

## An Eco-Pedagogy through Young-Adult Fiction: An Ecocritical Analysis of Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker*

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**Abstract:** *Young-adult fiction that addresses several environmental issues can be a valuable resource for environmental pedagogy, raising awareness of anthropogenic ecological calamities. The article, through the lens of ecocriticism, examines young-adult fiction such as the American writer Paolo Bacigalupi's Ship Breaker (2011) to explore how the text deals with different types of environmental degradation, including climate change and global warming, compelling readers to take environmental issues seriously. It also explores how the plundering of natural resources creates existential crises for the marginalised sections of society. This fiction centres on the protagonist, adolescent boy Nailer, who fights against various environmental odds and, in the process, exposes human greed responsible for environmental degradation. Despite being fraught with a dystopian vision of ecological crises, this fiction ends on an optimistic note, leaving a positive impression on young adults' minds. The text subverts traditional anthropocentrism and its myopic, egocentric privileging of human interests, conceptualising nature only as an inexhaustible resource. The article analyses the importance of studying the environmental dimensions of young-adult fiction in the Anthropocene, as they can foster environmental awareness among youth, helping them understand their responsibility to preserve ecology and environmental justice.*

**Keywords:** *Young-adult fiction, environmental dystopia, global warming, eco-pedagogy, climate change, and environmental justice*

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### Introduction: An Overall Purview

The paper analyses the American writer Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker* to illustrate the representation of environmental degradation in young-adult fiction (YA) for adolescent readers. Young-adult fiction generally deals with issues that are most appealing to young readers. They encompass themes such as the authoritarian repression prevailing in society, the emotional journey of a young protagonist, and the broader socio-economic conditions, presented lucidly for young readers. With the emergence of the Anthropocene, critics have

begun paying attention to the environmental dimension of such literature. *Ship Breaker*, as a young-adult fiction, is attentive to the current climatic changes, global warming, and subsequent catastrophes. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Article I explains that "climate change is a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods" (*Climate Change* 2007;

*Mitigation of Climate Change*, 2008). Climate change is thus referred to as a phenomenon caused by both human activities and natural causes. *Ship Breaker* pays special attention to the climate crisis that is leading the world toward dystopia.

*Ship Breaker* is set during the age of global warming, when ice is melting, sea levels are rising, and cities are drowning. The significance of the selected text lies in its delineation of the impending environmental degradation caused by man's uncontrolled greed and the pursuit of technological prowess, which often results in global warming. The anthropogenic deterioration in climate change has been a concern since the Industrial Revolution in England. Human activities in industry and other technological developments heat the Earth so much that basic climate patterns are changing, with prolonged summers, shorter winters, and a scarcity of rain. Global warming also causes species extinction. The uniqueness of *Ship Breaker* lies in its comprehensive presentation of apocalyptic themes for young readers, with an optimistic twist. It is informed by a "global eco-consciousness" (Wallis, 2013, p. 837). Andrew Wallis extends the matter related to environmental consciousness, particularly the global climate change:

Certainly, authors have always relied on their ability to evoke the universal

within the singular, but the present circumstances of planet-wide communications set against the backdrop of global climate change seem to be calling for 'bigger' narratives and are seen by some as a lynchpin of the ecocritical enterprise. (p. 838)

The text propagates a futuristic vision as it depicts the submersion of all the big cities in the US and other parts of the world because of the rising sea levels caused by global warming. The drowning of New Orleans is depicted in the text, which compels us to think about how environmental disasters affect the affluent and the poor together. Although the poor people have to suffer a lot, the rich cannot avoid its dangerous consequences. The futuristic setting in the fiction gives a new dimension to the current ecological catastrophes with the message that environmental issues should not be undermined. "Writers are projecting future scenarios of such developments and mining them for significance; utopian and dystopian literature provides them with an ideal forum for this exploration. Young readers are invited to consider what it means to be human in the twenty-first century" (Hintz and Ostry, 2003, p. 12)

