

Reading Anthropocene Anxiety in Cecil Rajendra's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

*Anthropocene anxiety is regarded as a form of distress caused by the Anthropocene, the geological age in which we now live, following human activities which have caused a significant impact on the planet. The Anthropocene has caused many literary works to express concern over these environmental changes, including Cecil Rajendra's poetry, which is charged with such concerns, offering a critical view of the environmental changes brought about during the Anthropocene. It is crucial to explore these concerns as people have generally become desensitised today, and their emotional responses are inadequate to respond to the vast environmental destruction, a psychological phenomenon that Paul and Scott Slovic refer to as "the Arithmetic of Compassion." To analyse Anthropocene anxiety in Rajendra's poetry, this study utilises Affective Ecocriticism based on the premise that ecocritical scholarship has much to gain from Affect Theory, which focuses on the study of affect and emotion. The analysis reveals that selected poems in Rajendra's *Rags and Ragas: Selected Environmental Poems* (Rajendra, 2000d) evoke Anthropocene anxiety through figures of speech, diction, tone, and poetic metre and form. By highlighting the poignancy of the Anthropocene anxiety in Rajendra's poetry, we can raise awareness of the Arithmetic of Compassion, as Slovic (2023) suggests, encouraging empathy for current environmental issues.*

Keywords: Affect theory; Anthropocene; anxiety; ecocriticism; Cecil Rajendra

INTRODUCTION

Literature and analysis on the Anthropocene, the newly denominated geological epoch during which human activities have had a substantial impact on the Earth, are rapidly expanding and offering diverse perspectives on the current state of the environment. The proposed Anthropocene implies the end of the Holocene, which began around 11,000 years ago and, marking the end of the ice age, characterised by a relatively warm and stable climate. Although humans have lived on Earth during the Holocene, we have, until relatively recently, had little impact on its geology. The impact of human activities on the Earth's environment has led geologists to suggest that we may be transitioning to a new epoch: the Anthropocene (Lewis & Maslin, 2015, p.171). The Industrial Revolution in the 18th century and the Great Acceleration from the mid-20th century led to significant changes; both periods brought substantial technological advances, revolutionising mass production that fuelled economic growth and enhanced living standards, which in turn increased population growth and urbanisation, further increasing resource consumption. The dramatic scale

and acceleration of this change have resulted in environmental catastrophe, the ramifications of which are felt at various levels. Humans directly bear a physical and mental impact, from illnesses and injuries to anxiety and stress. Collectively, there is growing concern about the widespread destruction of natural environments as significant damage to the planet is becoming increasingly evident, raising concern about the sustainability of both the economy and society.

The representation of the Anthropocene in literature explores the complex relationship between nature and humanity, highlighting the significant impact humans have on Earth. In *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Anthropocene* (Bloomfield, 2021), John Parham (2021) explains that “the Anthropocene presages an altered future for the Earth, animals, plants and humans, and how, if at all, literature might help us live that future” (p.1). Parham argues that literature can evolve and adapt to the Anthropocene in two ways: “by sharing divergent experiences (for different people, even species) of the Anthropocene, and by reconnecting human life with exponentially vaster scales: deep history, the planet Earth, the distant future” (p.10). He also examines three core components of literature, namely, “form, genre and narrative,” and how these have adapted to the Anthropocene, asserting that the study of Affect Theory has developed literary forms in terms of the use of metre, sound, and space (pp.14–15). These new approaches to writing literature in the Anthropocene age not only provide a new perspective for analysing literary texts but also contribute to the growing body of studies concerning the environment.

Paradoxically, despite facing mounting ecological catastrophes in the Anthropocene, humans seem to be entering a state of numbness. Instead of trying to find a solution to the catastrophes, we have generally become anxious and helpless, failing to shoulder the overwhelming burden of responsibilities. Our numbness has left us desensitised to the severity of environmental problems. Slovic and Slovic (2015) highlight this psychological obstacle to compassion, calling it the “arithmetic of compassion,” a phrase coined by the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert (p.20). Slovic suggests some possible ways of overcoming the arithmetic of compassion, or desensitisation to compassion, through poignant approaches to communication. Narratives can move an audience deeply in several ways: “by reducing large-scale phenomena to individuals, scaling up to the bigger picture, [telling] stories of vulnerabilities, [and] stories that reveal a dramatic change” (Slovic, 2023). In this regard, literary works that explore environmental anxiety in the age of the Anthropocene may sensitise people to the ongoing environmental catastrophe. Nicole Merola (2018) describes this problem as Anthropocene Anxiety, “an effect specifically concerned with inaction in the face of and worry about global socioecological change” (p. 27–28). This state has also been referred to as eco-anxiety, which encompasses various complex mental states and emotions, including distress, overwhelm, dread and worry arising from the current state of the environment (Dickinson, 2008; Albrecht, 2011, p.49; Pihkala, 2018, p.546). It is this anxiety that is creatively conveyed in the poetry of Cecil Rajendra, who expresses the profound emotional impact of ecological destruction in the Anthropocene. In this investigation, anxiety hitherto refers specifically to the anxiety associated with the Anthropocene, as expressed in Rajendra’s selected poems.

