



TODAY' S EXPLOITATION TOMORROW' S STRUGGLE- EMMI ITARANTA' S MEMORY OF WATER

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Abstract

This paper aims to critically engage the dystopian fiction of Emmi Itaranta *Memory of Water* to explain the future water struggles that might pose a threat to the existence of this planet. The post millennial era is faced with the acute shortage of fresh water. The rapid depletion of this scarce resource is likely to endanger the human race. The acts of water corporations have further augmented the issue, and the changing behaviour of States by aligning more with the corporatisation and commodification of water will dispossess humanity by depriving the essential prerequisite for sustenance in this world. The establishment of dictatorial regimes also poses threat for the life of ordinary citizens. This paper aims to read this political condition along with the fictional portrayal of a similar situation in Itaranta' s post millennial dystopian fiction. The study aims to unravel the tacit structural changes in the geopolitics of the post millennial era.

Keywords: Dystopia, Post Millennium, Commodification of water, Dispossession. Geopolitics, Depletion

What will we do if we ran out of clean water? There is a disturbing future world awaiting us, in which wars are waged over water, where right to water is more prominent than right to life. Water wars are a fearful nightmare. In the not so distant future, more alarmingly, water is expected to be a rare commodity for which blood will flow. The possession of water will be a question to which only power answers. Ever since the inception of this civilisation in which water has been a bountiful resource, amounting virtually to a free good, the situation is now abruptly changing to the point where, especially in the most arid regions of the world, water pollution and water scarcity has become the single greatest threat to human health, natural ecosystems and agricultural production. Within the first quarter of the next century, almost everyone will face severe water scarcity. Water, being the most irreplaceable natural resource and a precious asset for human survival, is under threat in our so called modern, civilized



world. Contemporary ecological threats and human induced harms to nature and environment needed to be replaced by a gentler caring of nature.

Emmi Itaranta, in *Memory of Water* (2014) a present “ a dystopian portrayal of a climatically challenged and environmentally transformed future. Among many ecological threats, the major problem of Itaranta’ s futuristic fictional world is the scarcity of natural resources, especially of fresh water” (Aykanat). In its memory everything that’ s ever happened in this world” (Itaranta 90), both literally and metaphorically. Water remembers everything that’ s done to it by humans. Water possesses a memory combined with the memory of environment and that of human beings.

In Itaranta’ s version of the story of life on Earth, “ Not one grain of sand stirs without a shift in the shape of the universe: change one thing, and you will change everything” . Taking this Buddhist mantra as her starting point, in *Memory of Water* Itaranta attempts to “ highlight humans’ overconsumption habits, and the global consequences of it. Thus, the narrative of the novel is formed around the material and discursive changes after humans try to change, exploit and control water on Earth” (Aykanat).

“ The only thing that separates us from dust is water, and water cannot be held in one place. It will slip through our fingers and through our pores and through our bodies, and the most shrivelled we become, the more anxious it is to leave us” (Itaranta). Itaranta observes, “ Yet some things run so deep we can’ t stop their flow. It’ s ignorance to think that earth and water can be owned. Water belongs to no one. The military must not make it theirs, and therefore the secret must be kept” (Itaranta).

Calamitous climate change, grasping officials, oppressive world governments await us in the near future. Being a deceptively tranquil examination of a world of dust and ashes, *Memory of Water*, explores the intricate relationship between power and water. This dystopian future is unfortunately not far off our probable fate. Global warming has melted the ice caps and flood has changed the world. Once a plentiful resource, water has become as tightly controlled by the government as nuclear weapons in the modern world. Noria Kaitio represents a kind of “ Joseph K” in her attempts to escape from the clutches of the power holding authority. Her responsibility of guarding the water leads to her death. She is unwilling to succumb to the needs of the military. She is a guardian of water, one of those watchers of water, who spent all their lives for the smooth flow of water. What Itaranta



depicts is a fearful picture of near future. She observes “ As the water shortage worsened, a stagnant stench of people and life seemed to crawl in to the houses, spreading its sticky fingers all over the streets and yards like lichen grows over rocks in a dried riverbed” (Itaranta). Trexler says, “ climate change and global warming are easily bracketed as prognostications that yet be deferred, but the Anthropocene names a world- historical phenomenon that has arrived” (Texler).

Since all of us are very fortunate in the case of water availability, we cannot imagine a time when people will try to steal water from others. But when it comes to past Twilight century where almost all springs have dried up, and the rest have been claimed by the military nothing can be expected, but everything happens. Itaranta try to enhances the gravity of situation by portraying more and more water guards each passing month resulting in the shutting down of water pipes and queue for water rations. The people long for rain, a soothing, purifying torrent that would wash them and the landscape, would tint the world different and new even for a brief moment. Noria, the Saviour, is symbolically represented as a “ speckle of floating green in the faded landscape of burned-out grass and bare stone” (Itaranta). Being the watcher of the spring, Noria is torn between her duty to her fellow beings and her duty to her father. At last, she found a path which was untrodden by other tea masters. What she did was accepting humanity and consciousness rather than being a mere obedient daughter. Noria’ s secret often “ guards powers strong enough to shatter everything” (Itaranta), Her stark contrast with Taro is that of right to water. While Taro’ s quest for the spring is full of his material aspirations, which of Noria is purely humane. Amitav Ghosh recognizes a political phenomenon, wherein “ climate change is not a danger in itself; it is envisaged rather as a ‘ threat multiplier’ against which “ the tasks of the nation state ... will be those of keeping ‘ blood-dimmed tides’ of climate refugees at bay and protecting their own resources” (Ghosh).

