

The Climate of Emergency and Global South Fiction: Critiquing the Absence of Emergency in the Anthropocene through Indiana's *La mucama de Omicunlé*

Tarik Monowar

Kaliyaganj College, University of Gour Banga

Abstract: *In the context of the Global South, the question of the climate crisis encounters a paradigm shift, where both capitalism and colonialism on the part of the Global North have sponsored and expedited the climate change and the associated socio-political crises which take a heavy toll on the once-colonized Global South. Following the question of climate change, environmentalists of the Global South suggest that “there is a distinct environmental epistemology and ethos associated with the citizens in the Third World” (Slovic et al. 2015,1). In view of the above context, this paper seeks to revisit the Caribbean author Rita Indiana’s novel *La mucama de Omicunlé* (2015), translated into English as *Tentacle* (2018) by Achy Obejas, locating it in light of Heideggerian *Notlosigkeit* (Heidegger 2012, 402), or lack of the sense of emergency, to decipher how this text represents one of the many responses to the “emergency of the lack of emergency” in the Anthropocene. Situating this Caribbean Anthropocene fiction through the rubrics of Rob Nixon’s “slow violence” (2011, 2) and Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martínez-Alier’s “environmentalism of the poor” (1997, 5), this paper will explore how the ‘emergency consciousness’ of the Global South has different ontological appeals. The hypothesis inspiring this paper is that Anthropocene emergency fictions from the Global South are additions to the “empire writes back” (Ashcroft et al. 1989) aesthetics, responding to the crises of global capitalism and colonialism.*

Keywords: Climate of Emergency, Absence of Emergency, Emergency in the Anthropocene, Emergency of the Global South, Global South Emergency Fiction

Introduction

The word ‘emergency’ as an umbrella term may refer to any serious crisis that demands an immediate intervention to prevent untoward consequences, but it makes a point of departure at the hands of Heidegger. Richard Polt, in his interpretation of Heidegger’s idea of emergency, says “Unlike a conventional emergency, such a moment may not call for immediate action; in fact, it may leave us at a loss and call for long reflection” (Polt 2013, 5). Thus, when

Heidegger asserts that the greatest emergency is the lack of a sense of emergency or “the lack of a sense of plight” (Heidegger 2012, 98), he seems to stress the lack of thinking and questioning on the part of “being”. Being emerges in emergency through thinking or questioning. The lack of thinking and questioning was deeply felt by Heidegger, as reflected in his assertion that this lack of a sense of emergency is greatest “where self-certainty has become unsurpassable, where everything is held to be calculable, and especially where it has been decided, with no previous questioning [...] Where “truth” has long since ceased to be a question [...] (Heidegger 2012, 98). When Amitav Ghosh speaks about climate crisis as “a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (Ghosh 2016, 12) he seems to be questioning this climate of ‘the emergency of the lack of emergency’ in the Anthropocene. For Ghosh, “the Anthropocene presents a challenge not only to the arts and humanities, but also to our commonsense understandings and beyond that to our contemporary culture in general” (ibid., 12). Since this culture is “intimately linked with the wider histories of imperialism and capitalism that have shaped the world” (ibid., 13), it is imperative that the critique of the emergency consciousness of the Global South subsume the subtle intricacies and nuances of different cultural matrices under question.

Following the Anthropocene, an era of cumulative carbon emissions, manipulated mega-fires, rapid melting of glaciers, landslides following too much excavation, surging sea-contaminations and other manifestations of human-induced climatic and environmental disasters are but the consequences of this climate of ‘the emergency of the lack of emergency’ in the global mainstream discourses and narratives. This brief article attempts to decipher how confrontations between the emergency in the Anthropocene and the emergency of the Global South call for a fresh revisiting with critical reflection because the “uneven patterns of neoliberal development in the Global South threaten the millions who depend upon access to natural resources for survival” (Slovic et al. 2015, 3). In the context of the Global South, consideration of environmental vulnerability is subsumed by the “politics of survival” (as Vandana Shiva titled her book) of sections of people and communities whom Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha described as “ecosystem people” and “ecological refugees” (Gadgil and Guha 1995, 137). In this context, Rita Indiana’s *Tentacle* is one of the potential literary representations of the Global South situated to demonstrate how the contemporary Anthropocene narratives question and critique this lack of the sense of emergency, following the adverse impacts of uneven development expedited by the tethered sponsorship of global capitalism and colonialism.