Nicknamed ‘The Lawyer-Poet’, Rajendra is one of Malaysia’s most prominent literary writers and was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2005. His works highlight issues including social injustice, race, war and environmentalism, and he is among the earliest Malaysians to write in English since 1965 (Patke & Holden, 2010). Having published more than 20 volumes of poems, Rajendra demonstrates a thoughtful approach to criticism of his work, stating that he reads all the criticisms but “only remember[s] reviews that are very critical and constructive” (Mustafa Kamal et al., 2024, p.244). He is no stranger to environmentalism and has been highly

vocal in his displeasure over environmental issues in both his literary and legal works. A man ahead of his time, he spoke out about the consequences of deforestation years before the majority of people became aware of its effects. Rajendra has been consistently unafraid to voice his concerns about environmental issues in Malaysia, to the extent that his passport was confiscated in 1993 due to his criticism of the local timber industry in the poem “Requiem for a Rainforest” (Whittaker, 1993). His Environmental Poems describe emotions or affect such as anger, sadness, helplessness and fear – all characteristics of anxiety. By utilising Affect Theory and ecocriticism, Affective Ecocriticism, we attempt to analyse Anthropocene anxiety in selected Environmental Poems by Rajendra: “Prologue”, “On Not Being Able to Write a Poem Celebrating the Erection of Another Multi-Storeyed Complex”, “Rubbish”, and “Ecological Suicide”. We do so by first analysing how Rajendra expresses anxiety in his Environmental Poems and then analysing how the anxieties evoked in the poems are linked to the Anthropocene. By examining the affective dimension of Rajendra’s poems, we highlight the deep connection between humans and the environment, thus underscoring the poignancy of the poems, which could potentially raise awareness of the arithmetic of compassion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

AFFECT THEORY AND ANTHROPOCENE ANXIETY

Bladow and Ladino demonstrate in their book *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment* (2018) how Affect Theory is used together with ecocriticism to analyse literary works. They highlight how humanity has reacted to environmental catastrophes in various ways, with fear, sorrow, anxiety, grief and fatigue, and argue that place shapes emotional lives. Another premise of the book is that Affect Theory can help find new ways to foreground the connection between climate and social justice. In their words, "Affective Ecocriticism more directly examines effect and environment by reconceiving familiar effects in spatial terms, by expanding what counts as an environmental effect, and by identifying new effects that can be understood more clearly through the lens of ecocritical theory" (2018, p.6). Anthropocene anxiety is, in general terms, the feeling of fear and distress deriving from a realisation of the substantial effect humanity has had on Earth, particularly in the Anthropocene epoch. As an effect, anxiety is examined in one of Tomkins' nine innate effects, one he refers to as “the milder form of fear” (Nathanson, 2008, p. xviii). The American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2023) defines anxiety as:

An emotion characterised by apprehension and somatic symptoms of tension in which an individual anticipates impending danger, catastrophe, or misfortune. The body often mobilises itself to meet the perceived threat: Muscles become tense, breathing is faster, and the heart beats more rapidly.

(“Anxiety”)

Chronic stress (which occurs when a stressor persists over an extended time) and psychological stress (stemming from emotional and cognitive factors) can also lead to anxiety (Chu et al., 2024, p.1). Moreover, anxiety can manifest in various other forms beyond the anticipation of danger, stress, and the associated somatic symptoms previously mentioned. Panu Pihkala, in his discussion of eco-anxiety, indicates that anxiety may take different forms, including fears, worries, grief, frustration, guilt, depression, trauma, despair, shame and anger (2020, pp.9–12).

In literature, effects such as anxiety can be studied through Affect Theory. Silvan Tomkins (2008) has paved the way for a new understanding of human behaviour and emotion. Donald Nathanson explains that for a response to be triggered, the effect must be triggered first, creating a Stimulus-Affect-Response (S-A-R) sequence (Nathanson, 2008, p.xiii). To illustrate the S-A-R sequence principle, we will look at the 'anger-rage' effect, one of nine innate effects identified by Tomkins (1987). Upon receiving a stimulus, the body first has a physiological response: "swollen, reddened face ... fists, arms, and legs tensed in an isometric contraction, abdomen taut, mouth open at its widest" (Nathanson, 2008, p.xvi). Only later do we become aware of our anger-rage 'feeling', which Tomkins describes as "awareness that an affect has been triggered" (Nathanson, 2008, p.xiv).