### **Discussion on Paradigms Used in the Study**

The article chooses to analyse the selected fiction through the paradigm of

ecocriticism that places the environmental concerns in the context of “The Anthropocene.” The term Anthropocene was used by the “Nobel-winning chemist Eugene F. Stoermer and his collaborator, a marine science specialist, Paul J. Crutzen” (Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 208) to “emphasise the central role of mankind in geology and ecology” (Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 208). “Anthropocentrism,” a term which gains special attention in the Anthropocene, according to the Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy (2009), refers to “the explicitly stated or implied claim that only human beings have intrinsic value; all other natural beings and things have only instrumental value, and human interests thus always trump the interests of nonhumans and the environment” (p. 58). There is a strong connection between Anthropocene and anthropocentrism as Anthropocene “supports only a weak, or shallow, environmental ethics, one in which nonhuman nature only has instrumental values and some human interests are sacrificed only for the sake of more enlightened ones rather than for nature” (Nguyen, 2011, p. 550). This callousness towards nature ultimately results in disastrous calamities. The principle of unchecked developmentalism that can be witnessed in the Anthropocene results in environmental crises like global warming, climate change, diseases

and destruction in human and nonhuman realms, which contribute to the present-day apocalypse. The eco-dystopian fiction not only narrates ecological degradation but also exposes the hollowness of postmodern societies, marked by the capitalistic ideology of the market economy. They advocate a radical change in the contemporary socio-economic and cultural setup, which is essential for the future. The genre of young-adult dystopian fiction, which is the primary concern of the paper, focuses on the actions of humans that cause environmental problems. The pedagogical value of young-adult fiction lies in the fact that impart ecological literacy to young adults.

### **Young-Adult Dystopian Fictions**

Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry, in their introduction to *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults* (2003), state that “a startling number of works in the dystopian mode for young adults deal with post-disaster and environmentally challenged scenarios” (p. 12). Dystopia becomes a powerful metaphor for young adults because, again, to quote Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry:

In adolescence, authority appears oppressive, and perhaps no one feels more under surveillance than the average teenager. The teenager is on the brink of adulthood: close enough to see its privileges but unable to enjoy them.

The comforts of childhood fail to satisfy. The adolescent craves more power and control and intensely feels their freedom's limits. Denied legal and social power, teenagers in dystopian books often wield awesome mind control. (2003, p. 9-10)

That is why the representation of dystopia in young-adult fiction becomes more poignant: young adolescent readers can easily identify themselves with the changing socio-cultural and, more importantly, environmental circumstances. They quickly grasp the definite sense of the flawed world of the present that foreshadows a bleak future. While dystopian fiction helps readers realize actual happenings, the utopian endings in young-adult novels suggest that there is still room for improvement.

Environmental problems cannot be understood without highlighting matters related to the discrepancies between wealth and poverty and the current structure of globalisation. Therefore, fiction like *Ship Breaker* focuses on environmental dystopia, where questions of identity, power, and money are associated with people's exposure to environmental dilapidation.

### **Brief Plot of *Ship Breaker***

Paolo Bacigalupi is a writer and an environmental activist. He has been awarded the Hugo and Nebula Awards for his debut fiction, *The Windup Girl*, and *Ship Breaker* has

been named the best young-adult novel. *Ship Breaker* is set amid global warming in late twenty-first-century American society. However, the different locations in the novel indicates not a particular place but a troubled world submerged in environmental precarity. Environmental Dystopian literature focuses on contemporary ecological trends that may be dreadful soon. *Ship Breaker* is a novel about eco-disasters, criticising developmental policies that sacrifice the environment. Saba Pirzadeh has contributed to the reading of *Ship Breaker* from the perspective of ecocriticism in her article "Children of the Ravaged Worlds: Exploring Environmentalism in Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker* and Cameron Stracher's *The Water Wars*". She observes, "American policymakers' overzealous drive for urbanisation and economic growth is being carried out at the cost of ecological destruction" (Pirzadeh, 2015, p. 3). In *Ship Breaker*, the protagonist, Nailer, breaks ships for copper and iron wire sold in markets by the merchant at a high price. Nailer, an orphan, has to take this job to survive in a hostile world steeped in poverty and ruthlessness. He sales those wires to "Lawson & Carlson, the company that made all the cash from the blood and sweat of the ship breakers" (Bacigalupi, 2010, p. 7). In the fiction, the ship breakers are young adolescents from the economically weaker section.

