

Pallavi Rastogi, Postcolonial Disasters: *Narrating Catastrophe in the Twenty-First Century* (2020): Review Essay

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Sourit Bhattacharya,

**"Pallavi Rastogi, *Postcolonial Disasters: Narrating Catastrophe in the Twenty-First Century*
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Ed. Treasa De Loughry and Brittany Murray

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Abstract: This review essay reads literary-critical works of what is broadly understood as 'postcolonial disasters'. It outlines how literary critics in the last decades have drawn upon cultural-geographical and anthropological readings of disasters to develop critical frameworks around how literary writers have used style, form, and aesthetics to represent postcolonial catastrophes. It then offers a detailed review of Pallavi Rastogi's 2020 monograph, *Postcolonial Disasters: Narrating Catastrophe in the Twenty-First Century*. Through an engaged and critical reading, the essay attends to Rastogi's insightful theorizing of the topic of 'Disaster Unconscious' and her wide-ranging interrogation of fiction from South Asia and Southern Africa. Her committed exploration of the dialectic of story and event, the review offers, is a fine example of materialist literary criticism indicating the ethical and aesthetic urgency for close and comparative readings of postcolonial literatures of disaster.

Sourit BHATTACHARYA**Pallavi Rastogi, *Postcolonial Disasters: Narrating Catastrophe in the Twenty-First Century* (2020): Review Essay**

In a 2019 essay published in *Geophysical Research Letters* entitled "Drought and Famine in India, 1870-2016," scientists, using station-based simulation methods to reconstruct historical soil moistures, found that out of the major seven famines plaguing colonial and postcolonial India, the 1943 Bengal famine had nothing to do with soil moisture or climatic impact. In their words, this famine "was completely due to the failure of policy during the British era [...]. Wartime grain import restrictions imposed by the British government played a major role in the famine" (Mishra et al 2019 2075, 2080). This point was already widely made by journalists, activists, and social scientists from the days of the famine, who had showed that the Second World War, anticolonial political agitations, a cyclone, hoarding by the trader class, and long-term starvation and food crises were the immediate and historical reasons behind the famine (J. Mukherjee 1-22). Starting with this revision of the Bengal famine foregrounds how natural disasters in the colonial world, at least, are hardly "natural." They are enabled and accelerated by social, political, and economic conditions; and they continue to shape postcolonial societies and lives that inherit and draw upon colonial legal, administrative, and socio-ecological systems. This review essay, through a critical reading of Pallavi Rastogi's 2020 book, *Postcolonial Disasters: Narrating Catastrophe in the Twenty-First Century*, examines how contemporary literary studies of disasters in South Asia and Southern Africa have astutely pointed out the constitutive links between imperialism, (post)colonialism, and catastrophe. Colonial countries have historically suffered catastrophic economic, political, and ecological crises in their entrance into postcolonial modernity – be they partitions, states of emergency, civil wars, riots, genocides, and ethnic cleansing, or "natural" disasters. Postcolonial rebuilding, thus, has been largely about remaking the nation from the 'catastrophe' that colonialism was.

The scholarly and literary study of disasters, to understand how colonialism or empire-building wreaked havoc on postcolonial societies, began in the wake of postcolonial ecocritical studies, which emerged as a sub-field of postcolonial literary studies in the last two decades. Social anthropological and cultural geographical studies of disasters from the 1980s onward, by scholars such as Kenneth Hewitt, Anthony Oliver-Smith, Ulrich Beck, Ramachandra Guha, and Joan Martínez-Alier, began to read disasters not as sudden, natural phenomena, as they had previously been conceived, but as meteorological/geological hazards and social risks that could be mitigated by preventing vulnerable groups from being exposed to harm. Rob Nixon's 2005 essay on "Environmentalism and Postcolonialism," and Eric Cazdyn's edited special issue, "Disastrous Consequences" in the *South Atlantic Quarterly* (2007), offered literary and cultural studies scholars ways of conceiving how these different anthropological-geographical and literary-cultural fields could learn from each other.¹ As Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin wrote in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2009): "Postcolonial studies has come to understand environmental issues not only as central to the projects of European conquest and global domination, but also as inherent in the ideologies of imperialism and racism on which those projects historically – and persistently – depend" (6).

