

An Ecocritical Reading of Akira Kurosawa's film *Throne of Blood* (1957)

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Abstract

Akira Kurosawa, the most Western and the most Japanese filmmaker, is still pertinent because of his oeuvre of incredible films which show various sociological and environmental concerns. One of such great films is Throne of Blood, originally Kumonosu-jō, which is also widely translated as Spider Web Castle. This film is also well perceived in the Western world as it is based on Shakespeare's shortest yet tremendous tragedy Macbeth, though it is uncredited. I would like to bring to attention how this film, which was released in 1957, is still concurrent in today's world. Environmental issues are one of the greatest concerns on this planet now. So, a concern for various ecological problems could be seen in various forms of literature. We will understand that Throne of Blood performed the same responsibility 64 years ago if we can watch the film through the lens of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism, also variously known as Environmental criticism or Green studies, is "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature", as defined by William Rueckart who is also believed to be the father of ecocriticism. In Ecocriticism, Greg Garrard says, "Ecocriticism is, then, an avowedly political mode of analysis..." and explains that eco-critics basically try to attach their analyses to a 'green', 'moral' and 'political agenda'. Therefore, "ecocriticism is closely related to environmentally oriented developments in philosophy and political theory. Developing the insights of earlier critical movements, ecofeminists, social ecologists, and environmental justice advocates seek a synthesis of environmental and social concerns" (Garrard 3). My object will therefore be to link the past to the present, to project a much older film Throne of Blood with the tincture of ecocriticism and exhibit it in the light of environmentalism.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, deep ecology, speciesism, anthropocentrism, eco-dystopia

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Introduction

From the very onset of the film, nature is all-pervasive. We can see a foggy heath at our first peek. As the film progresses, the triumphant samurai protagonists, Taketoki Washizu and Yoshiaki Miki are lost in a *cul de sac* amidst the Spider Web forest while returning from a battle against their Lord Tsuzuki's enemies. They are in double trouble as they are lost in the dark forest with thunderstorms, rain, and rays at the same time. They are witnessing such 'peculiar weather' for the first time. The landscape here is not picturesque, rather it is sublime and characterized by a frightening environment. Though the theory of sublime exists from ancient Greek time, here it is evident with its own lure. Here, nature is presented as a living organism that is disturbing the forest. But we can here bring the concept of anthropocentrism also. Nature cannot be perceived as a living being until the man feels its presence. So, it depends on the man and thus man becomes the centre. But again, we must pay heed to the fact that man cannot perceive anything unless the nature of the surroundings makes him feel something. Here, nature gains significance. Next, the treading of their horses in the forest can be compared to man's 'tread' or intervention in the environment. The protagonists then suddenly witness a spirit in the figure of an elderly woman who is singing with her spinning wheel. This spinning wheel can be associated with the Eastern philosophy of chakras that is present equally in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism. The wheel symbolizes law and order on the one hand and on the other it reminds us of the birth cycle. We are also reminded of our temporality through the spinning wheel. Next, we observe that

the Spirit's song consists of the line 'Humanity strives all its days to shear its own flesh in the flames of base desire'. If we go beyond the surface level and associate it with the present time, we can very well connect it with ecocriticism. 'Base desire' is the materialistic world consisting of various industries which are incessantly harming Nature. Therefore, humans are shearing their own flesh i. e. Nature. We are distancing ourselves from our own selves. So, it may be said that the turbulence of nature is caused by the human hand.

After receiving the prophecy from the spirit, while they were returning to their Lord, Washizu and Miki take a rest in an open field near the Spider Web Castle. Here, nature is providing them with the shelter that is very much needed in their time of exhaustion due to the continual war of three days and to the mental stimulation that they are in due to the prophecy. We here can see the conventionalization of mother nature. This is what eco-feminism opposes - the stereotyping of both nature and woman as always caring, giving, and gentle, no matter what man and civilization do to them. However, in a short while, the first prophecy proves to be true. Washizu becomes the Lord of Northern Garrison and Miki becomes the commander of the first fortress. Washizu discusses this with Asaji, his wife. She in turn influences him to take adequate action so that the second prophecy also comes true. On that night during their discussion, they can hear a bird crying that is considered to be sinister. Here, others may find an ingrained desire to present man as a victim to nature - here the bird's cry playing foul on Washizu and previously the tumultuous nature playing foul on the two Samurais. On the other hand, one may find it as a case of anthropocentrism: the man gets exemption from all his sins, and the whole accountability is inflicted upon the natural activities. However, through the bird's cry, Asaji hears something that is very intriguing. She says, "What do you hear in that bird's cry? 'Will you risk the world' so it sounds to me". This is said by her to manipulate her husband certainly. But if we foist this question on us with the connection of "ecocentrism", the whole thing becomes different. In today's world, the rise in chemical products, nuclearization, industrialization seem to affect the world very painfully.