Unfortunately, Nailer is paid a minimum wage for his labour, and he was once about to die after slipping into a tank of oil. He himself narrates his predicament, “We die here every day. Die all the time. Maybe I’m dead tomorrow. Maybe I was dead two days ago” (Bacigalupi, 2010, pp. 113–114). His friend, another child, does not attempt to rescue him because she wants to grab his job. Nailer’s father is a drug addict, and he passes away, leaving Nailer and his mother, who also dies. The fiction, along with environmental concerns, thus explores various forms of moral and ethical degradation, and the struggle for survival makes humans indifferent towards the natural environment, leading them to exploit it as much as possible. The narration takes a new turn when Nailer saves a shipwrecked girl named Nita, whom Nailer calls “lucky girl. Nita is the daughter of a wealthy but corrupt industrialist, and his uncle is an illegal tar sands dealer. Nita becomes the victim of the antagonism between her father and uncle, who wants to kill her. Nailer becomes a saviour for Nita, and his journey begins to reunite the father and daughter amid environmental antagonism. The story ends with Nailer rescuing the kidnapped Nita and meeting her on the same beach where they first met.

#### **Environmental Concerns in *Ship Breaker*:**

The writer Paolo Bacigalupi is not only an eminent writer but also an environmental

activist who represents “the slow violence of environmental degradation, which is a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space and typically not regarded as violence since its repercussions are not instantaneous, explosive, or sensually visible” (Nixon, 2011, p. 2-3). “Slow violence,” as Nixon has stated, is not confined to a particular region but spans time and space globally, highlighting the geopolitical, economic, and physiological significance of environmental deterioration (Nixon, 2011).

*Ship Breaker* analyses the “causal relationship between humans and the environment” and the role of “human agency” (Pirzadeh, p. 10) in the time of environmental crises. Here, the human agency is bestowed upon the young adult Nailer. His response to the contaminated surroundings forms the crux of the narrative. The ecological crisis manifests as rising sea levels, massive pollution, and global warming. Slow violence here in the form of “climate change in these fictions perpetuates everyday violence on the macro and micro levels of existence” (Pirzadeh, p. 10). This type of slow violence, as Rob Nixon observes, “is not just attritional but also exponential, operating as a major threat multiplier; it can fuel long-term, proliferating conflicts in situations where the conditions for sustaining life become increasingly but gradually degraded” (2011, p. 3).

Neiler, the protagonist of the text, has to fight against all sorts of odds, like ecological warfare and the elite exploitation and control of the marginalised section and the resultant dispossession of the latter. Even the profession of Nailer, shipbreaking, suggests environmental turbulence, as he collects wire from ships wrecked by catastrophes like hurricanes and other storms. Nailer lives in filthy squalor and earns “by selling copper wiring from oil tankers which have crashed during intense hurricanes, an outcome of environmental instability” (Pirzadeh, p. 1). Mining operations and other forms of landscape exploration lead to land degradation. Thus, the process also contributes to global warming. The situation becomes pitiable when children like Nailer are forced to break into the forsaken ships to remove the metal wires, which can later be sold for a higher price. While entering the wrecked ships, the children are exposed to poisonous chemicals that later prove harmful to them. Amid these corruptions and environmental calamities, Nailer fights to survive and save others. Environmental catastrophes are normalised in a way that makes it never look like an outbreak of violence at all. Neiler reacts to these catastrophes in their own way.

