



## An Ecocritical Reading of Elizabeth Bradfield's Poem "Plastic: A Personal History"

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### Abstract

Environmental writing aims to address environmental issues with ecological consciousness, creating a sense of responsibility among the readers to protect the planet Earth from environmental crises. Writers and activists have been trying to create awareness about the deplorable plight of the environment due to pollution. Plastic is one of the major pollutants of the environment. Despite repeated attempts to ban plastic over the last few decades, the pollution caused by plastic is on the rise. The paper gains relevance in this context. This paper is an attempt to explore how plastic and multiple variants of plastic have uninterruptedly crept into the daily life of a modern man and how it pollutes the environment endangering the Earth. Elizabeth Bradfield's poem "Plastic: A Personal History" is selected for the study, applying Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" in ecocritical theory. The paper examines how Elizabeth Bradfield, an American poet and naturalist, evinces the omnipresence of plastic in the modern world.

Key words: ecological consciousness, environment, plastic, slow violence.

The ubiquity of plastic in the 21<sup>st</sup> century makes it impossible to imagine a world free from plastic. The material has crept into the life of every being, both human and nonhuman on the face of the earth. The journey of the production of man-made plastic began in 1862, marking a step towards modernity. Kylie Crane says that plastic emerges with modernity and shapes modernity (24). Meikle's argument also

follows the same line: "plastic is the essence of modernity" (qtd. in Clane 25).

Keeping infinity as the trademark of the industry, plastic proliferated in the market uncontrollably. The use of plastic from Silent Generation to Generation Z is steady, but not slow. Use and availability of plastic were limited in the market confining to a few specific uses in the period of Silent Generation. Baby Boomers grew up with plastic and its numerous

varieties of objects in the market, ranging from children's toys to the food served on the dining table. Baby Boomer families grew up with Frisbee, Barbie dolls, Formica dinettes, Tupperware, Melamine dishes, Saran Wrap, dry cleaning and laundry bags (Meikle 278). Plastic permeated American culture leaps and bounds. The product has crossed cultural barriers to achieve a global nature in no time.

Barry Commoner, an ecological critic, in the book *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology*, pointed out that humans have detached themselves from the circle of life by the use of plastic. He remarked about the peculiar nature of human beings who have the unique capability of producing materials which are foreign and hazardous to the ecosystem. He added that nature does not have any mechanism for breaking down the non-biodegradable material of plastic.

It is a lamentable fact that plastic is not naturally destroyable by the elements of nature. Obviously, it is the use of plastic that pollutes the environment rather than the very material of plastic. The material that lasts for hundreds of years in toxic proportions is supposed to be used judiciously. Rather, it is used to meet short term needs in the form of plastic carry bags, water bottles, cups, plates, cutlery, packaging and so on. These plastic objects are the primary components of urban litter that cause marine pollution.

In this context, it is essential to disseminate knowledge about the dangers of plastic to the contemporary society. Writers have begun to take deliberate efforts to create awareness among the readers through their writings about environmental issues and concerns. Ecologically conscious writers and critics canonized nature writing and environmental writing and shaped ecocriticism, the critical literary theory on environmental and ecological issues. Elizabeth Bradfield, an ecologically conscious writer, expresses deep

concern over the increasing anthropogenic environmental destruction.

Elizabeth Bradfield, an American poet and naturalist imagines how human beings think and perceive other creatures in nature. Her works *Interpretive Work* and *Approaching Ice* have won accolades. According to Wiseman, "In poem after poem in *Interpretive Works*, the beauty of nature is luminous" (167). Being obsessed with Antarctica, she wrote poems on Antarctica, which she later compiled as *Antartica Poems*. As a queer poet she tries to harmonize queer and nature. She has drawn themes for her poetry from trees like magnolia and madronas and animals like whales. Her poems on nature include "Succession", "The Shepherd of Tourists on a \$20 Sunset Cruise Speaks" and "Whalefall", wherein she explicates the varied contours of nature. Unlike her other poems on nature, the poem selected for the study, "Plastic: A Personal History" exposes the hazardous impact on nature by the use of plastic.