The umbrella term “Global South” bears massive significance for the readers of postcolonial ecocriticism in terms of understanding the uneven patterns of development across the world. The origin of the term can be dated back to former German chancellor Willy Brandt’s distinction between developing or underdeveloped countries as the “Global South” and the far

more developed countries of the northern hemisphere as the “Global North”. The distinction, however, cannot be strictly limited to the geographical hemispheres. Therefore, recent interpretations of the term challenge “the Brandt Line” by arguing for the imbricated existence of the Global South countries within the Northern hemisphere as well. For the exponents of the “Ecocriticism of the Global South” (to use the title of Slovic and others’ edited work), “Global South” becomes a site of underdevelopment and underrepresentation, as well as a metaphor for epistemological diversity. This tends to challenge the homogenized discourses of the western colonizer states – particularly the United Kingdom and the United States, which have been suppressing the plurality of voices from the Global South countries. In their seminal work, *Ecocriticism of the Global South* (2015), Slovic et al. extend the postcolonial ecocritical project to include the plurality of voices and perspectives representing different provinces of the Global South countries. For them, the term “Global South” can be interpreted in three-fold ways:

- i. As an entity invented in the struggle between imperial global domination and decolonial forces which resist global designs through their emancipatory articulations.
- ii. as a geopolitical concept replacing the “Third World” after the collapse of the Soviet Union. From this perspective, the Global South is the location of underdevelopment and emerging nations that need “support.”
- iii. as a trajectory within the North enacted by massive migration from Africa, Asia, South-Central America, the Caribbean, and the “former Eastern Europe.” The “manywheres” of the “global” South acts as a springboard for critical imaginations of environmental consciousness and race. (Slovic et al. 2015, 2-3)

Emergency at the Interface of Race, Colonial Hangover and Environmental Capitalism

In his interpretation of Heidegger’s idea of emergency, Santiago Zabala says “the absence of emergency is a consequence of politics, finance, and culture having been framed within previously established realist parameters” (2017, 31). He also asserts “Anything that is not framed within the dominant paradigms [...] not only is repressed but also constitutes an emergency as it strives to change these established paradigms” (ibid. 31). In the spirit of this perspective, I would like to begin with the idea that the lack of emergency consciousness of the Global South is a consequence of the myopic mainstream paradigms of environmentalism of the western states. The aesthetics of Global South fiction assert how the mainstream discourses have repressed the peripheral voices and heterogeneous alterities at the intersections of racial violence, colonial hangover, capitalist economy, slavery, social inequality, and the exploitation of environmental resources. Indiana looks at the past and the present in a similar vein. She explains in an interview with Amy Brady how the present of the Dominican Republic (or any of the other Global South countries)

is always haunted by the colonial past: “Yes! I write about the effects of the past in our day-to-day practices and perceptions, how lives lived by others are part of our psychology and feelings, how we’re repeating patterns dealt to us by colonization and slavery” (Brady 2019, n.p.). In this regard, she picks up the illustrations of “the 16th-century buccaneers of Hispaniola” featured in her novel, demonstrating how they work as “a twin specter of present-day peripheral communities [...] bound by isolation and at the same time dependent upon foreign goods and culture” (Brady 2019, n.p.). Therefore, it is not surprising that the complex and highly experimental plot of Indiana’s *La mucama de Omicunlé* (2015) explores how the lack of the sense of emergency in the present climate change crisis is a socially constructed malady, engineered by the capitalist Global North countries, acting as Anthropocene geological forces with their power, profit, and control, promoting social inequality and violence and vulnerability.