In addition to the bodily approach to affect, Tomkins also explores the cognitive system. Tomkins' Script Theory and the minding system – extensions of his magnum opus, the Affect Theory – are composed of effect and cognition. According to Tomkins, the script is a set of rules that guide our behaviour in different situations (p.984). He explains that scripts can be innate, such as a newborn's distressed cry upon the spanking of its buttocks, or learnt: those that "originate in innate scripts but characteristically radically transform the simpler, innate scripts" (Tomkins, 1987, p.148). The minding system, in contrast, comprises "the higher-order mechanisms and processes whereby both affect and cognition are integrated into scripts" (Tomkins, 2008, pp.984–985).

Scholars in literary studies have critically extended and engaged Tomkins's Affect Theory to develop insights for analysing emotion in literature. Alex Houen (2020) challenges the purely bodily or non-cognitive approach to affect; in his book *Affect and Literature* (Houen, 2020), he explores how the study of effect is adapted and used in the textual analysis of literary studies, proposing an approach that examines effects in literary works that are not solely restricted to either the cognitive or body categories (2020, p.5). For instance, the usage of the informal interrobang, the combined question and exclamation mark, such as in the phrase 'Are we there yet?!' does not just posit a question but also includes a sense of aggravation in language form: an affective form of anger. In literary works, especially poems, effects can be conveyed through various poetic devices and elements: diction, imagery, figures of speech, syntax, sound, rhythm and metre, forms and structure. Houen (2020) analyses a passage from Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941) to exemplify how literary analysis could adopt both cognitivist and non-cognitivist approaches. In the novel, the character Isa Oliver reflects on her feelings of love for someone who is not her husband. The passage narrates Isa's feeling of being "in love" and the things that her lover does to her which make her feel in love. Houen explains that Isa's awareness of her emotion, "In love, she must be", is a cognitive, affective identification of her feelings (2020, p.16). Houen further elaborates that "what she feels 'in her', then, is an affective betweenness that arises as an interaction between language, bodily feeling, cognition, material things, memory, and her beloved" (2020, p.17).

Nicole M. Merola's (2018) and Sam Solnick's (2021) analyses of Juliana Spahr's poem "Dynamic Positioning" (2015) show how affect can be manifested in poetic forms, forming Anthropocene anxiety. Merola's study addresses ecocritical issues, including climate change, toxicity and pollution, arguing that Anthropocene anxiety has positioned us in a newly self-reflective anxious position (2018, p.25). Merola states that Spahr brilliantly formalises anxiety affect, structuring her poems by deviating from the iambic pentameter and making irregularities visible: the stuttering of breath causing compression and the metrically generated elongation of the lines both dislocated and anxiogenic (2018, p.37). Solnick (2021) adds that the poem's strict adherence to iambic pentameter shifts to "lexical and syntactical distortions with enjambments

becoming more frequent and pronounced as the poem moves towards disaster, complicating the relationship between line and sentence, sound and sense” (Solnick, 2021, p.236).

Merola’s and Solnick’s studies provide a solid foundation for how poems can evoke Anthropocene anxiety as a physiological effect. The effect is analysed by focusing on how it is conveyed in the breathing pattern in response to the detrimental changes brought about by the Anthropocene through irregular and distorted poetic forms and sound devices, as established earlier. We aim to expand on this argument, as anxiety can manifest in different forms, such as the bodily response of irregular heartbeats in different poetic forms and sound devices. Moreover, while Merola studies the work of Juliana Spahr, an American writer, our study extends the framework to Malaysian literature in English, offering new insights into Anthropocene anxiety.

CRITICISM OF RAJENDRA’S WORK

Environmentalism is a principal theme in Cecil Rajendra’s work. Fadilah Merican (2004) highlights Rajendra’s environmental concerns in “Ecological Suicide” and “A Prescription for Development”, which focus on pollution and the displacement of people as a result of ecological destruction. Issues concerning forest preservation are addressed in “All the Trees Are Falling Down”, which is Rajendra’s take on the nursery rhyme “London Bridge is Falling Down” from his collection *Papa Moose’s Nursery Rhymes* (1994), inspired by the well-known Mother Goose’s nursery rhymes. Similarly, Arifin (2010) highlights the environmental concerns voiced in Rajendra’s poem, specifically those presented in his anthology *Rags and Ragas* (2000d). He observes that Rajendra uses satire as a tool to mock and ridicule capitalism, seeing it as the root of the ecological catastrophe.

