

Overpopulation: A Hyperobject inducing ‘*Slow Violence*’

Priyanka Arora, Assistant Professor (Guest), Department of English, Shivaji College, The University of Delhi

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Abstract

The paper theorizes overpopulation as what Timothy Morton terms *hyper objects* that are too enormous in the spatial-temporal continuum for humans to comprehend. The article goes on to determine how overpopulation is a causality of what Rob Nixon terms as 'Slow Violence' on the planet. Nixon defines 'Slow Violence' as violence that occurs gradually over some time and might not be presented as violence at all. The paper presents three arguments to analyze the causality of ecological damage by overpopulation that humans are overlooking. It goes on further to evaluate specific effective corrective measures for anthrop harmonic living.

Keywords: Environmental Humanities, Hyper objects, Slow Violence, Deep Ecology, Anthropoharmonism

"...a finite world must have a finite population."
-Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons"

Who defines what 'finite population' entails? How much is 'enough'? Do we have the intellectual capacity to quantify it? How do we define 'overpopulation'? In the twenty-first century, humanity is perplexed by these essential questions. For this paper, let us define overpopulation as a state when a population exceeds its 'carrying capacity'. The 'carrying capacity' refers to the maximum number of individuals of a species that can exist in a habitat indefinitely without becoming a threat to others. There is a compelling need to plummet our population growth rate, stabilize, and gradually reduce our numbers to provide a fair chance for nature and other living beings to thrive and heal from the copious amounts of damage entailed by us in a minuscule time frame. This paper proposes that overpopulation joins the bandwagon of the damage-inducing causality on the rhythmic structure of an interconnected web of biotic

interactions. "[It] is the expanding scale of the whole human enterprise that is relentlessly destroying the biosphere, the living system comprising all Life on Earth" (Hawkins 207).

The world population has recently surpassed eight billion. As gauged by long-term paleontological data, contemporary trends among threatened species confirm that Earth is experiencing its sixth mass extinction of plant and animal species (Barnosky et al.). Meanwhile, the IUCN list of the 'Threatened Species' from across the globe is expanding exponentially. The collapse of ecosystems, most of which are not yet discovered, the extinction of biodiversity, the homogenization of habitats due to the proliferation of invasive species, and the increasing consumerism of humanity have furthered the threat to the sustainability of a plethora of organisms, ironically, including human beings.

Human colonization on Earth and its mounting scale with each passing day is a cause of 'Slow Violence' (Rob Nixon) that this paper will theorize. The cognizance of 'Slow Violence' is fundamental to our discussion. Rob Nixon coins the concept in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. He defines it as:

... violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction dispersed across time and space, attritional violence typically not viewed as violence at all....[It is] not just attritional but also exponential, operating as a significant threat multiplier; it can fuel long-term, proliferating conflicts in situations where the conditions for sustaining life become increasingly but gradually degraded" (2-3).

Additionally, we are the witness and victims of the exponential violence caused by us, the microscopic organisms in the macroscopic world, unable to comprehend our functioning as an act of violence and, in the process, degrading life and the elements that support it in all its forms.

Overpopulation aptly applies to Nixon's concept of 'Slow Violence' ."[We] have come to understand that overpopulation and economic growth are inversely related to the autonomy, integrity, and diversity of Nature" (Cafaro and Crist 5). Population growth is exponentially increasing the rate of ecological degradation. "There is now considerable evidence that humanity has altered the biophysical systems of Earth, not just the carbon cycle . . . but also the nitrogen cycle and ultimately the atmosphere and climate of the whole globe" (Robin 290). Multiple fields of study have ascertained that overpopulation tends to dilapidate sustainable conditions of existence. A renowned anthropologist, Kenneth Smail proposes that we "imagine any early twenty-first-century problem whether political, economic, environmental, social, or moral-and ask whether its solution would be made easier or more difficult by a rapidly growing population" (Smail 231). Unprecedented levels and erratic occurrences of global warming, flash floods, inflation, recession, failing democracies, rising authoritarianism, cybercrime, poverty, and unemployment, the list is unending; however, the response remains the same. The extermination of many species is an 'ongoing genocide' suppressed through silence that drowns their muffled

cries for help. Silence is how power talks down to the subjugated. Silence is how power disdains to talk about their extinction (Jensen, 2006).