Discussion

Focusing on this environmental degradation McCarthy said, "Let's not look how civilization had built up, let's look instead at how things went down, or things ceasing to be. There is no qualm in asking the question Are we on the road to civilization collapse?" Will we risk the world? We should not overlook the scene where the Lord is coming to Washizu and a line of farmers is busy cultivating their lands. Though their way of cultivating the land is not very destructive to nature, as time passes by, we have made our way of cultivation detrimental using pesticides and chemicals. We are forgetting our limits and our necessity. The concept of "anthropocentrism" comes here as humans forget that they are only a part of nature, not above it. Man has gone to the extent of creating genetically engineered crops, also known as *Frankenstein food*, named after the timeless novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) by Mary Shelley. The theory of speciesism comes to the fore as a man thinks he has control over other species of the world and can do anything according to his need and comfort. Rightly did Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring* say that,

The history of life on earth has been a history of interaction between living things and their surroundings only within the moment of time represented by the present century has one species-man-acquired significant power to alter the nature of his world. During the past quarter century this power has not only increased to one of disturbing magnitude but it has changed in character. (12)

She further said, "The most alarming of all man's assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials. To adjust to these chemicals would require time on the scale that is nature's; it would require not merely the years of a man's life but the life of generations"(12). Eco-disaster is inevitable when what we do to them comes back to us just like a boomerang, through slow poison or slow violence. However, under his wife's influence, Washizu finally kills his Lord, Tsuzuki Kuniharu. They have done it very craftily. At first, Asaji gives the guards of the Lord sleep-inducing sake, and when they fall asleep, Washizu commits the crime. After the murder, Asaji puts the blood-smeared spear in one of the guards' hands and starts to yell. By the time Washizu kills the guard too. But Tsuzuki's son Kunimaru and Noriyasu, an advisor to Tsuzuki suspect Washizu for the murder. But Miki is loyal to his friend. Though under Asaji's manipulation Washizu orders to kill Miki and his son. During the banquet scene, Washizu hallucinates Miki's ghost and starts to panic. But Asaji brings the matter under control by telling others that he is behaving like this only because he is drunk. Then

the assassin who has been appointed to kill Mili and his son by Washizu appears in front of them. The assassin has come with the amputated head of Miki and informs him that his son has escaped. After hearing this, the enraged Washizu kills him. Now, he has to battle with his enemies including his Lord's son, his friend Miki's son, and his Lord's advisor. To know the outcome of the battle, he goes back to the Spider's Web forest. There he invokes the evil spirit to know the future. The spirit tells him that nobody can do him any harm until "the trees of the Spider Web Forest rise against the castle". This is suggestive of the fact that whenever humans have fallen into a difficulty, they always take resort to nature. Here Washizu finds his solace only in the wilderness, though through the supernatural spirit. But after hearing the spirit's words Washizu finds relief and starts to laugh mockingly. He has the notion that trees can't do anything to harm him. Trees in particular and nature in general have only a passive existence. It is again an anthropocentric aspect of Washizu's attitude. It is as if only humans can instrumentalize nature. This is indeed a futile thought and we will soon realize that it's time to reconsider man's position as supreme in the great chain of being. In the meantime, Washizu returns to his troops and rejoices in his inevitable victory, as prophesied by the spirit. The next morning, Washizu hears a scream and discovers his wife Asaji in a schizophrenic state. She is washing her hand to wash off the blood which is completely her illusion. We should not condone the fact that the closed door of the castle leads her to a state of schizophrenia. Previously, we have seen Washizu in the same kind of insanity and agitation. His delirium also exemplifies the effect of claustrophobia. Here comes the nature and culture dichotomy. A man may construct spectacles ('castles', and in present time 'buildings') to form culture but it always makes nature a victim, and unknowingly they become their own victims. McCarthy thus coins the term 'counterspectacle' to show the toll it takes on both nature and humans. In the "Ruins of a Great House", Derek Walcott says: "Stones only, the disjecta membra of this Great House, whose moth-like girls are mixed with candle dust, remain to file the lizard's dragonish claws. The mouths of those gate cherubs shriek with stain; Axle and coach wheel silted under the muck of cattle droppings." Here, Walcott is not praising human culture and modernity, rather he focuses on the savagery that man has conducted. So, if we link the past to the present, we can see through the confined room and castle nothing but human cruelty. The very existence of man destroyed biodiversity. Culture and modernity make humans their waste. This is deeply discussed by Zygmunt Bauman in "Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts." Therefore, Eco-dystopia is unavoidable to witness. In "The Year of the Flood", Margaret Atwood rightly declares that "Like the Creation, the Fall, too, is ongoing"(39). In one of his climate fictions J.G. Ballard says:

