

Gendering Ecological Crisis: A Critical Reading of Craig Santos Perez's Select Poems in the Time of Pandemic

Shani K. Meeran

Ph.D Scholar, Department of English
Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit
Kalady

Abstract

Ecological crises are one of the burning global issues that we face today. The intrinsic bond between human beings and nature have been broken for a long time. The outbreak of the global pandemic and the subsequent lockdown worldwide has given some quality time for people to think about their lost connection with nature and realize how nature finds ways to rejuvenate itself in their absence. The role of literature in representing and dealing with difficult times has also become a point of discussion. The current paper focusses on representation of ecological crises and their relationship with gender in the poetry of contemporary American author Craig Santos Perez. Being an environmentalist, Perez's poetry has been noticeable for highlighting some major ecological issues and its consequences regarding feminine gender. Reading his poetry in the times of pandemic throws light on the plight of women during crises, particularly ecological crises.

The systematic oppression faced by women is paralleled by the destruction inflicted upon nature by man. A critical analysis of Craig Santos Perez's poems shows how the predicament of nature and women are closely related. Perez's poetry becomes a "site of memory, recovery, resistance, revitalization, resilience, and resurgence- especially in response to historical, cultural, ecological and personal trauma." Reading the ecological poems of Perez during the times of pandemic draws attention to the power of poetry and literature in bringing out creative changes in the society. Gender is an inextricable part of Perez's ecological poems. The paper explores the gender dimensions of Perez's select ecological poems and the power of poetry to highlight and heal the global crises.

Keywords: Ecological crisis, Gender, Pandemic, Oppression, Resistance, Revitalization

Ecological crisis is one of the most pressing issues that we face today. The human destruction of natural environment fueled by the market capitalism poses certain serious questions regarding health and sustainability goals. The outbreak of the global pandemic, Covid- 19 and its variants are one among them. The intrinsic bond between human beings and nature have been broken for a long time. Humanity's obsession with materiality, financial gains and urbanity has estranged them from natural environment leading to various crises. The ecological crises and the related problems are increasing at alarming rate. Though all people are affected by these crises, the mostly affected are the socially, economically, and sexually marginalized communities around the world. The impact of these crises on women and gender minorities is very high. It is high time to think seriously about the gender dimensions of crises in general and particularly ecological crises.

The contemporary poets tend to write more seriously about the negative impact of human activities on planet than their predecessors. In his introduction to *Poems for a Small Planet: Contemporary American Nature Poetry*, Jay Parini writes, “Nature is no longer the rustic retreat of the Wordsworthian poet...[it] is now a pressing political question, a question of survival.” Unlike nature poetry, environmental poetry explores the complex relationship between people and nature, often written by poets who are concerned about our impact on nature. In addition to serving as witnesses to global climatic changes, the contemporary poets play a decisive role in highlighting major environmental issues and advocating for the preservation of nature. The contemporary American poet Craig Santos Perez is one among them whose poetry are worth studying in the time of pandemic regarding their gender dimensions. His poetry is noticeable for bringing certain major environmental issues to the fore.

Born on February 6, 1980, Craig Santos Perez is a native Chamoru from the Pacific Island of Guam. Apart from being a poet, he dons several hats like scholar, editor, publisher, essayist, critic, book reviewer, artist, environmentalist, and political activist. Currently, Craig is a Professor in the English Department at the University of Hawaii, where he teaches creative writing, Pacific literature, and eco- poetry. According to Craig, he teaches the course on eco- poetry to “raise awareness, through poetry, about the environment, climate change, sustainability, resource use, development, militarism, and conservation.” He is the author of two spoken word poetry albums, *Undercurrent* (2011) and *Crosscurrent* (2017). He has also penned five books of poetry: *from unincorporated territory [hatcha]* (2008), *from unincorporated territory [saina]* (2010), *from unincorporated territory [guma]* (2014), *from unincorporated territory [lukao]*(2017), and *Habitat Threshold* (2020). He has been a finalist for the LA Times 2010 Book Prize for Poetry and the winner of the 2011 PEN Center USA Literary Award for Poetry.

