



The Precarious Conditions: Anthropocene and Transformed Human Nonhuman Relations



URL: [http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2017\(IH\).04](http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2017(IH).04)

DOI: 10.31703/gsr.2017(IH).04

Muhammad Ali^{*} Suneel Kumar[†] Pasand Ali Khoso[‡]

Abstract

This paper discusses the transformed human (fishermen) and nonhuman (dogs) relations; dogs being the most feared animal in past to dogs as companion species today at Manchar Lake. The Lake is one of the oldest and largest freshwater lakes of South Asia, located in Sindh Pakistan, and is degrading for last more than two decades due to a development project called Right Bank Outfall Drain (RBOD), which drains industrial, agricultural, and domestic affluent in the lake. In past, when lake was flourishing, fishermen had very few occasions to come on land hence very few chances of interaction with dogs; they would run back to boathouses if ever come in contact with dogs. Now, living on banks, they need dogs as their companion, to protect domesticated animals from other dogs, jackals and tomcats who roam around and runaway in eastern mountains after killing a goat, hen or domesticated waterfowls. This transformed relations shed light on how human life is entangled with other species that they need help of nonhuman Other for survival. This paper is result of ethnographic fieldwork conducted during June 2015 to March 2017 with fishermen community of Manchar Lake

Key Words: Anthropocene, Human Nonhuman Relations, Dogs, Manchar Lake, Sindh, Pakistan

Introduction – The Precarious Anthropocene

Anthropocene, the term coined by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer to describe a new epoch in Earth's history that human activity “*gradually grew into a significant geological, morphological force*” (Eugene & Crutzen, 2000, p. 17), transforming earths conditions and at stake is life, every form of life that could end in this mess. But recent works show how life, not necessarily human form of life, can emerge in blasted landscapes (Tsing A. L., 2015; Kirksey, 2015 and 2014; and Kirksey, Nicholas, & Brodine, 2013).

Anna Tsing in her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the possibilities of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (2015) has wonderfully presented how “*Matsutake's willingness to emerge in blasted landscape allows us to explore the ruin that has become our collective home*” (03) and force us to think “*what kind of human disturbances can we live with?*” (Tsing A. L., 2015, p. 03). Living in human disturbances is precarious business. What will happen next is unknown: a disaster, an earthquake, a tsunami, a Katrina, floods, melting of polar ice and rise in sea levels or losses of jobs due to economic crises, unemployment or emerging epidemics like Zika virus. But within this precarity there is hope, when certain life forms deny to surrender; they fight, survive, transform and give meaning to life. Precarity produces hope. This paper tells one such story of hope in precarious conditions when fishermen and dogs denied to surrender and transformed their relationship at Manchar lake, one of the oldest and largest freshwater lake of the South Asia, located in Sindh, Pakistan and is degrading for more than last two decades.

Thinking of degraded conditions, many times, force to think of how people have been affected; what type of migration taking place, what biodiversity we are losing or gone extinct, what cultural knowledge has vanished, and much more. With all these happenings, there are other phenomenon which are emerging, there are other realities which needs attention. Those other realities are not only anthropomorphic that how humans have been responding to degradation; they are migrating, changing their occupation, creating new relations with new environment and creating new cultural knowledge. Thinking this way would limit our thinking of Anthropocene. The new phenomena are multispecies in nature and emergent that is transformed human nonhuman relations in precarious conditions.

^{*} Department of Sociology, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: alighous@gmail.com

[†] Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan.

[‡] Department of Sociology, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan.

Precarity, argues Kathleen Stewart (2015), is an “emergent phenomena”. But if precarity is emergent then it can be anything. Precarity itself is ‘precarious’. It is an ‘unknown future’ to come. And writing in Anthropocene has to grapple that ‘unknown future’ which is emergent and happening right there, transforming and producing new multispecies ecologies. To grapple the emergent life forms in Anthropocene, one has to take “precariety as an earth wide condition” which allow us to notice “open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life...” (Tsing A. L., 2015, p. 04). These multispecies assemblages which shift historically and transform beings encountered force to think how to live in indeterminate conditions like Anthropocene. When beings, human and nonhuman, encounter they contaminate and transform each other and this is what precarity does. It always “makes us remember that changing with circumstances is the stuff of survival” (Tsing A. L., 2015, p. 27).