The narrative addresses and critiques the eco-political emergency of the lack of emergency in the Global South through illustrations of postcolonial and post-anthropocene ecologies of Caribbean land and water. The narrative here visualizes of a future time when the Dominican Republic is plagued with an unknown viral epidemic, where the allegedly infected poor are literally disposed of through genocides by spreading poisonous chemical gas, and where rising toxicity of water has obliterated all living species in the sea. At the very opening of the novel, the narrator draws attention towards the desensitization of the state, run by a dominating dictatorial regime ruthlessly killing Haitian migrants:

Recognizing the virus in the black man, the security mechanism in the tower releases a lethal gas and simultaneously informs the neighbors, who will now avoid the building’s entrance until the automatic collectors patrolling the streets and avenues pick up the body and disintegrate it. (Indiana 2018, 7)

The opening scene depicting the extermination process of the Haitian migrants directly reflects how “the convergence of racial capitalism and environmental racism” (Johnson and Lubin 2017, 25) contributed to and prolonged the tussle between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, including consequent genocides like the Parsley Massacre of 1937 and the notorious 2013 court order that denationalized and deported citizens of the Dominican Republic with Haitian ancestry. The establishment of American sugar plantations in the Caribbean, and the entailing deforestation, military repression and other interventions in the environmental system by the United States, reinforces the fact that the US colonial projects of violence, resource-abduction and monopolization work across the multifold layers of race, class, gender and the environment. This is evocative of what Françoise Vergès (2017) formulated as the “racial Capitalocene” offering a new perspective to focus on:

a history of the environment that includes slavery, colonialism, imperialism and racial capitalism, from the standpoint of those who were made into ‘cheap’ objects of commerce, their bodies as objects renewable through wars, capture, and enslavement, fabricated as disposable people, whose lives do not matter. (n.p)

Keeping with the spirit of what Verges advised, Indiana's novel reflects how the aesthetics and politics of emergency in the literature of the Global South calls for an alternative history at the crossroads of race, class, gender, environment, capitalism and colonialism.

Emergency of Desensitization

The other face of the lack of emergency is desensitization. The aesthetics of Global South literature have long been haunted with this emergency of social and environmental desensitization. So are Indiana's works. For her, social desensitization is deeply rooted in social inequality and violence, engineered by the legacies of colonial history and capitalist neo-liberalism. In her interview with Brady, Indiana observes how the desensitization and violence consequences of the lack of emergency shape the interface of human and non-human lives in the Dominican Republic:

Social inequality is the universal desensitizer. You have people who live in violent environments, who educate themselves in violence, such as a majority in The Dominican Republic, whose survival depends on it. The same goes for those who are being educated in indifference, a passive form of violence. Climate change will make the gap grow wider – crops will suffer, storms will get bigger, affecting especially those with fewer resources". (Brady 2019, n.p.)

Behind the apparent lucidity of Indiana's argument here, as well as all throughout the novel, the author registers the sheer desensitization toward the capitalist geological forces suppressing and killing people whom Gadgil and Guha describe as the "ecosystem people" (Gadgil and Guha 1995, 3) and the "ecological refugees" (ibid., 4), who mostly hail from the peripheral fringes of the Global South". Through her apparent desensitization toward the extermination of Haitian refugees, the character of Acilde, who hails from the poor and peripheral communities of the Dominican Republic, fits into and yet challenges Gadgil and Guha's categorization of indigenous and close-to-nature communities. Her desensitization, narrated below, illustrates how the victims of imperialism under the spell of desensitization to emergency often carry forward the capitalist and anti-environmentalist projects of the Global North:

As she smears the windows with Windex, she sees a collector across the street hunt down another illegal, a woman who tries to hide behind a dumpster, unsuccessfully. The machine picks her up with its mechanized arm and deposits her gluttonous child picking dirty candy from the floor... The yellow machines look like bulldozers at a construction site. (Indiana 2018, 7)

Amidst this atmosphere of eco-political emergency, where the "ecosystem people" and the "ecological refugees" are subjected to suppression and extermination, the novel follows the journey of Acilde Figueroa. Acilde is a teenage minor who "sucked dicks at El Mirador" (ibid. 8), and who is picked up by Esther Escudero (alias Omicunlé, a kind-hearted woman working as

religious advisor to the then Dominican president) to fulfil the prophecy that she will be able to “save the sea” (ibid. 77) from apocalyptic (or “aquacalyptic”, as Daniel Pauly would call it) disaster. Following the death of Omicunlé, who is the chief of the Afro-syncretic religion in the novel and chief advisor to Trujillo’s successor, Joaquín Balaguer, Acilde is soon engaged with a mission to “turn Omicunlé’s Yoruba prayers into an environmental call to action” (ibid. 121). From Acilde’s journey of time-travel and non-surgical gendertransformation, to the attempt to prevent the President of the Dominican Republic from “warehouse(ing) Venezuelan biological weapons”(ibid. 76) in the Caribbean Sea, the complex patterns of the narrative point to an eco-political emergency. The Caribbean Sea has been literally transformed into a dumping ground of garbage and toxic chemicals as well as a storehouse of biochemical war-explosives, causing a fabricated seaquake and mass extinction of ocean-life:

