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Representing Postcolonial Disaster: Conflict, Consumption, Reconstruction

From the South Asian Tsunami to the Haitian Earthquake, the last decade has witnessed a significant rise in the number of catastrophes experienced globally. These have highlighted how the various risks that inhere in human-environmental relationships are amplified not only by anthropogenic climate change but also by the systematic capitalist exploitation of natural resources. Both of these processes have accelerated in the period of expansive globalization following World War II, resulting in natural hazards' frequent conversion into wide-scale disasters, which cause disproportionate devastation in non-western countries. In addition to this, the social crises that shadow political decolonization in many postcolonial states – including war, genocide, and systemic poverty – have transformed natural and constructed environments in ways that are, in many cases, linked to contemporary forms of ecological imperialism. My research project is guided by a conviction regarding the need to humanize and add cultural and historical depth to our understanding of disasters' social and environmental effects. It examines the various ways in which writers, intellectuals, and artists working in non-western contexts theorize and represent specific experiences of postcolonial disaster. In particular, I show how a diverse body of post-World War II texts highlights tensions between decolonization, globalization, and neocolonial exploitation in the period that witnessed the emergence of disaster studies as an academic field. In so doing, I suggest that they provide conceptual resources for asserting culturally localized forms of environmental ethics that can challenge disaster capitalism, foster resilience, and reinforce disaster studies' commitment to reducing vulnerability.

My research is guided by two key aims:

- 1) To show what literary representations of compound crises can contribute to disaster management and sustainability planning in states that are still wrestling with the legacies of western colonialism.
- 2) To examine how disasters demand formal and generic innovations by postcolonial writers, and assess the constitutive roles such narratives can play in relation to processes of social and environmental reconstruction or recovery.

I intend to pursue these aims through a number of comparative, historicized case studies emerging from different forms of global disaster representation. These include the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict; Nuclearization in the Pacific; the Bhola Cyclone, Partition, and the Bangladesh Liberation War; the Bhopal Gas Disaster; the Rwandan Genocide; the Montserrat Volcano Eruption; the South Asian Tsunami; and the Haitian Earthquake. In all instances, I am interested both in the material effects and discursive framings of real-world crises, and seek to emphasize the environmental consequences of social disasters and the social construction of natural catastrophes in postcolonial contexts.