Unlike other nature poems of Elizabeth Bradfield, "Plastic: A Personal History" is centered on the use of plastic, the major pollutant in the environment. Her poems "Succession" and "Whalefall" directly represent nature whereas "Plastic: A Personal History" represents the degradation of nature. The poem presents a narrative about plastic that is used in the life of the poet and three generations in her family. The poet reminisces her childhood and adolescence days during which plastic and its variants were used for multiple purposes. The first line of the poem "How can I find a way to praise it?" discloses an ambivalent attitude to the material of plastic. By adopting an ironic tone in this line, she directs the readers' attention to the environmental hazards it causes. However, she does not ignore the utilitarian aspect of plastic. The first line of the poem itself raises the question whether the invention of plastic is a praiseworthy achievement despite the claims of the first manufacturers of plastic. Bakelite, the manufacturers of the first synthetic plastic called it "the material of thousand

uses" (qtd in Meikle 273) with the mathematical symbol of infinity as the trademark.

Elizabeth Bradfield subtly traces the evolution of plastic in various forms and its role in the lives of people over the decades by presenting a narrative about its uses in her life, beginning from the period of her grandparents to the contemporary period. From the period of Silent Generation, from 1933 to 1945, plastic was not ubiquitous, but it had made its presence visible in their lives. The Silent Generation's use of plastic was not profuse to be a cause for imminent disaster, but they were also not completely free from its harmful effects. The poet says:

"I don't think my parents --born in the swing toward ubiquity --chew & chew & chew on plastic. But of course, they do. Bits in water, food-flesh air.

The poetic expression "chew & chew & chew on plastic" denotes the alarming presence of micro plastics in water, soil, air, food etc. through which they enter the body of every organism. The mother's rubber bands stored in her drawer and her father's "red corroded jerry can" are pointers to the fact that plastic objects were used sparingly and the market was not flooded with those objects. Due to the durability of the material, the poet's grandfather did not have to discard the old jerry can and buy a new one. The long life of plastic helped her grandfather save money. The need to replace an old can with new one did not arise then.

"his father-in-law's red,corroded jerry can, patched and patched never replaced for new, for never- rusting".

Yet, manufacturers driven by profit motive, multiply the production of plastic in various forms and compositions.

The poet enumerates the objects made of plastic used at her home. Memories of her childhood are coloured with plastic toys of castle, circus train and yo-yo. It is obvious that

her toys are from the artificial world of plastic, not from the natural world. American children's knowledge of nature is very limited in the modern and postmodern era. Harold Fromm says: "To the average child of the United States in the present-day Nature is indeed a greater mystery, not insofar as it is incomprehensible, but insofar as it is virtually non-existent to his perceptions" (33). Children's perception of nature has not changed much in 2020s as well. Children are distanced further from nature, owing to their addictions to smart phones. In the technologically advanced contemporary society, children have replaced their plastic toys with smart phones, pinning them to virtual reality.

Plastic makes its way from a child's nursery to a dining table. She recalls how her lunch was packed in Saran wrap or waxed paper. Saran, the tradename of the company that made polyvinyl chloride wraps to pack food was a part of the American culture and society. Plastic pouches, merit badge, wraps, wax paper, grocery bags, garbage pails, Safeway bags, tooth picks, folders, shoes and lids have replaced metallic, wooden and earthen products. In the poem, the poet lists the plastic objects that meet the common needs in the modern society. The list thus demonstrates that the utility of plastic is not limited to mainstream society, but it extends to marginalized communities as well.

With the use of plastic, portability and storage facility of food products in the market have increased. The possibility of spillage of solid and liquid food products is also lessened as these products are covered with plastic lids. Reiterating the multiple uses of plastic, the poet asks, ... "What did we do before to-go lids?/ Things must have just spilled/ and spilled ." Unable to imagine an alternative to pack solid and liquid food products without spillage, the use of plastic goes unchecked.

The invading presence of plastic in the modern world reaches the peak when the poet poignantly and satirically asks:

Do you know  
what I mean? I mean, what pearl forms  
around a grain of plastic in an oyster?  
Is it as beautiful? Would you wear it?  
Would you buy it for your daughter  
so she in turn could pass it down  
and pass it down and pass it down?