Agnes Yeow Swee Kim (2008) brings attention to Rajendra’s apocalyptic visions of environmental wastelands and ecological catastrophes. She observes that the poem “Art for Art’s Sake” alludes to apocalyptic images: “The conventional apocalyptic images of aridity, irreversible degradation and pervasive lifelessness are reinforced by the repetition of the word ‘last’” (p.3). Rajendra portrays capitalism as the main culprit in his apocalyptic rhetoric, condemning development as the root cause of the catastrophe. Yeow also analyses the theme of war in the mushroom-cloud-shaped visual poem “Hiroshima”. She argues that Rajendra addresses the ecological crisis with apocalyptic urgency and a tremendous sense of responsibility (p.19).

Fadzil and Zainal (2018) employ eco-Marxism to analyse selected Environmental Poems by Cecil Rajendra from 1978 to 2004, looking at the antagonistic relationship between development and sustainability. Their study shows how the lawyer-poet has been consistent in criticising the rapid developments brought about by the greed of capitalism as being the cause of an overwhelming number of environmental catastrophes. Adopting an eco-Marxism approach, the study uses two concepts to understand how capitalism disrupts the environment: the treadmill of production and the metabolic rift. Among the poems analysed are “No Celebratory Song”, “Kuala Juru- Death of a Village”, “Ecological Suicide”, “ME-A-SAT”, and “The Endau-Rompin Aftermath”, which discuss issues concerning air, water and land pollution. Overall, the study asserts Rajendra’s anti-establishment stance, holding the establishment responsible for massive environmental degradation and criticising capitalism.

Dhanapal and Rajandram (2014) compare and study selected works of Western and Eastern poets, including Cecil Rajendra. Using Lawrence Buell’s DAIDO (Denial, Acquiescence, Impotence, Desperation, Outrage) ecocritical framework to identify the many reactions toward the dying environment, they analyse the poets’ perception, language and treatment of the subject

matter through stylistic analysis. Using a stylistic approach, they analyse two poems: “Death of a Rainforest” and “Death of a Village”. Dhanapal and Rajandram posit that the anguished tone of Rajendra’s poems expresses frustration at the destruction of rainforests. The imagery of the poem also suggests impotence or helplessness, “where man is appalled at the destruction of nature in the name of development and materialism but is unable to do anything about it” (p.237). This method of analysis resonates with Affective Ecocriticism as the authors highlight certain emotional reactions that are expressed stylistically, such as the repetition of “but no words will come” to convey speechlessness and frustration. Another example can be found in the analysis of the lower-case “i” as a pronoun, which is interpreted as a sense of powerlessness.

Existing criticism of Rajendra’s Environmental Poems highlights his concern with ecological devastation from the perspectives of apocalyptic visions, eco-Marxism and stylistics. By utilising Affective Ecocriticism, we are able to emphasise the bodily and cognitive aspects of the poetic form and style while also focusing on Anthropocene anxiety. Finally, highlighting that Rajendra’s poems are concerned with people who are vulnerable, in the sense of suffering emotional distress, including anxiety, anger, sadness and helplessness, underscores the poems’ ability to evoke sympathy and empathy in their readers in addressing the Arithmetic of Compassion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this analysis of Rajendra’s Environmental Poems, we will employ the framework of Affective Ecocriticism. While Affective Ecocriticism guides our analysis of Rajendra’s poetry, other scholars have applied frameworks like the postcolonial EcoGothic (Harris Satkunananthan, 2022) to interrogate Anthropocene narratives—highlighting how affective responses to ecological crisis are often entangled with colonial histories of violence. Our approach, however, prioritises the interplay between ‘affect’ (sometimes referred to as the study of emotion) and the environment, exploring how literary works reflect and shape our affective engagement with nature. Affective Ecocriticism provides a framework to analyse Rajendra’s poems by foregrounding the affective dimension, cognitively and non-cognitively, of the human–environment relationship. When analysing Anthropocene anxiety in Rajendra’s poems, this framework allows us to highlight stories of vulnerability, which is one of the types of narrative that Slovic (2023) suggests as a way to overcome the arithmetic of compassion.