According to Taro, conserving the tradition of tea ceremony requires wasting water. Despite being a tea master’ s son Taro perceives water only in a materialistic way. Taro’ s way of breaching the etiquette of the tea ceremony is the manifestation of his power. Despite knowing the fact that even his power will fade in the near future, Taro keeps on hoarding it and doing things he know to be wrong. Noria prefers water’ s will and she respects it. She



believes in the doctrine of her father that “ sometimes a spring or a well dries for no reason, without explanation. It’ s as if the water escapes of its own will, withdrawing into the cover of the earth to look for another channel. Tea masters believe there are times when water doesn’ t wish to be found because it knows it will be chained in ways that are against its nature” (Itaranta 91). Taro wants to chain water in every way hoping “ because if this is all there is, I might as well enjoy it while it lasts” (Itaranta). The future Itaranta presents is of a bleak vision foretelling the tamed terrorism in the Scandinavian Union, minor unrest, as if the water is scattered, incidental, and insignificant portrays a world devoid of drinking water. Women with their crying children are a nightmare deeply embedded in a scarcity of lifeblood, namely water. Only way to get water is to queue for rations. Itaranta presents a future where river is simply a “ dry scar” in the landscape. The symbol of the blue circle painted on the door, indicating serious water crimes, a sore tattoo on the skin of the village, too inflamed to approach safely, and covered with silence shows a situation where silence will crept into the minds of those guilty of water crimes imminently causing their death. The residents were held inside for some time and under house arrest, guarded night and day. Finally they were forced out and executed. In Nixon’ s words, “ for those who perpetrate slow violence, their greatest ally is the protracted, convoluted vapour trial of blame” (Nixon).

Master Kaitio’ s words “ the spring doesn’ t exist” (Itaranta) show the symbolic death of water resources over the world owing to material advancement and industrialisation. The military’ s control over natural water resources shows a totalitarian regime where power determines everything. Human values have been cut down and no hope survives there. The situation was so suffocating that anyone can be executed in their own front yard or captured inside their own home any time. What is dominant there is nothing but the heat of the sun and dust.As Itaranta observes, in the authorial state people feel fear each second, feel threatened even to breathe. Under the supervision of the blue-clad soldiers, it was not easy to walk in the village straightforward. New paths born of wordless pacts had slowly come to replace the old ones as the mark of water crime; a blue circle appeared on the door, had claimed space along the streets. Their mute spectres stood along the edges of the roads, “ surrounded by a ring of silence that no one would cross unless it was unavoidable... there was a swirling, all-swallowing emptiness in the place of the criminal house that would sweep them off the face



of the earth if they as much as glanced in its direction” (Itaranta). The truth was that no one knew for certain what happened to the residents of the marked houses. It was easier not to ask. Citizens and their rights were never the concern of the state. Only power matters in the dystopian future in which basic human rights are irrevocably destroyed. Power is manifested through Commander Taro and his accomplice who could turn the tea master’ s house upside down to search for the hidden spring. No justice was done in the case of this malpractice by the authority. They have destroyed everything just because they think they have the power to do so.

Censorship is yet another weapon of the authoritarian state. The messaging services were probably being monitored by the government. Those kept Noria captive had seen to it that she had no way of communicating with the other world. The power holding authority wanted to keep her alive and also wanted her to be afraid. She was caught between fear and uncertainties. This was the same dilemma experienced by Joseph K in *The Trial*. Through censorship the whole village was crushed in the grip of the military, and water belonged to the military, not to the people. The illusion of a space where power didn’ t exist crumbled in the mind of Noria. Despite being aware of the fact that the weathered wood of the door and fragile glass of the windows would not keep away those threatening her, Noria was unwilling to give up her shred of privacy, possibly the last thing she had. In Nixon’ s words, “ for those who perpetrate slow violence, their greatest ally is the protracted, convoluted vapour trial of blame” (Nixon). The violence performed by Commander Taro is a kind of “ slow violence” which haunts the people guilty of water crimes like a ghost following them to their doom. They have been accursed and destroyed prior to their death. The military is feeding them not food, but fear. The villagers are forced to abandon them as phantoms. Nobody knows exactly what happens to the inmates of the criminal houses. Noria too suffers from isolation, fear, hunger, thirst and all. She too feels the pain of being locked in. The dystopian picture could be averted when the community arrive at a conclusion that ‘ water can be used but not owned’ (Shiva).



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