

# Humans, Animals and Habitats: Liminality and Environmental Concerns in George Saunders' *Fox 8*

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## Abstract

With the equal treatment of binary oppositions related to environmental concerns, the hypocrisy of human beings continues to dominate on earth having no counterpart to compete except the ones within the same race. Intruding into the unexplored habitats has helped the race to expand their jurisdictions, often with the exercise of power and unrivalled exhibition of uniqueness. This qualitative research paper aims to interpret the environmental concerns discussed in George Saunders' *Fox 8* in the light of the characteristics of coercive liminality exercised by the invasive domination of humans over the inhabitants. The intrusion of human beings transforms natural habitats to man-made environments, thus making it exclusively accessible only for their purposes. Human invasions lead to domination and it entails exploitation that results in the displacement of inhabitants and resources from their natural habitats. Introduction of the concepts such as coercive liminality from the textual interpretation and the argument of resultant counterliminality develop the core of the paper. The research contributes to the perspective of liminality on studies related to environmental transitions and alterations due to human intervention.

**Keywords:** American Literature, domination, environment, exploitation, liminality.

## Introduction

The jeopardy of the gradual decline of environmental resources has evoked human beings to stay cautioned through various awareness and education programmes conducted by government and non-government agencies concerned with ecological and environmental issues. Recurrent natural disasters, biodiversity threats, climatic changes, acid rains, ocean acidification, extinction of wildlife, depletion of resources, global warming and many more immediate and long term effects of unnecessary human intervention and intrusion have been the primary apprehension behind global meets, summits and conventions. The Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 gave prominence to biodiversity conservation, sustainable use and equitable sharing of genetic resources. The United Nations Forum on Forests in October 2000 was a milestone to conduct various discussions and implement proposals for sustainable forest management. Arousing public sentiment, close-at-home arguments, wise legislation and ensuring awareness in the coming generation are the foremost proposed ways to protect the environment and its resources (Allen,

1911, p. 97). George Saunders tries to summon empathy, kindness and compassion in his readers by depicting the effects of human settlement through domination in the forest habitats by displacing the inhabitants and destroying the natural existence of the area. The three qualities advocated by Saunders are core to his various writings, both fiction and non-fiction (Hadaway, 2019, p. 10; Hayes-Brady, 2020, p. 89).

Saunders' *Fox 8* exhibits its influence in themes beyond environmental issues and concerns when extending its interpretation to refugee issues, slavery, and subaltern subjugation. Illustrated by Chelsea Cardinal, the short fiction independently published in 2018 intended to expose the state of US politics by the author.

It's a story about cultural difference and tribalism, about greed and the destruction of the American landscape (Preston, 2018).

But, this paper focuses on the connotations of the dialogues in the fiction to add knowledge of coercive liminality experienced by the vulnerable environment due to unwelcomed human ascendancy. It argues with reference to the short fiction about the presence of the characteristics that follow the inhabitants to the state of liminal status, thus advancing the habitat to be in its neutrality.

### **The Dominant Human: Existing Researches**

The scholarly researches on environmental studies substantially agree to the profound existence of paramount predomination of human beings over natural resources and especially in treating environment that crucially has considerable influence on the continuance of the human race on earth. Ehrlich and Ehrlich (2008) discuss human beings as dominators who alter their environments through the conquest of nature especially during the nineteenth and twentieth-century industrial revolution and population explosion. Deforestation for construction of cities, railroads and highways were highly conducted in the world without the view of sustainable development (p. 6). The consciousness's of a larger group that such exploitations are inevitable is questioned through the viewpoints shared based on historical evidence of threatening activities over nature.

Vitousek et. al. (1997) agrees about the unfortunate situation of human alterations of the earth by identifying that one-third and one-half of the land surfaces have been transformed by human action leading to thirty percent increase in carbon dioxide concentration since the beginning of the industrial revolution. They opine about the intensity and consequences of land transformations vary substantially (p. 494) and suggest that

...there is no clearer illustration of the extent of human dominance of Earth than the fact that maintaining the diversity of "wild" species and the functioning of "wild" ecosystems will require increasing human involvement (p. 499).

Chapin III et. al. (2000) argues that human alterations of the global environment have been a pivoting factor for the sixth major extinction in history causing subsequent changes in the global distribution of organisms. The research states that these activities of alteration lead to ecological and societal consequences in future. McNeely (1995) describes the word "progress" as gaining a greater share of the planet's productivity through technological innovations. He supports the view that

...very few of today's forests anywhere in the world can be considered "pristine," "virgin," or even "primary" due to human intervention and activities (p. 57).