To analyse how Rajendra expresses anxiety in his Environmental Poems, we will utilise the non-cognitive and cognitive aspects of Affect Theory adapted for literary studies by Houen. The non-cognitive aspect analyses how the pre-cognitive or bodily response of affect is conveyed in the poems. Anxiety can cause various physical responses, such as rapid or inconsistent breathing or heartbeat and forceful or sudden expulsions of breath when angry. The use of imagery can offer a detailed description of the physical sensation of anxiety, and metaphors can elevate the imagery further by painting a vivid picture and adding depth to the description. The use of poetic forms, including rhyming schemes, metres and white spaces, also evokes anxiety. The somatic symptoms of anxiety, such as hyperventilation – rapid or deep breathing – can be mirrored in poetry that contains multiple short and choppy lines and syllables. In addition, when placed inconsistently, white spaces (the empty lines in poetry) disrupt the normal flow and rhythms of reading, mimicking inconsistent breathing patterns. Rajendra also uses sound devices such as dental consonance and cacophony to repeat consonant sounds within words close together, mimicking

the sense of aggression and unease present in anxiety. In contrast, the cognitive aspects, following Tomkins' Script Theory, examine how thoughts of anxiety, fear and worry can be expressed in specific diction and how the use of metaphors and hyperbole can also enhance the description of anxiety. Analysing the speaker's non-cognitive expressions alongside the cognitive expressions of effect in the poems creates a bridge between the body and the mind, providing deeper insight into anxiety in Rajendra's poems.

The second objective of this study is to explore how the anxieties evoked in Rajendra's poems are linked to the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene does not refer to any specific form of pollution or environmental destruction but, rather, to the change in the Earth's geological state, which has been profoundly impacted by human activities. The focus tends to be on the larger scale and the lasting impact of human activities rather than localised and immediate repercussions of specific acts of environmental destruction.

Poems can convey the essence of the Anthropocene by contrasting the catastrophic effects of human activity on the Earth's health in this period to the Holocene, described as having a relatively warm and stable climate that allowed the expansion of vegetation across the globe. The transition can be portrayed through metaphors, imagery and symbolism, contrasting nature – such as plants, flowers, a beautiful environment, rural living and animals living in peace – with development, industrialisation, destroyed lands, urban living and flora and fauna suffering. Similarly, this shift is also conveyed in the poem's tone in the progression from a sense of the tranquillity of the Holocene to an uneasy and sombre mood. Nostalgia can create a sense of longing for the lost Holocene, as well as anger and frustration with the current state of the Earth.

Thus, drawing on the framework of Affective Ecocriticism, we can analyse how anxiety is expressed in Rajendra's poems. In analysing the poems, we examine literary devices, including diction, metre, tone and punctuation, which contribute to the bodily and cognitive expression of anxiety in the poems. We also examine how the anxiety conveyed in the poems reflects the destruction caused in the Anthropocene, specifically by examining how the poems depict the transition from the Holocene to the Anthropocene, the move from rural to urban areas, and industrialisation, all of which contribute to the anxiety conveyed. By synthesising the poems' depiction of the Anthropocene with the anxiety analysed in the first objective, we can conclude that the selected Environmental Poems by Rajendra convey Anthropocene anxiety effectively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

FROM THE HOLOCENE TO THE ANTHROPOCENE

"PROLOGUE"

The poem "Prologue" marks the beginning of Rajendra's *Rags and Ragas* collection. It highlights the overarching theme of the collection in describing the changes that the Earth has endured in the Anthropocene epoch. The first half of the poem reminds us that the nature around us today is gifted, "Our inheritance", from the changes experienced at the end of the ice age. As the glacial age came to an end, the Earth started to become warmer, reviving forests from a previous epoch and thus marking the beginning of the Holocene (Roberts, 2014a). Rajendra uses visual imagery and metaphor in the first half of the poem to describe the Holocene as lush and full of wilderness, evoking the majestic beauty of nature:

Our inheritance: a mantle
of cascading emerald
spun from a thousand
threads of regal green

(lines 1–4, p. 7)

The ellipsis at the end of the first stanza begins the transition to the Anthropocene, creating a reflective and dramatic pause in the sense of discontinuity from the Holocene. This introduces a moment of silence, contemplation and pause, igniting a feeling of anxiety around the shift to the age of humans in the following stanzas.

The second stanza reminisces, using the same image of the “mantle” to remind us of the magnificence of the environment in the past, reinforced by “once” and the past tense “adorned”. Here, the poem begins to express a form of melancholic sadness, triggered by disappointment and unhappiness at the loss of the graceful wilderness that used to cover most of the natural world: “a mantle which was once/adorned our Mother/from shoulder to ankle” (lines 9–10, p.7). The final line of the second stanza is emphasised at the end with a full stop, symbolically marking the end of the Holocene epoch.

A sense of disappointment at the ecological devastation wreaked is evoked in the following lines in the choice of diction:

But a gift unappreciated:
abused, neglected, ochre
stained and pitted, torn
and tattered, in threadbare

(lines 9–12, p. 7)

The past participles functioning as adjectives in these lines create a feeling of unmet expectations: the desirable “gift” is unappreciated, neither acknowledged nor valued. In addition, these words effectively intensify the frustration with the repetition of the dental consonance. The sounds created by these words embody the frantic, rapid heartbeat and shallow breathing of a person in distress. The constant repetition of the /d/ and /t/ sounds mimics the ragged gasp for air while capturing the panicked rhythm of a racing heart.