The "widespread ecosystem change" caused by colonialism, such as deforestation, famines, water mismanagement, soil fertility collapse, and others, that Huggan and Tiffin point to, led to increasing disaster conditions globally (6). The urgent question for postcolonial ecocritical literary scholars was how to decode disaster's unconscious registration in literary form (rather than to read it solely through thematic expressions). Rob Nixon's book *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) encourages scholars and readers to pay attention to formal elements in order to understand the ways in which form and style are used as vehicles for expressing the slow violence of toxic drift, global warming, or malnutrition. This slow violence is captured in the use of social realism, reportage, or uneven integration of oral techniques in work by writers like Mahasweta Devi, Wangari Maathai, and Arundhati Roy. Mark Anderson's *Disaster Writing: The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America*, published in the same year, argued that specific forms of disasters, spectacular or slow, result in specific genres of writing: so the 1985 earthquake in Mexico led to "cronica" or journalistic forms, while the recurring disaster of famine and starvation due to the advent of capitalist agriculture in the North-East of Brazil gave birth to naturalistic prose (22). Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee's *Natural Disasters and Victorian Empire* (2013) shifted the perspective from the temporality of disaster to its spatiality, to

¹ For a quick review, see Bhattacharya 43-51.

contend that recurrent famines, epidemics, and fevers in Victorian British colonial India rendered the empire an ideological zone of disaster, demanding "a disaster style of writing" involving frequent admixtures of genres and forms (24). Anthony Carrigan's 2015 essay "Toward a Postcolonial Disaster Studies" further advance many of these critical observations to argue for an alternative "mode of consciousness" in Kamau Brathwaite's magical realist *MR*, which registers the discontinuous catastrophic epistemologies embedded in western colonial Caribbean islands (125-27). As a result of these studies in addition to more recent readings by a number of scholars on disaster narratives in the postcolony, there is now a burgeoning academic subfield of literary studies concerned with disaster and violence, one that reads for the interlinks between imperial history, ecological vulnerability, and cultural production in postcolonial societies.² It is to this literary-critical context that Rastogi's work richly contributes. The remainder of this essay will offer a critical summary of Rastogi's work, concluding with its repercussions in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Postcolonial Disasters: Narrating Catastrophe in the Twenty-First Century

Rastogi's book is one of the first to offer a cogent theoretical framing of "postcolonial" disasters and their literary representations (by "postcolonial disasters," Rastogi means disasters taking place both in the after-colonial period and the complex imbrication of power and culture that disasters in this period, as suggested above, stand for). Drawing upon Jameson's and Lazarus's conceptions of the literary text as containing the symbolic registration of the social and political crisis of its time, Rastogi reads a Disaster Unconscious in postcolonial texts which "not only anchors the literary narrative to disastrous events, which are often social, political, and economic in nature, but also focuses readerly attention on the need to disseminate information about, as well as manage, catastrophe through narration" (5). She approaches disaster here through the temporality of the Story and Event. While Event is the actual disaster, disasters, she argues, may have long-term impacts on societies, traversing space and time; thus, making a time-bound, space-specific single point of entry to understand them is both symbolically and socially irrelevant. Story and Event, for Rastogi, have a dialectical relationship. What Story does is to shape the disaster with form, style, and motif so that the suffering and deleterious effects of a place and time on the vulnerable groups situated in the Global South can be read with empathy, urgency, and solidarity. Postcolonial disaster fiction, she contends, attempts to turn the ethical and the empathetic into the pedagogical and the ideological (11). Rastogi reads this *longue durée* of disaster in literary fiction through four types of disaster – oceanic, economic, medical, and geopolitical – situating them within the disaster optics of "explosion," "slow burn," and "simmer." In such a temporally and spatially elastic definition of disaster, not only is disaster's meaning expanded and enlarged, but Rastogi is also able to show how specific socio-political disasters have generated peculiar literary aesthetics in postcolonial fiction.

The book begins with the "explosion" of the Tsunami disaster in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Calling it an "oceanic" disaster, which includes storms, hurricanes, or tsunamis, Rastogi eloquently argues here that the immediacy and devastation of the Tsunami resulted in a number of short-form works from genre fiction to poetry. She states that "the eventfulness of the Event, or the pedagogical demands of the sudden-onset disaster, requires immediate attention that often subordinates the Story" (42), and this is why shorter literary forms are more appropriate or useful. Uniquely, the novels and poetry read here put the "broken" child at the center of imagination and reconstructive work. For Rastogi, the child, a classic postcolonial nation-building trope, suggests that with each disaster a nation must go back to its starting point, "its originary Postcoloniality, as it were, in order to reconstruct itself from infancy to fully realized maturity" (50). Both Yiola Damianou-Papadopoulou's *The Blue Dragon* and Phillipa Hawley's *There's No Sea in Salford* consolidate their political agenda of nation-building by romanticizing the child and the creative reconstructive impulse suggested by it. Here, Rastogi deftly notes the use of fantasy, allegory, pathetic fallacy, and other figurative modes of language to further the pedagogical imperative of disaster writing. This is also true, she claims, for Indran Amirthanayagam's poetry collection, *The Splintered Face*, which despite managing to weave "elaborate aesthetic conceits into sublime imagery," offers "the need to articulate disaster as disaster" (emphasis in original) by exhorting the diaspora to recognize the immense loss in its homeland and to take part in rebuilding Sri Lanka. Rastogi shows, through a close reading of the poem "Face," how Amirthanayagam breaks poetic conventions, creating jarring changes in pacing through breaks and pauses in the lyric to reproduce the