Milfont et. al. (2013) contends social dominance orientation as an important variable in understanding person-environment relations. They identify that individuals high in social dominance orientation exploit the environment in unsustainable ways as it promotes human hierarchical dominance over nature. Human being's dominant view on nature and its implications are discussed throughout the research that admits it as a major influencer of environmental problems. Milfont et. al. (2017) advances their research to identify that social dominance orientation was stronger in societies with societal inequality, under-development and lack of environmental standards. Those categories tend to be away from environmental citizenship actions and behaviours to support movements against domination over the environment. Krause (2020) writes about how collective practices of modern life by exploiting environment have equally affected everyone despite the substantial inequalities among human beings. The essay reconstructs the concept of domination between human beings and the environment by identifying changes that could support more emancipatory forms exhibited by a politics of non-domination. From the perspective of earth, it has lost control over its resources due to human domination of the planetary system.

Kerényi and McIntosh (2020) discuss the major changes through construction by humans leading to environmental consequences. Human settlements, urbanisation and resource depletion are highlighted in the research. Arias Maldonado (2019) argues for the necessity of Anthropocene's sudden and violent invasion to hinder the critique and removal of human domination over the environment. The article suggests for enlightened domination that can meaningfully reduce the harm done to nature instead of the complete absence of domination, though it remains the ideal goal for the time being. The discussion is extended to the view that

...instead of human dominion over nature, a reflective control of socio-natural interactions should be encouraged (p. 12).

### **George Saunders' *Fox 8* and Environmental Concerns**

*Fox 8* draws the cruellest attitude of humans for their aesthetic pleasure and materialistic greed with the application of Saunders' naturalistic "humour, pathos, and allegory with semi-literate animals" (Beck, 2013) exhibiting anthropomorphic characteristics (Saunders, 2018, p.3). Being the innate inhabitants of the forest habitat, the foxes projected in Saunders' fiction represent the whole group of fauna, flora and other natural resources. The unanticipated transition of the fox community symbolises the vulnerability of the existing habitat in which they live. The difference between the language of foxes and humans are extensively used to depict the difference in meaning signified by the same word, often leading to hints about human invasion and domination. When the foxes read the signboard "Coming soon, FoxViewCommons" (Saunders, 2018, p. 10), they doubt about its exact intentions. They ask,

Those werd caused many suden questions in all our branes. Such as: What is a FoxViewCommons? Wud it chase us? Wud it eat us? (p. 10).

FoxViewCommons, a mall project by humans has dual meanings and extremely different perspectives for the dominator and the vulnerable victims. For humans, it meant development and for foxes, it denoted destruction (Kaiser, 2018, p. 297). It could be later related to "starvation, death, and relocation" (p. 298) for the group that was affected by the encroachment conducted by

the dominant and powerful humans. The extension of the liminal phase of the environment due to invasive authoritarianism exercised by humans is portrayed through the human activities that transformed the very existence of naturalist identity of the forest habitat. Saunders describes the gradual exhibition of power and the helplessness leading to uncertainty, anxiety and fear in the inhabitants informing,

...soon here came trucks, smoking wile tooting! They dug up our Primary Forest! They tore out our Leaning Tree! They rekked our shady drinking spot, and made total lee flat the highest plase of which we know, from where we can see all of curashun if it is not raning! (Saunders, 2018, p. 10-11).

Human intrusion into the forest hindered the habitat as well the freedom that had been experienced by the victimised group of inhabitants. Within no time, the existing natural identity of the forest turned into a flat surface without trees, thus ready for the constructions to convert it into a man-made habitat. It was not about the trees alone, but several resources were also destroyed for the sole purpose of establishing it as a jurisdiction exclusive to human beings. Saunders shows how brutal are humans in destroying anything other than themselves for their selfish greed and development. "Selfishness and greed are often conveniently portrayed as innate human characteristics" (Jones, 2014). Fox 8 asks the reader if they would like to experience the feeling of the affected, they have to barely eat for weeks, get skinner every day and watch their friends die being skinny (Saunders, 2018, p. 12). The habitat of the animals was destroyed for building the proposed mall that would give happiness and enjoyment to the human community.

