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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## NATURE REBELS AGAINST HUMANS: A CRITICAL STUDY OF JONATHAN HOLMES' *KATRINA*.

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### Manuscript Info

### Abstract

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### Introduction:-

Humans have been selfish in their relation with nature and aggressive towards the nature properties. To get benefits to themselves alone and to fulfill their many interests, Humans exploit the surrounding natural blessings and deprive the Earth of its healthy existence and heavenly divine look. They have been the cause of different gigantic problems to the planet's ecosystems which, in return, have caused uncontrollable physical and psychological catastrophes. They for instance pollute air, water and soil, clear away forests, acidify rains, expand deserts, kill animals and plants, and change the climate. Humans become victims of what they have done towards environment. This study is an attempt to show the psychological effects resulting from the human-inflicted environmental traumas as reflected in Jonathan Holms' (1975- ) play *Katrina* (2010). *Katrina* presents a detailed image of the sufferings of different sections of people, from different destructive ecological occurrences, to show how man pays the high costs of his anti-natural thoughtless transgression.

Humans have committed intentional violence against the surrounding natural environment through many attitudes that steal the health of nature and poison the life of humans. As a result to that, the Earth's ecosystems that undergo men-systemized distortion come to say 'enough' and stop keeping balanced and under control. The symptoms of this environmental fatigue take the form of natural disasters. They conceived as the language of the aching planet to grab the attention of those who insist on turning off their eyes and ears to keep themselves away from thinking about the fatal destiny they push the Earth towards.

Man has long forgotten that the Earth was given to him for usufruct alone, not for consumption, still less for profligate waste. Nature has provided against the absolute destruction of any of her elementary matter, the raw material of her work; the thunderbolt and the tornado, the most conclusive throes of even the volcano and the earthquake ---.(Merchant 328)

Natural disasters are understood as nature-related occurrences that are "some of the traumatic events" (Baumeister 11). They result from the earth's diminished sustainability and human's thoughtless insistence on destroying the remnants of its ecosystems. On the other hand, they have detrimental impacts on humanity that despite not being the attacker in this fight cannot be held guiltless. This is because it is the human misdoings and abusive attitudes that have in the first place brought about the whole globe to such a stage of utter where all ways of salvation are blocked.

When natural disasters hit a particular community, its people get confronted with slew problems that move beyond their ability to cope with. They cause severe damages to build infrastructure that need large sums of money to be

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repaired. Also, “they may---result in the release of hazardous materials such as chemicals which are usually stored in a safe environment” (Middlemann 3). These materials can contaminate the environment the disaster ends up in, and people and animals are killed as a result. They are unwillingly exposed to extremely violent events that lead to the death of oneself or witnessing the death of a loved one. If they are not dead, they are likely to get physically injured and probably psychologically wounded as a direct outcome of the distortion of their pre-disaster. They become friends with sensations as dejection, depression, anxiety, nostalgia, loneliness, homelessness, hopelessness, and worthlessness. That is to say those natural disaster victims are fated to experience every sort of torture and excoriation physically and mentally with very slight hope of getting completely recovered:

The threat, fear and terror are experienced at the familial and community levels--The calamity makes an impact on the family and community structure dynamics, networks and cohesion. The social fabric is torn asunder; people are uprooted from their familiar habitat. Indispensable family members usually leaders or breadwinners are killed, made to disappear or separated. The way the family and community function changes. Basic trust and hope are lost; the glue that held the relationships and networks together is destroyed. Often there is family and social dysfunction and problems arise in coping with the situation--. (Somasundaram 1)

Hurricane Katrina is the deadliest and most catastrophic natural disaster that hit United States of America. It hit New Orleans, Louisiana, and devastated the Gulf Coast of the United States on August 29, 2005. It caused the decease of near 2000 people, displaced thousands, and made the struck areas completely unlivable:

This was one of the worst storms in U.S. history---. Hurricane Katrina did so much damage that hundreds of thousands of people could not go home for months. The hurricane destroyed everything in its path. It wiped out neighborhoods, businesses, schools, and hospitals---. The storm ripped apart buildings. It tore down power lines. It snapped trees like matchsticks. (Woods and Michael 4)