After [the President of the Dominican Republic] agreed to warehouse Venezuelan biological weapons in Ocoa, the 2024 sea-quake had done away with the base where they’d been kept and dispersed their contents into the Caribbean Sea. Entire species had vanished in a matter of weeks. The environmental crisis had spread to the Atlantic. (ibid. 76 – 77)

The critique of the imbricated global politics of colonialism and capitalism lies at the heart of the novel. It demonstrates how the imperialist activities like a “fabricated” (ibid. 77) tsunami, a pandemic, and control of environmental resources on the part of the United States and the European Union to satisfy their corporate interests of profit and power have led to uneven development, ecological vulnerability, inequality and social injustice, and environmental collapse in the Global South countries.

Oceanic Disaster as a Consequence of the Lack of Emergency

From the depiction of frequently occurring oceanic disasters to that of massive loss of marine ecological diversity, sea-narratives of the Global South present an alarming oceanic emergency. Throughout the novel, Indiana directly connects the rising toxicity and temperature of water, excessive coral bleaching and overfishing, and the dissemination of bio-chemical explosives that cause fabricated seaquakes to the prolonged histories of “hydrocolonialism” (Bystrom and Hofmeyr 2017, n.p.) and capitalist projects of sea-corporatism engineered by the United States. Indiana succinctly depicts the processes of control and exploitation of water and sea-animals in the Caribbean Sea. State sponsored or state-ignored activities like overfishing and coral bleaching are but some of the random instances of such control and exploitation. The narrator’s following argument in the novel thus reflects the same concerns: “Although government laws protected areas of the reef, the lack of resources made it practically impossible to enforce them, leaving hundreds of species at the mercy of indiscriminate fishing, construction, and contamination” (ibid. 59). The

narrative recounts how consecutive environmental disasters like acid rain, rising temperatures and the contamination of ocean-water have turned the Caribbean Sea into what DeLoughrey calls “a living graveyard” (35), or “a dark and putrid stew” (Indiana 2018, 77), following the repeated traumas of capitalist history and ecological disasters. The insidious trafficking of “fruit trees, those drugs that were still illegal and marine creatures, a luxury coveted by wealthy collectors” was rampant, followed by “three disasters”¹ that “finished off practically every living thing under the [Caribbean] sea” (Indiana, 13). Through the character of Linda Goldman, (one of the members of a local environmental protection project) and her anxious apprehensions that “the sea had been pillaged for centuries and it would soon be empty and sterile” (ibid. 92), the narrator demonstrates how the postcolonial Global South is haunted with oceanic emergency. Caught in the spirals of colonial legacies and capitalist hierarchies, the characters in the novel are seen living and encountering complex and conflicted ideals:

But Linda found gringos insipid and came home with the idea of starting a foundation to protect the coral reefs in Sosua, and, later, the entire island. Her father said no, that it would mean risking the livelihoods of the local fishermen, who had families just like he did. Linda tried to explain, in a language that was perhaps too scientific, that we were headed toward the complete extermination of all our marine life. “Extermination is a strong word, you shouldn’t use it when talking about animals,” the old man said. (ibid.,34)

Indiana’s refashioning of the oceanic emergency through her narrative emphasizes the inextricability of the environmental crisis and the wider implications of history, reiterating what Derek Walcott says in his titular poem “Sea is History” (Walcott 1992, 364). The narrative explores “art, politics, and environmentalism” through conversations between characters who work with ecological projects. In these scenes, the author engages with the complexities and nuances of the emergency and the lack of emergency of the marine ecosystems concentrated in the Caribbean history:

At the breakfast table, the conversation touched on the usual themes: John Kelly, the UCLA professor Linda was developing the Playa Bo ecological project with, had joined them that morning and was talking about the increase in the water temperature and the coming crisis that would result from the fatal bleaching of coral in the Caribbean. (Indiana 2018, 50)