Though many of Craig’s poems are specifically about Guam and the Pacific, they are not just limited to these areas. One predominant theme of his poetry is the environment, or climate change to be specific. According to him, the extreme climatic changes that we have witnessed are detrimental in many more ways than we know. He believes that poetry, and literature in general, “is an important site of memory, recovery, resistance, revitalization, resilience, and resurgence- especially in response to historical, cultural, ecological, and personal trauma”. In his words, “the literary is a symbolic space, poetry can inspire and empower us towards real change”. Craig’s poems are also noticeable for its gender dimensions. The way the relationship between gender, specifically feminine gender and ecological crisis are represented in his poems is worth studying. The systematic oppression faced by women is paralleled by the destruction inflicted upon nature by man. A critical analysis of Craig Santos Perez’s poems shows how the predicament of women and nature are closely related. Hence, one can read environmental poems of Craig against the backdrop of ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism or ecological feminism is a branch of feminism that examines the connections between women and nature. Specifically, it emphasizes the ways both nature and women are treated by patriarchal society. Ecofeminists try to explain the ways in which social norms exert unjust dominance over nature and women. They advocate an alternate worldview that values the earth as sacred, recognizes humanity’s dependency on the natural world and embraces all life as valuable. Ecofeminism takes its roots from the realization that the long historical association of women with nature have led to the oppression of both. The

women and nature are often represented as chaotic, irrational and in need of control whereas men are depicted as rational, ordered and thus capable of controlling the use and development of women and nature. Ecofeminists argue that this fundamental difference in representation results in a hierarchical structure that grants power to men and leads to the exploitation of women and nature if they are associated with one another.

Gender and ecological crises are part and parcel of Craig's poetry. For him, climate change is inextricable from other global injustices and inequalities. His poems could hardly be called "nature poems" in the tradition of largely white predecessors like Robert Hass or W.S. Merwin. Instead, they can be called "ecopoems" or poems that show the human and political side of the environment. In the words of poet and critic Juliana Spahr, "a nature poem would depict plants and animals- but an ecopoem would show the bulldozer destroying their habitat". Craig's daughter was born in April, 2014. The first year of being a father has filled his life with joy as well as anxiety. He was apprehensive about bringing up a child in an era of global warming and other ecological crises. Hence, he started writing a series of poems titled "understory" to help him process these emotions. Etymologically, the word understory refers to life forms that grow beneath a canopy of trees. For Craig, the word described what it felt like to be a parent and raise a child during a time of massive climate change. In this difficult time of global pandemic, reading his poems provides deep insight on the strained relationship between man and nature and its consequences.

"First Trimester," one of the poems from "understory" series is written in the context of Craig's wife's pregnancy. Most of the poems in the "understory" series feature his own wife and daughter who act as representatives for all the girls and women worldwide. These poems deal with the theme of ecology and various crises, mostly climate change. By featuring his own daughter and wife, Craig adds gender dimensions to the theme of ecological crisis in his poems. The poem "First Trimester" deals with the invasion of 'plastic-culture' among people and its impact on environment. As plastic never dies, it is considered as the perfect creation. The eternal nature of plastic helps it to win over its natural counterparts. The conflict between artificial versus natural is quite evident throughout the poem. Written in the context of his wife's pregnancy, Craig says "the doctor recommends a c-section". It shows the increasing preference of unnatural birth among people around the world. He expresses concern over plastic littering and its hazardous effects on various natural entities. He writes,

//in the sea, plastic multiplies
 into smaller pieces, leaches estrogenic and toxic
 chemicals// if [we] cut open the bellies of whales
 and large fish, what fragments will [we] find, derived
 from oil, absorbed into tissue// because plastic
 never dissolves, every product ever made still exists,
 somewhere, today// (6-12)

He wishes that his daughter be made of plastic so that she will survive the massive wasteland our Earth has become and can have a great future. The littering of plastic waste affects the fertility of soil considerably. Craig's concern over the fertility of soil belies the harmful impact of plastic waste on women's fertility too. He is very much concerned about the future

of unborn children in the wombs of their mothers. The various congenital defects due to the impact of toxic chemicals adds to his misery.