Hurricane Katrina is “a destabilizing event---that---is something more than a traditional disaster” (Brusma 1-2). It is an experience that culture and literature cannot pay insufficient attention to. They take an urgent responsibility to let those who have not share in the catastrophe to know about it through media, literature and films. Kirby states in his essay “An American Tragedy: Reading the Rhetoric of Disaster in Hurricane Katrina” that “one of the places where we most see the influence of Katrina is in literature, film, and popular culture that has emerged after the storm” (200). Writers and artists cooperateto give voice to the victims of hurricane Katrina. Some use their works to investigate all the consequent physical, emotional, and social torments; and others write to find a means of venting pains and recovering injuries:

A wealth of post-Katrina literature---seeks to give voice to the victims of the storm, chronicle the government mishandling, and recover and preserve the very unique nature of New Orleans culture. Whether in the form of nonfiction, fiction, or poetry, writers seek to narrate the Katrina experience and---participate in Blancot’s exercise of ‘writing the disaster’. (Kirby 200)

In 2010, the British dramatist Jonathon Holmes writes *Katrina* in which he uses survivors’ testimonies to bring to light the episodes of suffering and anguish directly after the storm. It is a play that revealed the environmental disaster and related the ecological trauma to the human one. It presents a detailed image of the countless misfortunes during a hurricane experience in an advanced country like the U. S. The play, more importantly, gives its addressees a condensed doze of the negative emotions that victims come to experience as a result. It shows how nature’s attack is uncontrollable and frameless, and how it takes a toll upon everybody and no one can flee its impacts especially the vulnerable: the poor, the black, the elder, the young and the females: “Both human made and natural catastrophes can leave the poorest, the youngest, the oldest, and the weakest in highly vulnerable positions” (Levers 13).

Katrina is totally constructed around the testimonies of six New Orleans survivors. These testimonies are mixed with statements of some American officials like Governor as well as some notes and inquiries by some journalists. The authenticity of the play’s material is reinforced by the dramatist through a variety of means: a direct introductory note which reads: “Some of Beatrice’s testimony has been adjusted. Everything spoken by any other character is entirely verbatim and garnered from interviews and accounts written by those concerned” (*Katrina* 5). The stage direction of the play is: “The testimony in this section is reproduced wherever possible from authentic recording” (13), and the playback of the records of the authentic words and speeches by real survivors.

The central thread of the plotline of *Katrina* is vigil who is an old New Orleans cancer patient and his woman, Beatrice. With the landfall of hurricane Katrina, the rising water has trapped all residents and prevented Beatrice from refilling the oxygen cylinders without which Virgil cannot breathe. As a result of that she passes away. Beatrice insists not to leave Virgil's dead body to the fatal hurricane and instead she carries it safely on a wooden door to City Hall so that she can give him "a decent set-off" (Billington: "*Katrina*" *theguardian.com*). She goes back to the City Hall in order to bury Virgil. She takes the audience to the place where they can share the awful fate all New Orleans people have come to meet as the storm has arrived and nature said its word. To tell the public how the natural systems' disruption has brought about an aching disruption of the human life's system that results directly in death and forever loss, Beatrice admits in her testimony that the City Hall is full of corpses. She admits that she is not the only family member who stands helpless to catch the last look at her dead love:

We got to the City. And the place was one long stretch of bodies, like after a war. Under tarps, under blankets; grieving families all around, frozen like they werestatus in a cemetery or some sort of parade, paused like on a video. So we joined them, sat ourselves down, and we waited. And this time when they eventually came to take Virgil away, I did not look back. (*Katrina* 39)

As her testimony tells, though Virgil was sick, his death shocks Beatrice and appears unimaginable to her. In most of Beatrice's talk to the audience about her tour through New Orleans to City Hall, she uses the second person pronoun as if Virgil were still alive. She unconsciously denies that Virgil is no longer alive and acts as if he were still there sharing the awful journey of finding a shelter from hurricane:

I couldn't do it all at once. I had to rest, to sleep---. And we found a platform high up to stretch out and sleep on--. And we went up higher and higher till we found our safety. And we took our rest. (36)

In fact, with the coming of hurricane Katrina, *Katrina*'s four survivors' system of dissociation and constriction, which are the most common coping mechanisms trauma victims adapt, are damaged. Their efforts to disconnect themselves from all the ways of the memories and feelings of their previous traumatic times of their lives completely fail. Therefore, they are rendered victims of a double trauma, and they are plagued with memories of experiences that move out of Katrina's time spam.