Through the marine biologist Linda’s fear and anxiety concerning the tourist sites of the Caribbean Sea and its beaches, the author reflects upon the contrast between emergency consciousness and the lack of it. The result is a mental state of dizziness that Linda experienced in the novel:

Where others saw scenery, Linda Goldman saw desolation. Where others heard relaxing sub-aquatic silence, she heard the shrieks of life disappearing. Where others saw a gift from God, given for the enjoyment of humankind, she saw an ecosystem fallen victim to a systematic and criminal attack. (ibid.92)

The author chooses to be optimistic about the climate emergency. On being asked in an interview with Amy Brady if, given the cumulative effects of the climate change crisis, Indiana is hopeful about the future, the author simply replied, “I want to be” (Brady 2019, n.p.). Her state of mind when she said this can be related to how Linda felt as she encountered the coral reef in the narrative:

When she looked at the coral reef, she felt like an oncologist standing before her patient’s body. She knew she could save it, although she also understood the disproportionate capacity of evil and its reach down to its finest detail. In order to make the miracle happen, it was necessary to have a measure of extreme optimism and critical realism that would drive anybody crazy. (Indiana, 92)

The mammoth task of bringing about emergency consciousness is not an easy one. Given the legacies of colonial history and systematic damages of social inequality, one has to go to the edges of “urgency and danger” (ibid., 92) with consistency and commitment to understand the nuances and challenges of complicated patterns of the Global South society. Indiana’s equally complex plot, with its dizzying spin of human and non-human characters, astutely addresses the intersections and dynamics of the poor and minorities of the Global South. The poor and the minorities of the Global South, particularly those who are mostly dependent on environmental resources for their livelihood, often may not fit into Gadgil and Guha’s general definitions (as already mentioned above) of the “ecosystem people” or “ecological refugees” because the same people, under prolonged impacts of colonial hangover and global capitalism, can be invested in global colonialist and capitalist projects. Indiana’s narrative aptly hits at the complicated social malady that is the lack of the emergency consciousness (or “emergency amnesia”, if you will), as it demonstrates how local fishermen are often found resisting the so-called coral reef conservation projects, much to Linda’s disappointment:

There were days she felt her commitment was irrelevant, when confronted for example, with a local fisherman’s anchor that in a single minute, had torn a reef hundreds of years old, destroying a valuable specimen and fish habitat the very same fisherman needed to subsist. The guards charged with enforcing environmental laws in the Cove of Sosua were the first to ignore them: throwing garbage, fishing with harpoons, and stealing coral to sell. (ibid., 92)

Aesthetics of Emergency and the Global South

The novelist here advocates for a counter-hegemonic shift of power, away from the global colonial centre to the Global South to prevent impending ecological disasters. To save the earth from this emergency of the lack of emergency, it is the marginalized and their aesthetics of art and literature that must take up the lead. Deducing the Heideggerian dictum of divine salvation of humanity, Zabala asserts that “art could offer a possibility of salvation” (Zabala 2017, 20) by making a shift away from the single dominant hegemonic global frame of

the lack of emergency toward the possibility of multiple inclusive and pluralistic frames of emergency consciousness. It is the art of the marginalized which can offer this possibility because “Art, like other ‘events of truth’ does not operate within this metaphysical (grand) frame but rather at its margins as a response to the lack of a sense of emergency” (ibid. 32). Art has the power to subvert the Global North’s overarching hubris, which lies behind this sense of the lack of emergency, in which:

Human beings themselves, like the organized super-man seem to dominate everything and are disappropriated of the last possibility of their essence: they can never recognize in the extreme blindness that the human forgetfulness of being, a forgetfulness brought to maturity along with the abandonment of beings by being, leaves human beings without a sense of plight(or emergency) [...] The disappropriation of beings, which takes them from the truth of being, allows humanity, ensnared in such beings, to fall, to fall into a lack of sense of plight. (Heidegger 2013 141– 142)

Acilde, who represents the marginalized people of the Global South, takes up the task of saving the sea and thereby saving both the living and non-living subjects (on and offshore) from ecological disaster. Kristie Soares, in her brief article “A Future That Rests with the Fate of the Oppressed: On Rita Indiana’s *Tentacle*”, dwells on this:

The fact that the fate of the world is placed upon the shoulders of Acilde, a trans white-passing Dominican man², itself makes this novel worth a read. The narrative pushes us to consider what the world might look like if its destiny rested upon the marginalized. In a future plagued by extreme consumerism and grotesque violence, it is Acilde who has the power to travel into the past and save humankind from itself. (Soares 2019, n.p.)

