almost like a labour--a sex slave to another British engineer in the city of Mombasa. It is much like a common who, having lost everything in the repressive capitalist production system, becomes a waged labour in the city.

The word 'desertion' plays literally up on the characters on various levels. Literal desertion of Rehana first by Azad and then by Martin Pearce continues with Amin deserting Jamila and later Rashid deserting his own family. Desertion of Rehana and Jamila literally devastates them which symbolises the exploitation of the land's natural resources and its people first by Portuguese settlers and then by the capitalist Sultanate of Zanzibar and finally by the British capitalist

imperialism and their desertion of Kenya when their greedy accumulative nature lost all the interest, leaving behind a complete chaos. The protagonists as well as the people and socio-ecosystem of the land were affected by capitalism's production process in one way or the other.

The ideology of the 'superstructure' influenced the base so much that the education system thoroughly ignored the indigenous education system and European run secondary schools were regarded as the only way to prosper in the world which was thoroughly dominated by capitalist ideology and market economy. While giving the ironic description of the maps of Africa Gurnah shows the real condition African land and people and the real face of European capitalist imperialism:

The colours were a code for a worldview --- it was a way of understanding the world. --- The purple was for the anxious self regard of the Portuguese and their obsession with royalty and religion and symbolisms of Empire, when for most of the centuries of their colonial occupation they had been plundering these lands with barefoot brutality, slashing and burning, and transporting millions of the inhabitants to the slave plantations in Brazil. (Gurnah, 148-149).

In the same context Gurnah continues:

The Spanish had their territories as well marked yellow on the British maps gesture to their national colour, which signified an obsession with plundered gold.--- No one really understood what a panic was in the offing, that in a few years most of these European administrations were going to break camp and dash off home, leaving behind them a series of paper thin treaties and agreements that they felt no obligation to honour. (Gurnah, 148-149).

The monuments, buildings and all the artefacts made by the British constructed the superstructure which revealed the ideology that inflicted the sense of the capitalist imperialism's superiority and the feelings of white man's burden in the minds of the sons of the soil. "Amin had once seen the Residency building ... like a naughty child stealing a look into a forbidden room." Sultan Barghash constructed the pavilion and walled garden bringing rare kinds of flowers from all over the world.

Many of them, however, were the token of a gift from the British consul or a symbol of pride and 'purdah' from the eyes of the natives who had no right to enter the garden.

The exploitative European capitalist countries polluted severely the socio-psychological ecosystem of the land that the product based market culture instigated the once pristine native Africans to be utterly corrupted. The Independence which was thought to be a new usher in to a new dawn, ultimately raised the curtain from the blood curdling brutality, corruption and revenge tradition. Jamila was lost most probably after her house was plundered and Amin could never find her for the rest of his life. Even after independence unequal distribution of wealth and the same historical tradition of privatisation and accumulation of natural resources and Labour coupled with corruption and racial hatred made the social sphere worse for commons which ultimately paved the way for a violent revolt. Although this leads to no social pacification or equilibrium, the real progress of the newly independent country received the first blow for a new social reformation from it. The same tradition of private appropriation of wealth and expropriation of the commons led to this. In the later part of the novel the utterly corrupted and violent became the newly independent government. The chaotic social ecosystem forced people like the protagonist Rashid to search for shelter in the country of the former colonial master i.e England. The pathetic mayhem in his own country obstructed his return to his ailing family. The irony still haunts that the ideology of the superstructure lured him to go to the country of market commodity, the headquarter of capitalist imperialism. However, the social surrounding including the natural ecosystem was so polluted and threatening that he could not return to his motherland. This was the tragedy for many Rashids, which was the catastrophe for a newly born independent country --- a catastrophe that can be linked to the tragedy of the socio-ecosystem of the country.

Amin got literally deserted by life. His dream of becoming a teacher was dashed to dust in a newly awoken utterly chaotic nation-state; his dream of getting his love crushed. For the rest of his life he became the only resort to his infirm parents, himself becoming semi blind. Nevertheless, he never hesitated to defend his little brother whenever and whatever situation arises.

Eco-Marxism reveals the exploitation of both the common people and the natural resources by the brutal force of capitalism and how this exploitation relates to the catastrophe of the ecosystem.

East African littoral was resourceful both from nature's plenty and from its innocent, simple people. However, with the discovery of new trading routes across Africa and the rise of European imperialism, the brutal force of capitalism shows its sharp teeth to accumulate all the natural resources as well as all the human power only to satisfy their own greedy profit making venture and power hunger. In doing so, they polluted the social ecosystem of the land corrupting the people, plundering all the wealth of nature expropriating the commons. Before them, the Sultan of Zanzibar and the Arabs also did the same. The protagonists suffered through these and that suffering continued from generation to generation culminating in the violent mayhem, chaos and bloodshed when the unprecedented freedom was achieved in Kenya. People were forced to take refuge in other countries or in Europe. These events were no less worse than any catastrophe impending on a country. Thus, after exploiting the country the British deserted the country of Kenya, Martin deserted Rehana or Amin deserted Jamila.

Works Cited

- Agger, Ben. *Western Marxism*. Goodyear Pub, 1979.
- Benton, Ted. "Marxism and Natural Limits : An Ecological Critique and Reconstruction." *New Left Review*, vol. 1/178, no. Nov/Dec, 1989, PP. 51-86.
- Burkett, Paul. *Marxism and Ecological Economics : Towards a Red and Green Political Economy*. Boston, Brill, 2006.
- Castoriadis, Cornelis. *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey, Polity Press, 2005.
- Engels, Friedrich. *The Peasant War in Germany*. Routledge, 1915.
- Foster, John Bellamy. *Marx's Ecology : materialism and nature*. New York, Monthly Review Press, 2000.
- Foster, John Bellamy. "Marxism and Ecology : Common Fronts of a Great Transition." *Great Transition Initiative*, October, 2015.
- Gurnah, Abdulrazak. *Desertion*. Bloomsbury, 2005.
- Lievens, Mathias. "Towards an EcoMarxism." *Radical Philosophy Review*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2010.
- Lowy, Michael. "What is ecosocialism?" *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2006, pp. 15-24.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital : Volume I*. Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1974.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital : Volume III*. Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1978.
- Narx, Karl. *Grundrisse : Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. Penguin Books, 1977.