Miranda is "frozen in her mourning testifying to events with compulsive sorrow" (Romanska 229). In her testimony, Miranda is haunted with memories of her unfortunate childhood. She says that as a child she lived in utter loneliness resulting from the irresponsibility of her parents who should have been the kindest caregivers ever. Their home was free of the familial bonds, and the feelings of stability, security, care, belonging and inclusion had no slight existence.

I was born out of wedlock. My dad was addicted to alcohol and my mom was addicted to him. I see the days with no light and water in the house. I see the days I couldn't find my mom or dad. (*Katrina* 16)

Miranda starts her flashbacks to the horrors of the storm so that recipients can share the burden of New Orleans victims whose "collectivity suddenly shifts in an unforeseen and unwelcome manner" (Alexander 2); and are consequently exhausted, lost, separated from their families, abandoned by their community. She and her daughter were forced to leave their house and take shelter near school where the water had not arrived yet. She volunteered to help her neighbors escape death as their houses came totally underwater: "We left the house and we went up on the roof of a school. I took a crowbar and I burst the door on the roof of the school to help people on the roof. Later on we found a flat boat, and we went around the neighborhood getting people out of their houses and bringing them to the school" (*Katrina* 17). She also remembers the wild alligators brought by the flooding water of the Mississippi River and the dead bodies of their New Orleans counterparts floating in the water: "We heard alligators had come in...and they were eating people...We had to walk over bodies of dead people" (*Katrina* 23).

Daniel, a prisoner, is another victim of hurricane Katrina who gives a space to the suffering of those whom the American society overlooks their pains and tearing wounds during such conditions as the hurricane. He describes to his addresses how it does mean to be attacked by mountains of water while being incarcerated in small cells where there was no place to go to escape death. The guards offered no one of those inmates any help to get out or to go anywhere water cannot reach. They went through hour-long nightmare in which they were struggling against the

rising water, locked cells, thick darkness, surrounding horror, and indifferent officials who mercilessly insisted to keep them stuck in prison while thousands fled the flooded city.

As an eye-witness of such fear, Daniel says that they went on shouting and kicking the doors of their cells in an attempt to get help. They fired clothes and wrote signs to tell those who were outside that there were people inside the jail who were still not allowed to evacuate. Though most of them were not put in jail for serious crimes, their cries were not responded to and no aid was offered (Welch *vice.com*). After a time of no national reactions and fragile efforts of self-help, some inmates died and their peers saw their bodies floating in the surrounding water that was quickly rising toward the ceiling.

And no one came to help. The water had gone from chest high to high. Guys were on the top bunk with their head stuck out the ceiling to get air. They couldn't hold their breath that long. We weren't trying to break out to get out of jail, we breakin' out to save lives. (*Katrina* 20-21)

These words define one of the most degrading situations that can ever be witnessed brought about by the natural ecosystems' anti-humanity attack. They reveal Daniel's feelings of worthless and even nothingness that usually accompany trauma patients because "other human beings they once respected and whose good will they once counted on treat them with such icy contempt" (Erikson 193) and defy any kind of resistance. In fact, those prisoners, left in those horrible conditions, many of them "were held for minor violations, and some had not been charged" (Michaels, *wsws.org*), are considered one of the scandals the U.S justice system that Katrina directs wide attention to.

Actually, the storm of Katrina reminds Daniel of the pre-storm 15 years ago in prison. He states that before the attack of hurricane Katrina in 2005, Daniel spent 15 years in prison for the accusation of killing someone whom he did not. He paid a long time of his life in place of real convict behind bars while doing nothing threatening to the national safety and human security before he was proved innocent. However, his innocence never guaranteed him as agony-free life in community like the United States. He says that he was disdained and treated as a murderer regardless of the newly unveiled realities that was not guilty. He was not offered proper job opportunities; and when he was, he was quickly fired because of being one day a convict: "Since then I've been job to job. It's real tough, because no one wants to hear that you were innocent. All they know is that you were on death row" (*Katrina* 1, 17). Daniel was arrested again with no particular charge and guiltlessly put in jail on the eve of the disaster that converted the entire city into a large jail and all New Orleans into convicts. He was forced to re-encounter the bitter days of prison that were expected to be extremely soar with the dominating natural deterioration while having no one to stand beside and support in his double faced trauma as a prisoner and natural disaster survivor:

Night before Katrina, the police pulled me in. No reason, just knew my name. So I'm in central lockup, and I'm like, this is a nightmare. I'm seeing death row again, everything is flashing back. I don't want to see this no more. I used the phone, but there wasn't anyone to call. I called my family---. They had to leave, so I have to stay here and wait the storm out. (*Katrina* 17)

Cal is another victim of nature's revolution against humans. He is a victim of trauma against which he is involved in a severe fight with the landfall of Katrina. The hurricane tragedies stimulate his memories of the extremely sorrowful life he certainly works hard to defy and keep repressed in his unconscious in order to be capable of going on. In his testimony, he reveals that he lost the source of unconditional love which is generally destabilizing experience and is a great cause of lifelong disillusionment, unease, and trouble. Cal admits that the loss of his mother drove him to the despair. He said, "I went crazy, I went crazy, man. That's how I've been living for a long time. Sometimes, man, I be kind a like welcoming death" (*Katrina* 18).

Cal's flow of trauma memories takes a national direction. He is burdened with the tragic times New Orleans' people went through during the staggering attendance of Katrina. To arrive a place which was not much flooded, he had to cross two miles of water in complete darkness and with no helping means. He was forced to stroke such a long distance during which he met many survivors scattered in the underwater streets without any kind of anti-disaster for those in power. Everything was damaged and flight around even the corpses of many citizens who dropped dead of the dysfunctional surroundings, turning the survivors' days of waiting extremely terrifying and frustrating:

We're right there in the ninth ward during the storm, so we can see everything. We look out and we're like All right, well, shit, man, all this water rolling like this, there ain't chillin', just look' at this Hurricane, Katrina tearin' it up. (*Katrina* 20)

Larry and Lorry's memories illustrate the struggle of the underwater city's tourists against the hurricane's experiences. Larry says, "We were repeatedly told that all sorts of resources including the National Guard and scores of buses were pouring into the city. The buses and the other resources must have been invisible because none of us had seen them" (*Katrina* 24). Larry and Lorry give reports on the officers' inhumane reactions against the crowds who tried to get out of the city till the end of the storm: "they began firing their weapons over our heads--. This sent the crowd fleeing in various directions" (27). Larry and Lorry are astonished that all these hundreds were so invisible and their shouts were completely unheard. Though they had a place to take shelter in --the hotel--, the living conditions got poorer as time moved on and helps never arrived. The situation got worst when they were turned out of the hotel and left to search for a place to protect themselves from the hurricane's impacts. As Lorry describes, all of them were consequently thrown into increasing "desperation and despair" (24), especially when seeing dead bodies scattered in the rising water, survivors wading miles in quest of rescue, and the weak, "babies in strollers--- people using crutches, elderly clapping walkers and others in wheel chairs" (24), thwarted in streets with nothing to do to defy death.

Katrina's survivors testimonies are "never complete, and highly charged with black spots of the inexpressible experience" (Laub and Andreas 11). They sometimes stop talking about their past experiences and stand silent. This silence is an intentional one as "the victim attempts to suppress what is recalled so as not to relive victimization countless time, or finds it repressed by some part of himself which functions as a stranger, hiding from the self's experience" (Culbertson 69). Holms gives his audience the impression that survivors go through episodes of isolation and detachment in reaction to trauma by making everyone of them totally separated from his/her counterparts. There are no dialogues, actions, and interactions. Every one of them only addresses the audience as if no one else exists. They feel detached and isolated from others and unable to develop relationships with those whom they have around. Actually, this isolation is not a choice. Victims are battered and abused by a traumatic event and are forced to stay away from people and found refuge in loneliness. This is due to the fact that they feel that others cannot bear. This attitude of detachment is said to stop being influential after some time:

To a degree, isolation and avoidance are workable strategies, and many traumatized persons have followed these strategies for years. Ultimately, however, when distress mounts---isolation is no longer an effective strategy. Paradoxically, while you're seeking safety in isolation, you also may feel more vulnerable, having given up the potential safety of secure attachment. Moreover, isolation is depressing. (Allen 118)

As a work of verbatim theatre, *Katrina* is "freed---from some of the burdens of conventional play writing" (Paget 318). This is because Jonathan believes that the role of verbatim playwright is to confuse the audience, get them out of their classically thought of how theatre work should be, and give them "the impression that they are creating the whole, completing the work through their investment participation and interpretation" (Jeffers 5-6). So, they are forced to work on their own to craft the story in its full form and put the suitable end to make up for the unfinished nature of piece. The events of *Katrina* do not have a beginning, middle or an end. The play is not divided into acts and scenes but rather into four stories. Every story is tourist information of bureau; the second one is a replica of the bar where audience hears warnings of an impending hurricane. The third story is set in a completely smashed version of the bar which hosts the central section of Katrina's survivors' testimonies that stand "as the eye of the emotional storm" (Cavendish *telegram.com*) that accompanies the natural one. The fourth story is devoted to Virgil's funeral.