² See for instance works by Sharae Deckard (2016), Pramod Nayar (2017), Danielle Zoe Rivera (2020), Kasia Mika (2020), and Justyna Poray-Wybranowska (2021), among others.

lack of speed in communicating the tragedy (72). In discussions of the lyric more generally, Rastogi often makes reference to Adorno's provocations on the genre as an "impossible form" of self-expression after catastrophe (1983). Adorno, as Rastogi explains in an endnote from the Introduction, does not mean that writing poetry is impossible after catastrophe, but rather that poetry would have to consider its ethical implication and its self-reflexivity against the "absolute reification" (Adorno qtd. Rastogi, fn. 42, 212) of the mind, which the readings of Amirthanayagam's poetry mentioned above strongly indicate. Another key reference for reading Tsunami poems is Sharae Deckard's prescient analysis, in which she notes that neoliberal narratives of the Tsunami implement what Naomi Klein calls "disaster capitalism" (2015. Reading short stories and poems of the Sri Lankan Tsunami disaster, Deckard shows how the world-capitalist dimensions of humanitarianism and reconstruction are critiqued, and how structural violence in the service of transnational capital is revealed in these works (2015, 26-27). Deckard's reading of 'disaster capitalism' and the 'crisis of representation', it seems to me, could be used as a comparative framing reference for Rastogi's disaster poetics here.

In the second chapter, Rastogi takes us to a "slow burn" example: the economic disaster of Zimbabwe as represented through two English-language novels by Tendai Huchu and NoViolet Bulawayo. Unlike sudden disasters, like the Tsunami, slow onset disasters do not "register the calamitous magnitude until they have become full-fledged catastrophes" (81). An economic disaster, which means unemployment, very high prices of food and basic commodities, lawlessness, looting, and mob violence for a long period of time, results in writers using what Rastogi calls a "buying out" of time, which stands for "a prioritization of the Story that involves consciously turning away from crisis-ridden Zimbabwe through choices in novelistic voice, thematic content, and even geographic setting" (84). While "buying out" suggests an escape, literally and literarily, from "disastered" geographies, both Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* and Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, in their constant use of satire, romance, and parody, as well as in economic and fiscal imagery, indicate that the economic catastrophe is so much embedded in postcolonial living that there is no clear buying out of it ever. "The economic disaster, then," Rastogi submits, "raises numerous questions for readers to consider about how to live with catastrophe, especially in terms of its temporal longevity, even as it puts forward different Event-oriented imperatives, such as learning to cope, and not rebuilding physically" (99). Unlike in sudden-onset disasters, in a slow-onset disaster, the pedagogical imperative of the Event is often muted, "requiring great interpretive effort from readers seeking to understand their oblique commentary on crisis" (85). I wonder if Rastogi could have made use of John Marx's insightful observations regarding "failed-state fiction" (2008), which she mentions cursorily in the chapter. Marx's thoughts on how fiction both manages to normalize state failure and economic crisis, and to offer a counter-discourse through its educative agenda (the pedagogical in Rastogi's reading) to the social scientific norm of quantifying crisis, strike me as very close to Rastogi's reading of economic crisis and failure in fiction. Melissa Kennedy's (2017) reading of how, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, satire has emerged as a dominant literary form in postcolonial African literature to critique the crisis-ridden myths and neo-colonial agendas, could also have been a useful reference point for this chapter's theoretical bedding.

The third chapter continues the "slow-burn" example in the medical disaster of AIDS in South Africa and Botswana, as represented in Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* and Unity Dow's *Far and Beyond*. While the origins of AIDS can be traced back, Rastogi notes, from the early decades of twentieth-century colonisation and cross-species lab experimentation in the Belgian Congo, AIDS entered Southern Africa in the 1980s through migrancy, sex, and urbanisation. There were also widespread rumors that AIDS was a consequence of witchcraft and western modes of living (118). Rastogi uses the framework of "narrative medicine" here, which includes discussion of key medicine tropes, such as metaphors of human miscegenation and suffering, false naming and the provenance of the disease, descriptions of illness and pathology, and calling out AIDS to dispel its myths. "The ultimate project of these novels," she writes, "is therefore therapeutic, emerging most forcefully when seen through a medicalized, although hybridized, tripartite framework of *diagnosis, treatment, and healing*" (123, emphasis in original). She draws from Rita Charon to make the point that calling a disaster by its name is "bearing witness" to its suffering and trauma. In what is the most detailed and appealing literary reading in the book, Mpe's and Dow's novels are thoroughly scrutinized here to explore this tripartite structure: Rastogi examines how for Mpe, it is narrative techniques of irony and sarcasm that align with diagnosis, metanarrative for treatment, and cosmopolitanism and forgiveness for healing; while for Dow it is the process of naming the disease, allegorising the impact of it on human lives, and imagining another possible future through political and artistic empathy, or "the healing powers of art and literature" (152), through which Rastogi establishes the Disaster Unconscious therein. What is particularly brilliant about this chapter is the way Rastogi effectively combines quoted passages and theoretically rich close

readings, allowing us to see the strength of her logically driven conclusions, while producing persuasive examples of how to read postcolonial disaster texts closely and comparatively.