Life in Anthropocene is indeterminate and “thinking through precarity makes it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible” (Tsing A. L., 2015, p. 20). The indeterminacy in which both human (fishermen) and nonhuman (dogs) are involved to produce “hope in the blasted landscape” (Kirksey, Nicholas, & Brodine, 2013). Multispecies world is always an assemblage of human and nonhuman which transform in precarious conditions like Anthropocene. Following is story of such transformed assemblages of human and nonhuman beings whose “ways of being are emergent effects of encounters” (Tsing A. L., 2015, p. 23).

The Ontology of Degradation

“All good anthropology has always been ontological in that it opens us to other kinds of realities” (Kohn, 2014). The ontological turn in anthropology has opened new realities, realities which are beyond human bringing other than human species to forefront of anthropology discipline, which has long been ignored or marginalized, focusing on *Anthropos* only. It is to demystify anthropocentrism with the plea that humans are not only living species that make this Planet Earth, rather there are species other than the humans which are not only here but are at work in making and unmaking of the Earth. If so, then anthropology cannot limit itself to study of anthropos only.

This bringing in the marginalized nonhuman species within the main realms of ethnography is a call to do ethnography in the age of Anthropocene; hence, “*writing in the Anthropocene*” (Rose, 2009, p. 87) is about “*attending to the remaking of Anthropos as well as its companion and stranger species on the Plane Earth*” (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010, p. 549).

Ontological anthropology is also an ‘ethnographic critique’ on western dualism that has long monopolized the world reality as singularly located within dualistic model of Mind/Body, Nature/Culture, Objects/Subjects, Humans/Nonhuman and whatnot. (see Descola, 2013, Kirksey E. , 2014, Kohn, 2013, Latour, 2004 & 1993, Viveiros de Castro, 2014 & 1998, Blaser, 2013 & 2010, Haraway, 2008). But there is always “the otherwise” (Povinelli, 2012) of reality; there are realities rather than reality. Thinking of Anthropocene in human terms actually is falling in the western dualism of culture and nature or human and nonhuman, where the formers are always superior that only culture what is meaningful and only humans can understand and respond to Anthropocene. But today “Anthropocene can no longer be understood only in human terms. This ontological fact demands another kind of ethical practice” (Kohn, 2014) or in the words of Mario Blaser, “You need ontology as a concept to be anti-dualist. There exist other forms of knowledge. The key issue is how do we know what the world is made of? We need a new metaphysics” (Blaser cited in Rival, 2012, p. 129).

Such “ontographic” (Holbraad, 2012) experimentation is about the “permanent decolonization of thought” (Viveiros de Castro, 2014). The ontological turn in anthropology by questioning reality opens up other kinds of realities beyond us. This is only possible when we ‘decolonize’ ourself from “human form of thinking *by letting other realities of sylvan thinking, nonhuman mode of thought to think through us*” (Kohn, 2014; my emphasis). This is to going beyond the anthropocentric construction of the world.

Ontological anthropology by emphasizing on the questions of reality and nature of being argued that the cosmological world inhabited by different people around the world has quite different understanding on the origin of world as well as about the being which inhabit it against how western culture think. For example Viveiros de Castro (1998 & 2012) provocatively putting that how some North American Amazonian think that the origin of all beings in the world is ‘*humanity*’, even animals were humans first and later while shading or cannot holding the humanistic characteristics were transformed into animals; as against western cosmogony that all beings evolved out of ‘*animality*’. This could have huge ontological consequences as the cosmogony defines how we interact and define our relationship with the nature and various beings in nature.

[see also Descoal 2013]. Questioning human nature relationship ontologically, has brought anthropologist to ask, how people in different societies treat or engage with animals and other species, even nonliving things.

In the above context taking degradation as an ontological issue at Manchar Lake allows to think of what possibilities are emerging in the era of Anthropocene, especially in human nonhuman relationship. This transformation of human nonhuman relationship is to suggest that not only humans who are finding and learning new ways of living in the age of Anthropocene but also nonhuman species finding new partners and new ways of living. They are also learning how to make moves for survival in this age of extension. Following pages are the story of such transformed relationship of human and nonhuman, especially of fishermen and dogs. But before this story let me shed some light on Manchar Lake and its life.