Why has humanity not acted upon it yet? Are we so ill-informed of the actual situation, so mesmerized by the power that comes with the human colonization of the planet and in denial of its suicidal trajectory, that we continue to increase the birth count every year? How can we move towards a more sustainable living when the rate of extraction of resources is greater than the rate of their renewal? Is overpopulation a *hyper object* and a cause of 'Slow Violence' on this planet? How can population control find alternatives to anthropoharmonic living? How does the Global North-South divide affect population and resource distribution? The paper presents these questions before fellow researchers and attempts to respond to these pertinent questions.

“[We] can be ethical only toward what we can see” (Leopold)

Those who possess narratorial control are the ones who determine what is hyper-visualized and what is to be invisible. The victims of overpopulation whose subjugation is withdrawn from the mainstream narratives by those who control them. These concerns can be addressed through Nixon's understanding of 'Slow Violence'. According to him, since this form of violence occurs 'out of sight,' it can proliferate gradually sans being noticeable. Thus, overpopulation as an imminent threat to the planet is a narrative that does not reach the masses. According to Leopold, 'out of sight' occurrences do not pester one's morality as much as events visible to the human eye. The paper will establish three arguments conceptualizing how overpopulation is a causality of Slow Violence.

The primary argument claims that overpopulation serves the motives of capitalists by providing a vast labor force, increased competition, and collective mediocrity, thereby encouraging reproduction for heightened production. Palmer supports this argument by claiming that a growing population is essential to anti-environmentalists' success and that they would be well served if there were a taboo on discussing population growth and the ways to limit it (Palmer 103). Palmer refers to the anti-environmentalists who view Earth as a mine of resources, i.e., the capitalist society and the people who hold power in this economic structure. According to Antonio Gramsci,

The mass formation has standardized individuals psychologically and in terms of individual qualification and has produced the same phenomena as with other standardized masses: competition which makes necessary organizations for the defense of professions, unemployment, over-production in the schools, emigration, etc.

The capitalist framework views every entity as a resource to be utilized to acquire capital. Nature is not valued for its existence but for what monetary or social value humans assign. "The dominant culture thus seems unable to grasp the moral evil of erasing wild nature just to

accommodate more and more people to live, all at once, on a planet occupied as a resource satellite" (Crist 150).

Contrastingly, George Perkins Marsh, the mid-nineteenth-century environmental pioneer, argued in *Man and Nature* that "the power most important to cultivate, and, at the same time, hardest to acquire, is that of seeing what is before him"(15). To bring into focus 'Slow Violence' that is made to exist out of sight. Here, "writer-activists can help us apprehend threats...that remain imperceptible to the senses, either because they are geographically remote, too vast or too minute in scale, or are played out across a period that exceeds the instance of observation or even the physiological life of the human observer" (Cafaro and Crist 15). Subsequently, they can work on spreading awareness amongst the masses on the present condition of our planet and offer their expertise to aid in resolving the issues arising from overpopulation and being made invisible.

Timothy Morton, in *Hyperobjects*, establishes the human limitations in the spatial-temporal continuum. Humans cannot primarily comprehend and actively respond to these *hyper objects* that "refer to things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (*The Ecological Thought*). Humans appear to be short-sighted, unable to comprehend the magnitude of disruptions that are being subjected to Earth by such *hyper objects*. The human brain cannot comprehend the enormous timescale that runs into millions of years. Human beings' presence is a mere blip on the temporal scale of the Universe, even though we egoistically call it the 'Anthropocene,' or the age of the man.