The fourth and final chapter brings us back from Southern Africa to South Asia with a focus on the ongoing impact of the partition of British India into India and Pakistan through endless wars, terrorism, and the prospect of nuclear annihilation. Rastogi uses the disastrous metaphor of a "simmer" to underline the tensions between India and Pakistan, which she calls a geopolitical disaster, drawing upon Frederick Burkle's notion of "complex emergencies" – that is, states falling into collapse because of myriad factors such as war, ethnic conflict, religious tension, and border issues. "The geopolitical disaster," Rastogi observes, "merges singular disastrous events into one large – and endless – catastrophe" (159-60). Because of the *longue durée* of this disaster, fiction may not always highlight the pedagogical imperative of the event, reminding us, as readers and critics, of the task to retrieve the Event from muted metaphors. This would also mean thinking through the radical ways novels have imagined "alternative communities and axes of relations that transcend traditional models of kinship and national belonging" (162). Thus, Rastogi finds Jaspreet Singh's military novel *Chef* collapsing the difference between citizens and enemies through literary and cinematic media, Moni Mohsin's chick lit *The Diary of a Social Butterfly* implementing a predominant satiric mode and experimental style of double opening as a mode of democratizing humor, and Manil Suri's speculative novel *The City of Devi* aiming to imagine a community future ripe with anxiety, warning, and what Rastogi calls "cautious optimism" (194).

Rastogi's book ends with a "Coda" on the current refugee crisis, which she claims incorporates all four disasters into one, suggesting that there is an overlap between the modalities of these disasters. This is an important point that, I believe, could have been made more convincingly in the Introduction. While the work she briefly reads here, Olumide Popoola and Annie Holmes' short-story collection *Breach*, can be understood as a literary representation of a sudden-onset tragedy, there is not much difference between a refugee disaster, at least in the way Rastogi conceptualizes it, and an oceanic disaster in the first chapter. Although Rastogi mentions that the refugee crisis is a long-term geopolitical disaster, tsunamis and cyclones (oceanic disasters per se), as Mike Davis has shown in his readings of El Niño famines (2002), can be read as long-term, environmental (man-made), and political disasters. This part, it seems to me, may confuse readers in a book which is otherwise remarkably tight in its theoretical framing and narrative reading.

Additionally, while Rastogi's main framework of Story and Event draws upon the topic of temporality, considering the materialist grounding of the readings, the discussion would have benefitted from a more rigorous understanding of disaster, time, and fiction writing, , through, for example, the works of Maurice Blanchot, Paul Ricoeur, Lauren Berlant, Laura Bear, Keya Ganguly, Gregory Button, Prathama Banerjee, and others. Second, throughout the book, the novel is the literary form most frequently examined" or something similar. While Rastogi offers some excellent close readings of style and form in the novel, the over-reliance on this fictional genre in postcolonial studies, which has faced increasing criticism, could have been overcome here via readings of autobiography, memoir, creative nonfiction, poetry, graphic novels, artwork, graffiti, documentary films, and so on, which have innovatively engaged with disasters. Finally, Rastogi's chosen texts are all written in English. While this in itself is not a weakness in the work, postcolonial studies has repeatedly reminded us of the iterative cosmopolitan and marketable agenda in English-language works. Engagement, on the other hand, with local language or translated works should yield additional insights into the way disaster affects vulnerable groups and their imaginative horizons.

However, the most important achievement of Rastogi's work, it seems to me, is that she enables us to see how postcolonial writing is fundamentally absorbed within a Disaster Unconscious, to which we as its readers have not always been paying careful attention. In the last decades, works by writers such as Mahasweta Devi, Amitav Ghosh, Helon Habila, and Rita Wong, among others continue to remind us that authors have not been careless in this respect, as they register in their works a socio-economically and climactically changing world. Considering that the Covid-19 pandemic continues to disrupt and ravage lives in uneven ways, as richer nations have once again managed to benefit from global inequalities by developing and extracting vaccines from within lower income countries, Rastogi's text, and the field of postcolonial literary disaster studies more broadly, are a stark reminder that catastrophes are never natural. They are what we make of them. In the current socio-economic climate, postcolonial nations, unfortunately, will be forced to make the worst of them. Postcolonial literature, however, will not forget this urgent dynamic.

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