Understanding Manchar Lake

The Manchar, a tributary of Indus, popularly known as 'daughter of Indus' is natural geological depression in the west of Indus River in Sindh Pakistan. Lying beneath the Khirthar Mountain Ranges in the east, oval in shape it takes water from three main sources that makes it as big as 230-40 sq. km during summer flooding season. The popularity of the lake was the indigenous 'boat houses' or the 'floating villages' where fishermen used to live before degradation. Today, only few boathouses persist. Other than boathouses, seasonal migratory birds from northern parts of the world, which fly here during winter season, create nostalgia at and about Manchar Lake. It was known as 'heaven for waterfowls', which were usually captured by indigenous hunting techniques. Today, catching waterfowls with indigenous hunting techniques is nostalgic memory for fishermen. As with degradation less number of waterfowls visit the lake and hardly stay for one or two days. The lake was also home to numerous fish species. In 1950 survey there were more than hundred fish species and fish catch was 3000 tons per annum, which reduced to 300 tons/annum in 1994 as the degradation started in 1992 and today fishermen hardly catch 100 tons/annum. (Memon & Birwani, 2002).

The major cause of lake degradation is Right Bank Outfall Drain (RBOD) which drains industrial, agricultural and domestic affluent in the lake. It is remodeling of Main Nara Valley Drain a historical source of freshwater in the lake. The project commenced in 1994 and has to be completed by 1998 as per PC - 1 but has been rescheduled to 2010 first and again in 2013, but it is still under process.

Mustafa Mirani, the Vice President of Fisher Folk NGO, also local habitant of Manchar Lake, in his talk at Radio Voice of Sindh, London narrated the story of lake's degradation as:

The destruction of lake is not natural that any earthquake, or flood has destroyed it. Rather, there are manmade development projects which has destroyed the lake. It all started in 1976, when WAPDA started a project called North Dadu Surface Drainage Project to drain agriculture and domestic effluents into the Manchar. This was done by converting Main Nara Valley (MNV) which was draining freshwater in the Manchar lake from Hamal Lake into Main Nara Valley Drain. It had little impact initially, because effluents were not massive and provision of freshwater from Indus as well as rains were enough to neutralize the effluents. The little impact of the drain gave a justification to state authorities to remodel MNVD in early 1990s to RBOD. This remodel project drained not only agricultural and domestic but also industrial waste into the lake. Since then, the lake is degrading and today it is not more than a waste lake.

The RBOD that fishermen call, *chaddan* drains the industrial, agricultural and domestic waste in the lake, poisoning the lake water. Although the project commenced in early 19902, but its effects started to appear as late as in 1996. Fishermen Moola Bux Mallah who witnessed the dead fish in the lake that never happened before said: 'Initially we didn't know what is happening why there is only dead fish. It was later to learn that this is *chaddan* which is pouring in this toxic water in the lake'. When government was constructing RBOD fishermen thought of it as new freshwater channel which will bring more freshwater and fish into the lake. 'We were very happy when work was going on but we didn't know this [RBOD] will destroy us', *Chaddan* is evil, an atom bomb, it has killed the lake' said Gulan Mallah.

The contamination of water also denied the right of safe drinking water to communities living in and around the lake. Many towns have searched for the new source of drinking water, while villagers fetch water from other areas. The people who are living very near to lake has to accept the fate of drinking the poisonous water. According to reports the lake contains 32000 mg of TDS (Total Dissolved Solids) per liter, while the acceptable level is 1000 mg of TDS. While the salinity of water is recorded up to 7000 PPM (parts per million) where the acceptable level is 500 PPM. (Memon & Birwani, 2002, p. 09 and The Daily News October 31st 2013).

Dogs: The Significant Other

Asan khe suki khan bhao thendo ho kethe kutto ya suki jo ko janwar khai ne wane (we used to fear dryland, what if dryland animals, especially dogs, bite or kill us?). Now dogs protect them and their domesticated animals from other animals like wild tomcat, street dogs and jackals, which roam around at the bank of the lake and runaway in the eastern mountains after killing goat, waterfowl, or hen. This transformation of once 'enemy' to friend, a 'companion specie' is what discussed in following pages.