Thus, the second argument provides an ontological inability of humans to comprehend how their actions affect the planet. The now-overpopulated world initially welcomed the reproductive explosion for creating a community that would progress in different spheres of life. However, with rising progress came rising economic prowess that gave people autonomy for decision-making and a more secure and longer life.

Subsequently, the third argument asserts a blind eye being turned to certain happenings to maintain human conveniences or 'Freedoms' as Dipesh Chakraborty examines in his lecture at *St. Berchman's College* (February 2023). The third argument delineates the 'freedom' of mobility, energy, infrastructure, modernization, medicines, and defense advancements, to name a few, requiring the utilization of resources. An anthropoharmonic living would require reimagining our futures and freedoms, emphasizing 'our' planet, a global approach to Planetary.

Due to increased consumption, there is a sequential connection between overpopulation and its environmental effects. The harmful patterns of overconsumption by an already overpopulated species adversely affect the environment. It is then quite lucid to comprehend that our consumption levels need to plummet. "While we need to consume less, it is easier to change family size around the world than it is to change consumption patterns" (Campbell 45). However, both population control and reduced consumption are equally significant means of moving towards sustainable living. The demographic transition theory (Potts & Campbell, 2005)

accepts the hypothesis that urbanization, modernization, and development, according to Western ideologies, will cause a diminishing desire for couples to have many children (Notestein, 1953). It is propagated that "development is the best contraceptive" (Cafaro and Crist 11). However, this theory needs to be revised as there are examples before us where both developed and least developed countries have seen their fertility rates climb after earlier declines.

Furthermore, while birth rates have witnessed a persistent decline since the 1990s, this has occurred due to tremendous amounts of effort undertaken to fund awareness campaigns, provide affordable contraception, educate people to trust and try new and more effective contraception methods, convince individuals, especially men to use contraception and think about family planning, and to normalize having smaller or unique family structures with pets/ adopted children as members along with the parents. Even now, continuing to drive fertility trends downward will continue to take hard work and substantial resources; it will not happen automatically (Moreland, Smith, and Sharma 2010).

However, in absolute terms, current world population growth is still immense. There is also a new recognition that falling fertility offers an economic dividend (Birdsall, Kelly, and Sinding 2001), as countries can direct their capital towards technological advances, or building human capital, rather than invest in the basic needs of an enormous population that is unable to develop to its fullest potential due to paucity of resources.

"Ecological materials do not transmit through markets or cultural exchange; they dissolve through webs of interconnections until they appear hidden, only to rejoin and accumulate again far from their source in both space and time."

–Ben Shread-Hewitt, "Slow Violence"

Environmental Humanities is a growing field of study with an evolving vocabulary and a mushrooming literature. The concept of Deep Ecology finds its place here. It is propounded by a Polish philosopher, Henryk Skolimowski, and popularised by Arne Naess in the 1970s. Deep Ecology proclaims that "...all life is interconnected and separate parts of the ecosystem-including humans-function as a whole...and that the entire living environment has the same right to live, and flourish" (Chabria and Taylor 263). When viewed from the context of Deep Ecology, overpopulation would seem to be a means of 'Slow Violence' being subjected to nonhuman beings sans acknowledging their existence as being crucial in the workings of our planet. Thus, when viewed from the context of nonhumans, humanity appears to be a solitary entity creating a burden on the planet that is disproportionately enormous when compared to their number.

"We are all in this together, and isn't world population a zero-sum game, with equal effects being felt no matter where the people are? Yes, we are, and no, it isn't" (Palmer 105). Hence, it is to be argued that humanity is not a solitary entity. The most glaring disparity is one of class, where the 'uber rich' and the 'never-have-nots,' as quoted by Rob Nixon, have varied relations with the environment. Some affluent donate to environmental causes while others mint

capital over exploiting natural resources. Similarly, some underprivileged people live ecologically, exemplifying sustainable living, however, some poor individuals have no thought for the environment and their sole motive is to earn money for survival, no matter the environmental cost. Consequently, their experiences of environmental impacts also vary. Where the number of environmental refugees is predicted to rise exponentially in the next decade, it is to be seen how the value of capital evolves (Gabriele Mante and Mattias Kolstrup, "Environmental Refugees (Climate Change and How it Affects People's Lives)).