Another significant poem from “understory” series talks about a walk that the poet takes with his pregnant wife Nalani during her second trimester to their small community garden plot in Manoa. In this poem, he shares his concern over the excessive use of pesticides and how it affects the health of our planet and its people. He asks,

how will
open air
pesticide drift
affect our
unborn daughter,
whose nerve
endings are
just beginning
to root? – (23-31)

His baby inside the mother’s womb is akin to the unborn plant inside a seed. As we spray pesticides to increase the yield, the mother nature herself is affected. The excessive use of pesticides poses serious questions regarding the fertility of soil. Here again, the concern over the fertility of soil echoes the fertility of women in general. As part of pesticide use, various water resources as well as its organisms are seriously affected. He says, “50,000 heart sea urchins die off” due to the injudicious use of pesticides. He ends the poem by asking what his daughter will be able to plant in this “paradise of fugitive dust.” Apart from the surface meaning, Craig here shares concern over the reproductive capacity of his own daughter while growing up in this over polluted and toxic world. Like in any other crisis, here too the women are the most affected. The use of pesticides can cause serious birth defects to successive generations. The massive havoc wreaked by aerial spraying of Endosulfan in the Kasaragod district of Kerala, a state in India is worth remembering in this context. In an article titled “Children of Endosulfan” which appeared in *Down To Earth* in 2001, Mohana Kumar Y. S., a doctor who has practiced medicine in the area since 1982, speaks thus about the impact of Endosulfan:

Disorders of the central nervous system are very common among the children of the area—cerebral palsy, retardation of mental and/or physical growth, epilepsy and congenital anomalies like staghorn limbs. There are too many cases of cancer of the liver and blood; infertility and undescended testis among men; miscarriages and hormonal irregularities among women; skin disorders; and asthma, to name a few.

Another significant poem in the “understory” series deals with the apprehensions of the author as he takes his six months old daughter to vaccination. The poem shares the larger concerns of parents in general regarding the challenges of child- bearing and rearing in times of contagions

and other diseases triggered by climate change and the resultant global warming caused by the exploitation of nature. Written in 2014, Craig mentions the outbreak of chikungunya, dengue fever, west Nile virus and Ebola in various parts of the world. He would not have missed to mention the outbreak of Corona virus if the poem was written in the recent years. He shares serious concerns about the outbreak of various waterborne, airborne, foodborne and insect borne diseases due to human interventions in nature and its impact on new borne babies as well as the future generations. He writes,

-when
the planet
warms, [our]
bodies host
fever chains
of transmission-
no child
born in
this fourth
era of
disease will
be immune
at dawn (54- 66)

Yet another notable poem from the “understory” series, written for Craig’s wife and daughter on her first birthday addresses the plight of women during wars. Craig talks about the numerous girls disappeared from reservations, maquiladoras, villages, and schools during internal wars in Hawaii, Philippines, and South Korea. He worries about how to stop his daughter’s body from becoming target practice. Craig becomes a powerful voice for the women’s rights in the poem. With the hashtag #bringbackourgirls, Craig becomes a contemporary voice for the women’s rights. He interweaves the conservation of nature with the protection of women in the poem. The lines “nalani gathers/ the clippings/ because even/ [our] nails/ are ten/ percent water” hints at conservation of natural resources. Similes drawn from nature like “falls like king tides” reiterates the same idea. Craig draws parallels between the conservation of nature and women against the backdrop of wars in the poem. In fact, the core idea of ecofeminism is that the man’s domination over nature parallels that of his domination over women.

Craig problematizes climate change in his two most famous poems titled “Love Poems in the Time of Climate Change” written in 2017. “Love in a Time of Climate Change” or “Sonnet XVII” is a recycling of Pablo Neruda’s “Sonnet XVII”. It also echoes famous love poems like Robert Browning’s

“How Do I Love Thee (Sonnet 43)” and Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 18”. Craig alludes wittily to Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s famous novel “Love in the Time of Cholera” in the title. The poem “Love in a Time of Climate Change” reminds us of the persistence of love through times of natural calamities and change over the course of history. The speaker’s love towards his lover is like the love towards most vulnerable things. He loves her as the seed that does not sprout, but carries the heritage of roots within it. It hints at the impact of climate change on the fertility of soil as well as women. It reminds us of miscarriages and congenital defects caused due to climate change. The speaker loves the woman without knowing when the world will end. Here Craig shares apocalyptic concerns. Also, his love is natural because only such love will survive. The poet talks about the need to rekindle the man’s broken relationship with nature as there is no future without nature. He writes,

I love you naturally without pesticides or pills-
 I love you like this because we won’t survive any other way,
 Except in this form in which humans and nature are kin,
 So close that your emissions of carbon are mine,
 So close that your sea rises with my heat. (10-14)

In the poem love towards woman is presented as akin to love towards nature. The poems also establish the need to strengthen the human bond with nature. The poem is quite relevant in the current scenario of global pandemic. The outbreak of global pandemic and the subsequent lockdown worldwide has given some quality time for people to think about their lost connection with nature and realize how nature finds ways to rejuvenate itself in their absence. Various poems written in the time of pandemic also reminds us of the importance of renewing the good relationship with nature for making earth a joyful place to live in.