'If I ever had come on land, I was very much watchful of dogs whenever I see dog I used to run back' said Baradi Mallah. He was telling the story when he was living in the boathouses. For them it was rare to come on land. Indeed, for days they would not see the land. The buyer usually would take fish from the boat and their meal usually consisted of fish and other eatable flora and fauna of the lake. There were few occasions when fishermen had to come on land. One during flooding season when water was high in the middle. During that time, they would sail their boats near the bank of the lake, where water was low. And other times when there is extreme dry season. Meer Bux Mallah, aged 58 years, remembering his time said that "once it was such a dry season that we dig up holes and filled it with water to sail our boats'. During such dry season they had much chance of meeting with dogs, their significant other due to dryland in the middle of the lake; dogs were to roam around their boats, especially in search of domesticated waterfowls to eat.

This encounter of fishermen with dogs weaved interesting stories that provide significant light on the relationship of fishermen with dogs. One of such encounter was shared by Baradi Mallah:

I do not remember when it happened, but once I was on my boat, we had sailed it near the bank of the lake, as it was flooding season. In the morning as a routine day activity, I put all my waterfowls in the water near the bank of the lake. That day, I did not know but there was some anxiety, a fear as if I will lose my birds. I was also very much conscious of dogs, many times looked around for dogs but there was nothing. As I started to do other things, I heard my waterfowls shouting. As I turned around I saw two dogs and they have attacked the waterfowls. I took stick, although I myself was afraid of dogs, but thought if I do not make them run they will eat all my birds. Scare myself but I took stick and ran towards dogs, dogs ran away but killed three of my birds and took two of them.

Although there were few fishermen who did not fear dogs as they said but most of the fishermen expressed similar views what Baradi Mallah said. For example, another fisherman named Allah Bux Mallah, who has recently migrated to land said that "I use to fear the dogs and other land animals. Whenever I would come on land, I would tie my shoes with my belly, so as I can run back as fast as possible.

This relationship of fear and awe have been transformed into what Donna Haraway called "companion species" (Haraway, 2003). With the degradation of lake, fishermen community left their boathouses and migrated to the banks of the lake. They have to adopt new ways of lives, and they have to accept their new companion species; where in past if they lived with fish and waterfowls, today, they are also living with dogs. Living with dog needs "respect and response" (Haraway, 2008, p. 19).

Dogs: The Companion, loved and hated Species

At Manchar Lake transformation of human nonhuman relations are quite visible. Baradi Mallah who once feared the dogs now has three dogs as his companion species, who protect his waterfowls, cows, goats and hens that he has domesticated. In village Shaikh Daman, at the eastern bank of the lake, almost all the households have one or more dogs; roaming around, playing, fighting, barking and looking for other enemy species to chase them. The villagers said 'today we cannot go without dogs, we need them to protect our waterfowls. Sometime we have to go to deep lake fishing and we stay for night there, if there are no dogs, who will protect our waterfowls from other dogs' said Papan Mallah.

Once during my visit to Baradi's dwellings, when I settled little far away from his house, dogs came running and barking at me. I took the stick to scare dog but before I do anything, Baradi called his dogs, shouted at them, *hurrrii chad, paree the*, (leave, go away). Dogs settled down there near me. Later that night I heard dogs roaming where I slept and where the main houses of Baradi was, continuously barking, looking for tomcat or jackals, protecting house and waterfowls. That night Baradi told following story:

I was asleep once and didn't notice when tomcat came and eat one of my waterfowl. My dogs did not bark, tomcat went unnoticed. It never happened before, my dogs are good, and they are very vigilant, active. If they would have barked that night I would have known of mishap, but they didn't bark. May be my dogs did not notice tomcat or what else, I do not know. Dogs should notice what is going on around that is why they are

here. They should notice the danger. We sleep because we know dogs are there to protect our waterfowls, or at least to bark so as we can get up to react.

The dependence of Baradi on dogs that 'if they would have barked, I would have known of mishap' suggest that humans are not sole independent species in the ecology, indeed they need help of other species.