Similarly, the world has also been bifurcated into the developed North and the developing or underdeveloped South. Where the North is responsible for the overconsumption of natural resources since the Industrial Revolution and for polluting the environment disproportionately, the South, too, needs to be held responsible for overpopulation and unsustainable growth that has inevitably led to the overconsumption of limited resources. Furthermore, Crist and Cafaro write:

...[dangerous] chemical pollutants originating in the developed world have found their way into the geographically remote flesh of polar bears and the breast milk of Inuit women. However, swelling numbers of dispossessed people in Africa and elsewhere have mounted...an aggressive assault on forest animals...[causing] the ecological reckoning (6).

Thus, human experience is clouded and colored by their identities and individual experiences, complicating their response to nature. However, there seems to be no disparity in establishing overpopulation as a concern and a cause of 'Slow Violence' and on whose pretext we are "losing the planet" (Gustave Speth, 2009).

"Let us call the first Resource Earth and the second Abundant Earth. If human beings choose Abundant Earth, then we also choose to embark on a speedy journey toward a declining world population" (Crist 150).

It is a choice that humans have to make, either to choose Resource Earth and continue to exploit it and overpopulate the finite Earth without valuing it for what it is or work towards an Abundant Earth that entails healthy ecosystems having feedback mechanisms and a finite population of humans.

This can materialize when we provide women with autonomy over their bodies, accept their decisions to be or not be a mother, emphasize family planning, spread awareness about abortions, and engage men as well in these debates and discussions on prioritizing a woman's decision on abortion, adoption, or to have a smaller family size. It is also worth remembering that the most extreme and vocal advocates against abortion do not support family planning (Campbell 46). This gives an impetus to thoughtlessly huge families unable to sustain themselves. This needs to be addressed instantly, along with opening up forums for discussions, to normalize and familiarise the people with these aspects so that what has hitherto been invisible is visible to the human eye. The recent Supreme Court of India judgment in favor of safe and

legal abortion up to twenty-four weeks for both married and unmarried women is a progressive move, providing impetus to conscious family planning and reproductive choices of women (Apurva Vishwanath, *The Indian Express*).

Along with family planning and making our women autonomous, reduced human consumption and Universal Citizenship (eRenlai Ricci, "Universal Citizenship: A Utopian Possibility?") are also solutions that can be deployed. Universal Citizenship is a relatively new concept being propounded to affiliate people from across the planet in solidarity with their shared experiences of the surrounding nature. Ecuador has welcomed this. However, its scale needs to be exponentially enlarged to facilitate a shared experience. Consequently, a shared vision of preserving the existing planet would develop in every human being. Additionally, a fifteen percent Corporate Tax levied on all corporates by the governments, as a result of the discussions at COP26 (James Landale), is a good step in funding the lopsided fight of humans against the mighty nature that has affected humans throughout the globe, irrespective of class, race, gender, caste, ethnicity, or sexuality. This has occurred due to the interconnectedness of life.

Perchance, humanity is lethal for the biosphere, reluctant to or unable to limit ourselves. It is time to work on overpopulation consciously. We should embrace Abundant Earth and our inherent relation with it, irrespective of the economic structure in place during a particular time in society. Humans find safety in a relatively predictable climate and reliable food sources. "We thus are called, even at this late hour, to find the clarity and courage to shift into a new relationship with Earth, before we diminish the greater-than-human world, our own lives, and the lives of future generations irrevocably"(Cafaro and Crist 3). Thus, the 'Slow Violence' caused by overpopulation that has been ensuing on Earth for centuries now needs to be seen, acknowledged, and gradually rectified so that the Earth can flourish along with all its life forms. It would enliven Deep Ecology, an ideology that would facilitate the progress of humanity toward sustainable living.

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