The poet is giving an alarm call to the society by reiterating the point that the whole planet is polluted with plastic. No creature on the face of the planet is free from the web of plastic consumerism, not even an oyster in ocean. The disposed plastic returns to the modern man in another form, as a pearl ornament. As Jody A Roberts says, "Nearly every human subject found anywhere on the globe likely bear the marks of a plastic modernity" (qtd. in Clane, 25). Elizabeth Bradfield's question whether the legacy to the posterity is a plasticized world still remains unanswered.

Particles of plastic have filled oceans and waterways in which currents of water accumulate in convergence zones called gyres in the centre of world's oceans making it the "Great Pacific Garbage Patch" (Maqueda 18). Elizabeth Bradfield writes in her poem that bits of plastic are seen everywhere, even in a beautiful pearl. Barry Commoners's first law of ecology that "Everything is connected to everything else" (qtd. in Glotfelty, xix) is conspicuous in the formation of pearl from a bit of plastic in the ocean. The pearl thus formed is a Plast glomerate, symbolizing the Anthropocene epoch.

Plastic products have permeated everybody's life in the contemporary society. The dangers of the extensive use of plastic in the daily life are conveniently pushed to the recesses of memory. Convenience and utility in the present moments of life cloud the vision of environmental disasters looming large in the

near future. The disastrous consequences of its overuse do not have the spectacular effect like other natural calamities. The society at large rarely thinks of the environmental destruction caused by human interventions in nature as any sort of violence on nature. The environmental destruction caused by the manufacture and overuse of plastic is slow and not immediately perceived. Rob Nixon uses the theoretical concept "slow violence" to refer to this kind of slow environmental destruction. He says:

By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space and as erupting into sensational visibility (2).

Plastic violates the harmony in the nature, raises global temperature, brings climatic variations, causes natural disasters and the like as the various products produced from the material of plastic pollute sea, soil, air etc. endangering flora and fauna all over the planet Earth. This attritional violence is what Elizabeth Bradfield addresses in the poem through her memory of the use of plastic in her family. The personal history of plastic metaphorically represents the collective memory of its use in the modern culture, evading personal and familial boundaries. Heather Davis asserts that the use of plastic transmits a sense of universality contrary to the sense of locality. She states: "Regardless of where plastic comes from, it has the effect of transmitting a sense of universality: plastic is designed to be divorced from a specific location, appearing as if from nowhere and coating particular places in this sense of globalized unlocality (Davis 5).

Due to its nature of slow violence, immediate preventive actions are not carried out to check the uncontrolled production and distribution of plastic. Elizabeth Bradfield raises the question whether plastic is a boon or a bane to the society. She writes: "How can I find a way to praise/it? Do the early inventors & embracers/Churn with regret?" It raises the doubt whether the inventors of plastic regret for producing plastic and dumping the remains all over the planet, killing multitudes of beasts, fish, birds, human beings and ultimately the beautiful planet Earth. Norman Mailer, an American journalist and writer, was cognizant of the impending danger in the environment by the use of plastic. He reminded the American society that "a material of thousand uses" was wearing them from the lap of nature. He stated: "We had divorced ourselves from the materials of earth, the rock, the wood, the iron ore.... we looked to new materials which were cooked in vats, long complex derivatives of urine which we called plastic" (qtd. in Meikle 280).

When Elizabeth Bradfield lists out the uses of plastic in the current society, she points out that the modern society which includes both the poet and the readers are also the consumers of the product. The commonly available products in the consumerist society that have made life easier and convenient are also the variants of plastic with different chemical compositions as the poem says, "first plastic, pre-plastic" The characteristic that popularised the use of plastic in the early period of its invention is now the major cause of environmental pollution.

The indispensability and the ubiquity of the product make the contemporary society unaware of its presence in various compositions and shapes. The use of plastic is so normalised and naturalised that a society without plastic is improbable, though not impossible. It is this tendency to naturalize and normalize plastic in modern man's daily life that the poet addresses in her poem.

In line with Cheryl Glotfelty's words that "all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world affecting it and affected by it", (ix) Elizabeth Bradfield points out how plastic consumerism devastates various ecosystems and environment, depriving justice to various creatures on this planet. The poem is a clarion call to take up the responsibility to protect our planet Earth with all its beauty and mystery. As an environmental poet, she sets her readers thinking about the nexus between their plastic consumerist habits and the current environmental degradation.

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