The consonance continues one last time in the first line of the final stanza, “pieces fragmented ...” before pausing again with an ellipsis, creating a breathless silence before confronting reality. The speaker grieves, expressing concern and regret for the legacy left to future generations. The poem recalls again the “mantle” (line 14, p.7) that was once majestic and grand, passed down to future generations in ruins, and the speaker’s anger is punctuated by the exclamation mark, further highlighting the weight of the despair: “a bedraggled legacy of rags!” (line 16, p.7). The poem chastises the present generation for squandering the inheritance received from the past and failing to leave something valuable for the future.

The application of Affect Theory in the analysis of the poem reveals anxiety at the changes brought by the Anthropocene. The choice of diction, visual imagery and metaphor evoke anxiety cognitively through the mind of the speaker, while the dental consonance and ellipsis induce a physical response of rapid heartbeat and contemplation, and the exclamation mark, which expresses anger, amplifies anxiety as an effect. The changes described also allude to the transition from the Holocene to the Anthropocene. The first two stanzas depict a glorious natural world. However, this beauty is ruined by the damage caused by human activities, evident in the past participle verbs used from lines 9 to 12 (p.7). Arguably, the most compelling embodiment of the Anthropocene resides in the multiple meanings of the word “mantle” (line 5, p.7). In the poem’s

literal context, the word is used to describe a piece of royal clothing: “a robe befitting a Queen”, and also symbolises nature through its association with greenery: “emerald” (line 2, p.7) and “spun from a thousand/threads of regal green” (lines 3–4, p.7). What is most interesting here is that, geologically, the “mantle” also refers to the part of the Earth covered by the crust that has also been affected by the environmental catastrophe. A 2023 geodesical study measuring the Earth's geometric shape found evidence that the movement of the Earth's mantle in the Anthropocene is responding to what is happening on its surface, particularly in terms of changes in mass distribution such as ice melting in Greenland and Patagonia (Ivins et al., 2023). One cause of Greenland's ice melt is global warming, which is caused by the increase in greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, particularly carbon dioxide from human activities, including deforestation and intensive agriculture. Human activities have not only destabilised the Earth's crust through industrialisation but have also disrupted its inner part, reinforcing the worrying reality of the Anthropocene. The poem's secondary meaning of the word “mantle” depicts how the destruction caused by human activity has metaphorically peeled away the Earth's outer layers, affecting the mantle's movement.

“ECOLOGICAL SUICIDE”

The unsettling title “Ecological Suicide” sets the stage for this poem's powerful message: Through our relentless exploitation of nature and insatiable greed, we are destroying our planet, driving and shaping our own destruction. The rural exodus expressed in the first two lines: “The village/deserted”, alludes to the transition from the Holocene to the Anthropocene. Bio-archaeological researchers have established that humans resided in rural areas during the Holocene epoch since the Neolithic age, as shown from the carbon-dating of excavations of mounds in southwest Asia which contain seeds believed to be early agricultural remains (Roberts, 2014b, p.180). The shift to the Anthropocene, as established earlier, is believed to have started when industrialisation created a mass exit of people migrating to large cities in the hope of professional and economic advancement.

Rajendra then describes the destruction of the “river”:

The River
choked and polluted.
And a red
haze hovers
over devastated
hills.

(lines 3–8, p. 35)

The use of the passive voice in “choked” and “polluted” implies an undisclosed agent responsible for the act that will be revealed later. The repetition of the dental consonance /d/ sound: “deserted”, “red” and “devastated” creates the sound of suffocation, like a person gasping for air, a constriction in a normal breathing pattern, reinforcing the speaker's anxiety in the Anthropocene.

The final part of the poem expresses anxiety effectively through feelings of sorrow and despair as the speaker confronts the horrifying truth that the destruction is not caused by exploitation, war or colonialism, symbolised by “barbarians”, “B.29 bombers” and “foreign devils” but by the devastation caused by humans ourselves: “we are the authors/of our own death” (lines 17–18, p.35). This causes a sense of hopelessness, a feeling that the damage may not be repairable as those who should protect and care for the Earth are the very agents causing the damage. The effect of despair that Pihkala (2020, pp.9–12) describes as another form of anxiety

emerges with regard to Tomkins' Script Theory as "some degree of shame effect" (Nathanson, 2008, p.xxi). When a positive outcome is not achieved cognitively with regard to a script, it leads to a sense of disappointment.