“Sonnet XII” is the second poem in the series entitled “Love Poems in the Time of Climate Change.” Contextualizing love in times of ecological crises, the poem establishes parallels between the exploitation of women and nature. Equating global woman with “waxy apple,” “record heat”, “thick smell of algae” and “burnt peat”, the poet hints at how both nature and women are equally wronged by patriarchal society. In the poem, Craig again deals with the challenges of love affairs in times of global crises. Hence, he describes love as migration of refugees with overcrowded boats which may or may not reach its destination. Also, he describes love as a clash of petro-states. Both the images imply the uncertainty of future of love in times of various global crises. However, the lover in the poem is ready to love his beloved till the end of the world due to its over exploitation by men.

“Rings of Fire” is another significant poem by Craig, which is included in the collection *Habitat Threshold*. It is written on his daughter’s first birthday party. The poet discusses various natural calamities happening worldwide, especially global warming against its backdrop. He says, “paradise is burning”. The poet also shares the challenges of bringing up his daughter amidst the

worst scenario. Craig says that all these natural calamities know no borders. People all around the world are affected. But as in any crisis, the oppressed like women and children are most affected. Despite all the issues presented in the poem, the speaker still craves for an unfiltered cigarette. It hints at the continuing human interventions in nature which leads to exploitation regardless of the threats that it poses. The poem ends with everyone wishing happy birthday to his daughter. The smoke is being described as trembling as they all exhaled the same flammable wish. It hints at the uncertainty looming over his daughter's future. There is another poem of the same title written on his daughter's second birthday. It is written almost in a similar fashion but the situation described in the poem has become even more worse. The poet writes, "this year is the hottest in history, breaking the record set when she was born". The poem shows how the global crises worsen year after year. In this poem also, the speaker talks about his craving for cigarette which hints at the continuing human exploitation of nature. Here also the poem ends with the expression of uncertainty over his daughter's future.

A critical reading of Craig Santos Perez's poetry shows the parallels between ecological crisis and gender. Featuring his own wife and daughter in a considerable number of poems, Craig presents them as representatives of the marginalized and oppressed who are the most affected during any crisis. He is successful in representing the strained relationship between man and nature and therefore, the need to rekindle it. He considers poetry as a space of possibility and promise and believes in its power to inspire real change in society. Juxtaposing the relationship between ecology and women as explored in Craig's poetry with the current global pandemic situation help us to understand the grave situation of women during any crisis. Also, reading his poetry in the time of pandemic make us think deeply about the human exploitation of nature and the urgency in conserving it. "Subsistence Perspective" which aims at creation, re-creation, and maintenance of immediate life with no other purpose as suggested by Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies in their eminent work *Ecofeminism* seems to be the likely solution for the present crisis.

Works Cited

- "Children of Endosulfan." *Down To Earth*, 28 Feb. 2001, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/children-of-endosulfan-15838>. Accessed 20 Jan 2022.
- "Craig Santos Perez." *Wikipedia*, , https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Craig_Santos_Perez. Accessed 24 Jan. 2022.
- "Craig Santos Perez." *Poetry Foundation*, 24 Jan. 2022, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/craig-santos-perez>.
- Miles, Kathryn. "Ecofeminism." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9 Oct. 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ecofeminism>. Accessed 30 Jan 2022.
- Perez, Craig Santos. "First Trimester." *From unincorporated territory [guma]*, Omnidawn Publishing, 2017.
- . "From "understory"." *Poetry*, Jan 2016.

- . "From "understory"." *Poetry*, July/Aug 2016.
- . "From "understory"." *Poetry*, Summer 2015.
- . "Love in a Time of Climate Change." *Habitat Threshold*, Omnidawn Publishing, 2020.
- . "Sonnet XII." *Habitat Threshold*, Omnidawn Publishing, 2020.
- Shiva, Vandana and Maria Mies. *Ecofeminism*, Zed Books, 2014.
- Wilson, Meagan. Interview with Craig Santos Perez. *Colorado Review*, 29 Oct, 2015.