Nailer is well aware of the injustice around him, but he does not actively revolt against it. He is, rather, a passive character who does not participate in changing the socio-

political system. Nailer is not a revolutionary character in this sense because he does not take any extraordinary initiatives to improve the community's living conditions. He is apparently too busy to improve his living situation. However, he undergoes a kind of transformation while helping his mother, Sadna, and his friend, Pima, escape the environmentally degraded land, thereby demonstrating his activism for the greater common good. Bacigalupi explains his effort to save friends from the wasteland where environmental catastrophe has made the place uninhabitable: “The old world wrecks still lay back . . . still leaking oil and chemicals, still swarming with workers, but he wasn't one of them. And not Pima. And not Sadna, either. He wasn't able to save everybody, but at least he could at least save Pima and Sadna” (Bacigalupi, p. 221-22). Nailer, further, gains the support of Nita, a member of the privileged class, who helps him to improve the life of some community members. Nita's entry into the group of Nailer and his friends, the subalterns of the society is marked by hardship as she adapts the new way of life:

Nailer had expected Nita's prissy distaste for the slums of the Orleans to continue, but she adapted quickly. . . She threw herself into work, and didn't complain what she ate or where



she slept. She was still swank, and still did weird swank things, but she also showed a determination to carry her weight that Nailer was forced to respect. (Bacigalupi, p. 218)

The fiction obliquely suggests that, through the unification of the upper and so-called lower sections of society and an equal distribution of natural resources, holistic nation-building is possible. Nailer may not change the fate of the entire population. Still, he initiates the empowerment of the lower strata of his society and, in the process, helps at least some of them regain a new life. *Ship Breaker*, in fact, does not sketch any supra-human picture of the protagonist. It is a very down-to-earth portrait of Nailer and the urgency of his situation. The work ultimately evokes empathy among adolescents, enabling them to realise the severity of the environmental disaster. The readers can also feel the need for proper democratisation of society in general, rather than corporate monopoly.

This young-adult fiction, in a way, educates the young readers on issues like dependence among the community members, skills to guide the society, awareness of the fatal impact of the environmental catastrophe, enlightens them about the survival strategies, and power and resistance. They end on a positive note, expressing a desire for a utopian

world. In the selected text, despite the depiction of a dystopian future, there is always a glimpse of hope because young readers, while reading, expect a new promised world of faith in front of them. Monica Hughes, who wrote the *Isis trilogy* (1980-83), has argued for the hopeful ending of dystopian young-adult fiction: “dystopian young-adult fiction may lead a child into the darkness, but you must never turn out the light.” She further adds, “Dystopian worlds are exciting but the end should not be that of nihilism and despair” (Hughes, 2003, p. 156). *Ship Breaker* corresponds to her analysis of an ideal young-adult fiction.

### **Conclusion: Environmental Pedagogy**

*Ship Breaker* imparts multidimensional environmental lessons. The fiction goes beyond the traditional anthropocentric social setup to include nature and marginalised entities within the paradigm of development. The myopic vision of treating nature only as a resource leads to the destruction of nature and humans and nonhuman species. Humans should not be placed at the highest level in the universe, but rather be seen as an integral part of it. The sense of superiority humanity has cherished from time immemorial never acknowledges the importance of biodiversity. The Western anthropocentrism, based on short-term calculations of profit and loss, proves destructive in the long run. It pollutes the environment and exploits its resources to

increase profits. Phenomena like global warming and climate change indicate that if the profit-driven mentality is not curbed now, it will lead to the extinction of the entire planet. Young-adult fiction like *Ship Breaker*, with its futuristic setting, warns readers about the planet's future degradation. It also proposes that the proper well-being of the earth is only possible through the cooperation of adults, adolescents, and children. Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker* ultimately demonstrates that young-adult fiction possesses profound pedagogical potential in the Anthropocene. The novel enables young readers to witness how climate change is not an abstract scientific discourse but a lived reality (Abbott & Wilson, 2015) shaped by power, class, capital, and human choices by placing adolescent character at the centre of the narrative.

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