In the same spirit, Indiana’s narrative also seems to suggest that, like Acilde, it is the task of the Global South’s art and literature to save the other world by “writing back” to the centre, disrupting its global frame to highlight the emergency of the lack of emergency and asserting an inclusive, pluralistic emergency consciousness of the Global South. The narrative accordingly takes up the task of decolonizing the eco-political matrix from myopic mainstream narratives of climate change by promoting emergency consciousness in the Global South countries. Following the rise of postcolonial ecocriticism and the emerging paradigm-shifts in the political ecologies of the Global South, the concept of emergency departs from the apolitical generalization about “Anthropocene” that “humans (in general) have become a geological agents, changing the most basic physical processes of the earth” (Chakrabarty 2018, 171). All through her narrative, Indiana emphasizes the impossibility of disentangling environmentalism from colonial history. But like Linda, the author knows that salvation is not an easy task: “Salvation depended on re-educating an entire community, and on the government and its long-term protection plan. It was work that would require years” (Indiana 2018, 92).

In view of the above facts, the aesthetics and politics of Global South literature can be said to have emerged as a reaction to “the emergency of the lack of emergency” in the mainstream master narrative of the western

countries. In doing so, however, the Global South emergency literature doesn't present a mere metaphysical counter-narrative of blind resistance to the colonial past. Instead, it subverts and disrupts the multifold mechanisms of capitalism: state power, neo-colonial corporatized economic monopoly, military intervention, technological development projects arbitrarily exploiting environmental resources. In doing so, it exposes how the colonial legacies of discrimination, desensitization and violence in terms of race, class, gender and environmental resources are consequent upon this 'emergency of the lack of emergency'. In the process of overcoming the shackles of existing aesthetics, Global South literature presents an alternative vista of multiple, open-ended, pluralistic narratives, which include emergency consciousness as "the remains of Being" or "everything that is not framed within metaphysics" (Zabala 2017, 34).

As a highly compact, complex and experimental cultural text representing the Dominican Republic, Indiana's novel authoritatively illustrates how postcolonial ecocritical engagement represents and contributes to the possibilities of an emerging genre, which may be called Global South emergency literature. What remains to wonder is if, in the task of decolonizing the mainstream discourses of the United States and the European Union, Global South emergency literature will act as "an event of be-ing" (Heidegger 2012, 396) capable of grasping the challenging realities of the Global South countries and thereby generating possibilities for bringing about emergency consciousness in global imagination and cultural practice. Indiana's text alone may not, perhaps, be sufficient to answer this, but what it illustrates is that Global South literature does attempt to offer "emergency consciousness". This process of "emergency consciousness", itself complex and dynamic, involves not only in the act of critiquing the lack of emergency in the hegemonies and practices of the anthropocene, but also offers alterity in thought and imagination. Indiana's *La mucama de Omicunlé* astringently seeks to reorient the alternative ecologies of the Global South, specifically the postcolonial Dominican Republic. This is one of the reasons why the novel deserves specific focus as one of the active literary representations that strive to warn us of an eco-political emergenc

Notes

¹ The three consecutive ecological disasters Indiana indicates in the novel are the earthquake, the explosion of biological weapons stored under the sea, and the consequent tsunami resulting in extinction of sea-animals and contamination of both the Caribbean and the Atlantic ocean.

² Following the English translation of the novel, Acilde's pre-transition is addressed here as 'she' and Acilde post-transition as 'he'.

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Tarik Monowar is an assistant professor at the Department of English, Kaliyaganj College, University of Gour Banga, India. He has recently completed M. Phil. from Visva-Bharati University and is currently pursuing his Ph D from the Department of English, Bankura University. His research interests include Global South Literature, (Post)-Anthropocene Literature, and Postcolonial Ecocriticism.