The form of the poem further reinforces the sense of anxiety. Rather than adhering to a traditional form, the poem's playful defiance of form invites active engagement from its readers. Structured in 17 lines, the poem is punctuated by deliberate sections of white space, varying in length and distribution. The white spaces are larger from lines one to 10, where the lines contain short syllables, creating a longer pause in each white space. This then transitions to tighter gaps of white spaces with longer syllables in lines 11–19, which creates urgency in the reading, evoking an effect of more rapid breathing and heartbeat, characteristic of anxiety. Anxiety is also conveyed in the personification of the river being "choked" and further amplified in the repetition of the dental consonance /d/ sound: "deserted", "choked", "polluted", "red", and "devastated", mimicking the struggle in breathing and shortness of breath.

The poem provides visual imagery of the shift to the Anthropocene as the village is deserted, rivers are polluted, and hills are devastated. The application of Affective Ecocriticism allows us to analyse the speaker's anxiety, as evoked cognitively through symbolism and choice of words. Furthermore, Rajendra conveys the physical manifestation of anxiety in the form of the poem: the repetition of dental consonance and the differing placement of white spaces create an auditory effect of suffocation.

INDUSTRIALISATION

"ON NOT BEING ABLE TO WRITE A POEM CELEBRATING THE ERECTION OF ANOTHER MULTI-STOREYED COMPLEX"

While "Prologue" utilises metaphoric imagery to describe the beauty and destruction of nature, this poem opts for a more concrete approach, using visual imagery: "A blade of grass/A grain of rice/A wild flower" (lines 1–3, p.9). Again, similar to the previous poem, the placement of four-dot ellipses at the end of the first stanza creates a long pause, inviting a contemplative silence and suggesting tension over the Anthropocene. The following verse insinuates a feeling of anxiety, stating that life, the flourishing flora, serves as a constant motivator for humanity: "Things that pulse/With life/Often move the piper" (lines 4–6, p.9). The fourth stanza pivots towards a tone of embittered disillusionment through the use of the rhetorical question: "But concrete, steel/And glass/What can they inspire?" (lines 7–9, p.9). It highlights the lifeless structural materials that dominate the landscape and questions, with a sense of despair, what inspiration these soulless monuments can possibly offer. Furthermore, the verse breaks from an isosyllabic four-syllable-per-line structure to stanzas that employ whimsical rhythmic syllabic counts: Stanza 2 with 3, 2, and 6 syllables, and stanza 3 with 4, 2, and 5 syllables in each line respectively. In contrast to the uniform metrical syllables, the anisosyllabic metre, where the number of syllables per line varies, evokes an irregular breathing or heartbeat pattern, as in the case of anxiety. The inconsistency mimics the erratic rhythm of anxious breathing or the frantic racing of the heart. Moreover, the enjambments employed in the second and third stanzas, as the tension is released from the first stanza, create a sense of disruption and urgency, conveying the feelings of haste and anticipation associated with anxiety.

After a series of erratic and frantic syllables, the speaker's voice returns to isosyllabic syllables, descending into a calm and even rhythm. Now, with controlled strength over the rapid breathing, the final line reveals frustration and anger, punctuated by the exclamation mark, towards

the changes brought by human activity: “Giant skyscrapers/Stand testimony/to hearts of mortar!” (lines 10–12, p.9). This stands as a critique against the relentless development of “skyscrapers”, towering monuments feeding the insatiable hunger for human pride. These giants that pierce the sky wreak ecological devastation, from the clearing of land to pave the space required to the vast quantity of material harvested and transported for construction, contributing to global warming and resource depletion. Moreover, the line also attacks those responsible for these catastrophes, describing them as having “hearts of mortar!” implying their hearts have hardened like stone, driven by greed for material gain, and devoid of empathy for the suffering of animals and humans as a result of the ecological destruction.

Through an effective reading of this poem, we can identify the Anthropocene anxiety depicted as the speaker is emotionally affected by the changes brought by industrialisation. The poem evokes anger and disappointment (also characteristics of anxiety) cognitively towards human development through contrasting images: the smallest fragment of nature offers a spark of joy, whereas the grandest human constructions only evoke sadness. Furthermore, notable examples of poetic brilliance are found in Rajendra’s creative depiction of the physical characteristics of anxiety through the use of enjambments that evoke urgency and the transition from uniform stanzas to stanzas with varied syllables, suggesting irregular breathing and heartbeats. The development of towering buildings that require vast resources and the transformation of the environment are monuments to human dominance, embodying the Anthropocene and contributing to these anxious feelings.

“RUBBISH”

Rajendra challenges the exploitative nature of capitalism in his poem “Rubbish”, criticising the relentless pursuit of profit which disregards its potentially disastrous effects for the environment. The poem begins with an epigraph of a memo by Lawrence Summers, the former Chief Economist for the World Bank, who encouraged the transfer of polluting industries to less developed countries. The poem serves as an argument, subverting the idea stated in the epigraph.