### **Coercive Liminality and Environmental Transition**

In *Fox 8*, the group of foxes, animals and their surrounding habitat collectively can be considered as the indirect victims of the coercive liminality by the humans who built their mall by displacing the inhabitants and exploiting the environment.

In the environmental domain, conservatism upholds the ideology of domination and subjugation of the environment, of indifference to the harm caused in pursuit of economic growth, and of support for established harmful practices (Feygina, 2013, p. 373).

Liminality is described as a condition of being in-between two phases of transition in which the "liminal entity" (Turner, 1969, p. 95) or "liminal personae" (Turner, 1970, p. 47) i.e. the people/objects involved in the process, are "neither one thing nor another; or maybe both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere, and are at the very least 'betwixt and between'" (Turner, 1970, p. 48). From the perspective of the vulnerable group and their habitat controlled by the dominance of humans, as same as the signboard intended difference in perception, the unanticipated human exploration and exploitation of environment produced "ambiguity and neutrality" (Turner, 1970, p. 49) in their transited identity. Further consequences of the settlement of humans were understood when Fox 8 became an unwelcomed guest who unfortunately had to witness Fox 7 beaten to death by humans (Saunders, 2018, p. 32). Saunders' representation of such an inhumane situation points to the gradual destruction, exploitation, control, power and domination conducted by humans causing a coercive liminal identity to the environment and its inhabitants. It is achieved by producing "anomie, alienation, angst" (Turner, 1974, p. 78) ordeals, humiliations, paradox (p. 295) and "anonymity" in the vulnerable group which is a part of the affected environment. The unusual situations (Saunders, 2018, p. 10-12) and a new way of life (p. 24-32) around the foxes and other organisms separate them from their innate

identity of being a part of the natural habitat. It leads to expressing the condition of no status, property, and insignia (p. 95) leading to passivity (p. 96) in the same as a result of the exertion of such suffocative and restrained subjugation.

Fox 8 was mentally lost (Saunders, 2018, p. 33), faced the worst of all times, and felt bad about its condition (p. 36) after its experiences with humans in the transformed habitat which was once its home. The perspectives of the affected and victimised are highlighted in the fiction by developing the plot through their narrative point of views. Saunders' ideological perspective in his fictions stand unified with the powerless and repressed categories in the society and represents their anxieties and fears of being marginalised and alienated. As to how Henry David Thoreau considered himself as being simultaneously in-between Society and Nature - in a liminal state of border life (Thoreau, 2011), the inhabitants of the existing habitat are neither a part of the dominant society nor the vulnerably affected environment. The transition of the habitat depicted in the fiction alters from its natural essence to a man-made environment, though not completely transformed to such a status. Liminality prevailed in the attributes of the foxes' habitat, throughout its transition, as a resultant of the coercive acts of humans. It briefly symbolises the gradual process of the application of coercive liminality in dominating the natural existence of environmental resources.

## Conclusion

"Between 2015 and 2020, the rate of deforestation was estimated at 10 million hectares per year" (FAO and UNEP, 2020, p. xvi). The explosion of population in the world since the second half of the twentieth century increased demand for resources that lead to the inevitability of explorations and exploitations. Ehrlich and Holdren (2019) centres on the notion that population growth causes a disproportionately negative impact on the environment (p. 1212). Saunders warns in the fiction about the long term consequences and impacts of exerting coerciveness on the environment and its resources. Fox 8's final words "If you want your Storys to end happy, try being niser" (Saunders, 2018, p. 49) aims at informing the world of dominators to rethink about their cruellest deeds of invasions, displacements and exploitations on the vulnerable organisms, environment and natural resources. Batool and Hussain (2016) describes the environmental degradation factors and its effect on wildlife (p. 509-510) that happens rapidly due to human contribution that would lead to adverse effects on the human population as well on all other animals on earth (p. 510). It leads to 'counter-liminality' that is the resultant of the coercive liminality exercised on the environment by the dominative and destructive nature of humans. Thus, these terms are related to each other as the effect of coercive liminality on the victims turn to produce counter liminality on the exploiters.

In light of the above insights with reference to George Saunders' short fiction, the research can be concluded with the understanding that human invasion, inhabitant's displacement and resource exploitation with the exclusive exercise of domination and power leads to the state of coercive liminality and thus it results in counter liminality, affecting the initiators themselves with the uncertain and long-lasting effects of environmental degradation.

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