The four stories are designed in the way that provides the spectators with a storm struck place mood. In story one, the stage directions read: "Auditors are given disposable rain coverings...As they enter the building they ascend a staircase, the sides of which are recognizable as corroded and groaning levee walls" (*Katrina* 9). To give them the feeling of being actually in New Orleans, the staircase leading upwards to the third floor where survivors wait "is graffitied: 'Abandon hope all ye', FEMA evacuation strategy: run, motherfucker, run!" (*Katrina* 13). The story itself is a bar which is totally smashed by the water and wind. The audience is not allowed to have a seat and stand all along the time the victims tell their stories of trauma. Holmes reveals that attitude saying: "The more body is engaged on its own terms with the work, the more those attending are involved, implicated, and affected by the experience" ("Theatre and experience" 2).

Actors in *Katrina* directly address the testimonies of the real people they perform their roles to the audience and intentionally snatch them away from the frame of watching to the one participating (Koenig *independent.co*). This leads to establish a natural relationship between the actors and audience. It frees the audience from any senses of empathy and instead involves them in thinking processes regarding what gets disclosed before their eyes. Holmes states that collapsing the fourth wall set up between the actors and audience is a form of a reimagining of the role of the audience:

It ceases to be a band of consumers, paying for the familiar, and becomes instead a collective of witness; vital to the event's integrity...auditors and spectators are free to choose how closely they engage with the material and how involved they become in the unfolding events. This is clearest when testimony is at the heart of the experience, as in *Katrina*, the audience is witness to a form of public hearing of untold stories. (2)

Holmes uses technological devices to create the suitable context within which the survivors' stories can be retold. The first and second rooms the audience enters are equipped with TV set constantly broadcasting a 'Come to New Orleans' video that presents the wonderful blessings of New Orleans as a touristic city as well as "meteorological maps and imagery of the hurricane" (*Katrina* 11). They also have public address systems (screens, speakers, amplifiers) via which the audience can read and hear the repeatedly announced hurricane related new and authentic archive statements by officials and journalists (9).

Hurricane Katrina is one of the greatest natural disasters that hit United States. It is the cause of countless deaths and losses among New Orleans' citizens. It has disrupted every day, normal routines of African-American collectives as well as the set of needs generally important for all human being. It has forcefully changed families' structure and separated people from the ones they love and feel comfortable to be close to. New Orleans people are caused to leave their homes and feel excessive terror, insecurity, and instability as a consequence of the long suffering nature's response. They are also caused to be not only degraded by the attack of the natural world, but also by the unjust human policies. As they make up a part of the black and poor ethnicities in the U.S., they are kept invisible and their tragedies are kept overlooked. They are not hot offered aids and rescue means, left on their own in the face of hurricane led catastrophe havoc, and their efforts to keep themselves out of the reach of death are even inhumanity hindered by those on the top. Hence, hurricane Katrina can be considered as a human disaster as well as natural one. This is due to the fact that its fatalities never result from natural deterioration alone but also more severely from the human deterioration and pure inhumanity piercing the globe's crown creature: Man.

Through approaching the serious problem of environmental deterioration which is now the topconcern of the whole world, one feels that key solution that can curb the uncontrollable eco-degradation is drastic change in the humanity's code of the thoughts and morals in relation to the beings to stop thinking that they are able to exist alone without the support of what they are surrounded by. They must know that they have no right to be completely egocentric or to perceive themselves as more important than the other living beings. Humans must instead take the initiative and be the first to take action to re-imagine their relationship with the nonhuman world. They are the ones who should stop their abusive communication and design mutually beneficial living arrangements so that both teams can live peacefully without any misdeeds and aggressive responses, and so a perfect reversal trauma can possibly take place. Humans are the actual starting point of the cycle that must be the source of healing and the point that ends that long series of those uneasy sufferings.

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