The first stanza begins with a sense of anger towards capitalists and their repeated statements. “Their logic/as usual/is impeccable” (lines 1–3) emphasises frustration at the constant repetition: “as usual”. In addition, the lines express annoyance and disbelief at the constant validation of the capitalists’ views, making the speaker feel that he is unheard and suggesting that he has very little control in this situation since the capitalists’ logic “is impeccable”.

The frustration continues in the following stanzas as the speaker describes how capitalists view the “migration of people” (line 4, p.13), which may include accepting refugees “equals/political instability” (lines 5–6, p.13), and that exporting or moving polluting activities, or the product of these activities, “equals/financial viability” (lines 8–9, p.13). The motivation here is the lower costs of waste disposal or the less strict water or air-quality standards in countries with lax environmental regulations. The final lines amplify the anxiety, highlighting the frustration in the choice of words:

for just between you
me & the World Bank
dumping dirt on us
makes no difference

(lines 14–17, p.13)

A sense of helplessness is evoked by ending the line with a rhetorical question that conveys despair:

let's face up to reality
in the eyes of the likes
of our Uncle Larry, we
will always be another
pile of garbage, won't we?

(lines 18–22, p. 13)

The poem brilliantly evokes somatic anxiety through its form. The first stanza, with its short, measured lines, evokes calm breathing patterns that gradually increase from 3 to 4 to 5 syllables, marking the beginning of anxiety. The transition of the following stanzas to a syllable count of 6/2/9 in the second stanza and 7/2/8 in the third suggests a shift away from calm. The fluctuations in the syllable count mimic irregular, erratic breathing patterns with uneven pauses between breaths. The fourth, fifth and final stanzas embody agitation and restlessness, with longer lines and an inconsistent syllable count: the fourth stanza has 6/4/7/6, the fifth has 5/4/5/5, and the sixth has 8/6/7/7/6, syllable count. Furthermore, the enjambments that force the reader to read on without a break in every line further heighten the rapid, breathless feeling.

By employing Affect Theory, one could witness how Rajendra uses diction and rhetorical questions to convey anxiety cognitively, plaiting different syllabic patterns and enjambments to evoke the physical response of irregular erratic breathing as the result of anger, frustration, and helplessness towards those who have a significant influence on policies. Humanity is consumed by the pursuit of wealth and disregards any consequences its actions may have on the environment. The priority given to cheaper and more polluting practices that harm the environment is a key characteristic of the Anthropocene.

CONCLUSION

Cecil Rajendra's creative way of constructing poetry enables readers to experience the anxiety effect along with associated effects such as anger, disappointment, sorrow, and despair at the Anthropocene. By utilising Silvan Tomkins' Affect Theory, we analyse the non-cognitive physiological manifestation of anxiety as an effect of the increased, frantic and inconsistent heartbeat and breathing difficulties reflected in these selected poems of Rajendra. These are conveyed brilliantly in the use of sound devices such as dental consonance, form devices such as white spaces, and punctuation such as exclamation marks, creating auditory effects of suffocation, an irregular heartbeat and anger. Additionally, Rajendra's effective use of structural devices, namely the ellipsis, enjambments, and an irregular syllabic metre, supports the echoed effects. Furthermore, Rajendra conveys anxiety cognitively through his choice of diction, metaphors, rhetorical questions, and punctuation marks to express disappointment, disillusionment, worry, and anger. The Anthropocene expressed in Rajendra's poems through the visual imagery of industrialisation and the transition from the Holocene to the Anthropocene moves beyond a simple discussion of ecological issues, excavating the deep and profound implications of the Anthropocene epoch.

Like Merola's study of Anthropocene anxiety on Spahr's poems, this study reveals Rajendra's formalisation of anxiety through the deviation from uniform metrical syllables. The irregularities that arise from this deviation similarly capture manifestations of anxiety in the breathing difficulties experienced and expressed by the speaker of the poems. Additionally, Rajendra's poems effectively extend the formalisation of anxiety through the use of devices such as dental consonance, white spaces, exclamation marks, and rhetorical questions to express irregular breathing and heartbeat, anger and disappointment. Rajendra's poems, therefore, while expressing Anthropocene anxiety, also become "stories of vulnerabilities," a narrative trait that Scott Slovic suggests as a poignant approach to overcoming the arithmetic of compassion. The poems analysed here portray the speakers as vulnerable and effectively anxious due to the changes brought about by the Anthropocene epoch. Rajendra is especially foremost in composing poetry that expresses anxiety in the Anthropocene, inspiring readers to feel empathy toward the victims and compassion in the face of ecological destruction.

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