Everywhere there's been the same avalanche backwards into the past-so much so that the few complex organisms which have managed to retain a foothold unchanged on the slope look distinctly anomalous - a handful of amphibians, the birds, and Man. It's a curious thing that although we've carefully cataloged the backward journeys of so many plants and animals, we've ignored the most important creature on this planet...(42)

So, a reversed evolution cannot be far away if the ecosystem continues to change. In the *Origin of Species*, Darwin showed us evolution and the evolution is still going on, maybe in the near future people will experience the reverse. Coming back, After Asaji's hallucination scene, we witness upheaval among the troops, and they are claiming that the trees of the Spider Web Forest are going to attack them. At last, we can see that the opponent soldiers have cut the boughs of the trees in Spider's Web Forest and they are carrying those boughs with them to safeguard themselves, so it looks like that the forest is rising to 'attack' them. So, Washizu's downfall is inescapable. He finally dies after being wounded by several arrows thrown by the rival soldiers.

An ecological approach would be to see Washizu's death as a result of excessive deforestation. An indication of eco-disaster is evident here as we know the cutting of the trees will lead to a catastrophe caused by human action and activities. On the other hand, here is an approach to bring nature and man together. When the opponent soldiers were moving toward the castle with the boughs, we can see nature and man together, side by side. We can implement this in today's life. Here is the idea that 'nature and man can work together to defeat a tyrant. If humans stand for nature, we can defeat the apocalypse. If mankind unites itself to fight against climate issues, we may see a better future. There is still a way to escape the apocalypse. Otherwise, according to IPCC's (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report (AR6- sixth assessment report), by 2100 global temperature will rise by more than two degrees Celsius compared to the times when industrialization had not swelled so much. Another report by the UN says the world temperature will increase more than 1.5° Celsius by the 2030s. Linda Mearns, the co-author of the

report and also a senior climate scientist at the U.S. National Centre for Atmospheric Research says, “It’s just guaranteed that it’s going to get worse”, and she further adds “I don’t see any area that is safe ... Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.” Just like Washizu's inability to hide from the inevitable, we can't also escape from our doomsday.

Conclusion

It will not be unjustified if we say that Akira Kurosawa's film *Throne of Blood* or *Spider Web Castle* reflects Arne Naess' concept of Deep Ecology which believes in the equality of all the life forms on earth and decentres the supremacy of man. In other words, on one hand, it builds up the concept of anthropocentrism and dismantles the same on the other. It also concentrates on the issue of the damage to the ecosystem caused by human intervention, and also believes that all the life forms on earth have their own innate value without any regard for man's evaluation of their usefulness. The twice winner of the BBC Wildlife Award for Nature Writing, Richard Kerridge says, “To read ecocritically is, therefore, to read from an extremely specific present. In this sense, eco-critical reading is as far from reading in search of timeless truths and values as one could get, though it is in part a search for global truths and values”(142). On this basis, discussing Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* is not merely dragging the past fruitlessly, rather if we shed 'ecocritical' light on this great film, we have that extremely specific present in this film in its true sense which is already evident through the above discussion.

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