Baradi went on:

The next night, I thought I would not sleep and kept my one-barrel rifle with me. I know that tomcat will come again. This is the nature of animals once from where they get their prey they come back again. But do not know when I went asleep. But my dogs did not sleep that night, perhaps like me they also knew that tomcat will come again. I got up as dogs barked. All three were barking and chasing behind the bushes. I could see the movement in the bushes. I got up quickly took my rifle, aimed and fired. I shot him. It hit him. I could hear the painful sounds of tomcat. My dogs also followed the painful sounds of tomcat. But could not find him and came back. Next morning my daughter saw tomcat dead in the bushes faraway.

This new way of working together of fishermen and dogs is about the survival in Anthropocene. There could possibly be other ways of survival for both fishermen and dogs, but both of them have found this entanglement more meaningful, hence, dogs today are the family members of many fishermen. Living with dogs is contamination. But here 'contamination' is 'collaboration' (Tsing A. L., 2015, p. 27) that fishermen and dogs are working together in spite of differences for their survival. Here contamination and collaboration both gets new meaning; contamination is not impurity rather it is 'necessity' in the age of Anthropocene, and collaboration is not only about working together rather it is 'survival'. Hence, contamination as collaboration is about 'necessity for survival' for both humans and nonhumans in Anthropocene.

Such unpredictable assemblages force to think of the world as an "unruly edge" (Tsing A. , 2012), where collaboration is survival, and for "in order to survive, we need help, and help is always the service of other, with or without intent" (Tsing A. L., 2015, p. 29). This is what Baradi communicated above and during another discussion while he was feeding is dog:

Look, he said, these three dogs are now my family members and helper. They keep dangerous animals away from my cattle. Also their continuous bark informs me if there is something wrong within my territories. We don't have big walls around our houses where we can protect our cattle or ourselves. We need them. And they also need us. I feed them, keep them in my house like my children. I give them food to eat, place to rest and sleep. What else they need. They are far better than the dogs who roam around, have nothing to eat and always searching for their food.

What Baradi said is an excellent example of collaboration for survival in the age of Anthropocene. It transforms, both dogs and fishermen in order to survive in the ever changing ecological conditions of the lake. Fishermen like Baradi, who have migrated to land since many years, and living in a bamboo houses at the banks of the lake just beneath the Khirthar mountain ranges and domesticate animals need dogs as companion species.

But dogs are also 'unfortunate' beings for other fishermen. Especially for those who have recently migrated to land or living in town areas, or don't need dogs as their companion species. For example, Mureed Mallah said,

We don't have any *preet* [love, longing] for the dogs. Dogs are *palyeet* [impure] creatures. If we keep dogs in house, God will not bless us.

And when asked why other fishermen keep dogs, he was of the view:

Those who keep dogs they have been to land long ago before us and I think they do not like dogs but they keep them as 'necessity'. They need to protect their cattle. But we do not like to keep dogs in our house.

Mureed Mallah does have cattle but he lives in a nearby town and have well build house where he keeps his cattle. If dogs came up as companion species to many fishermen, they are also 'unfortunate' beings for others. Both hate and love harness the dogs and fishermen together at Manchar Lake; the degradation has transformed the binding; of fear and hate to companion and love, while for others it is hate hence dogs are left out to roam and bark.

How living creatures find their ways into world in spite of all this mess of Anthropocene. In fact, living creatures since the appearance of life on earth has to find ways, has to create certain assemblages. What transforms us and them too, are the unpredictable conditions which create unpredictable encounters. Never

dogs living near Manchar Lake and also fishermen would have thought that the lake would degrade some day and they both have to find new ways of living with each other.

These collaborations are not only humanely determined, rather dogs have motives of their own in these collaboration. This nonhuman motives could be located how dogs not only collaborated with humans but also how they learned to live with other nonhuman species, especially the waterfowls that they loved to eat in past. For example, in earlier narrative of Baradi Mallah, where he said how dogs ate his three waterfowls now the three dogs are protecting his waterfowls from other animals. During my visits to Baradi's dwelling, once I noted the following encounter of dogs and waterfowls, when Akber Mallah, Baradi's cousin brother was taking waterfowls to his house:

It was evening when Akber Mallah, Baradi's cousin took his boat to sail towards waterfowls just little away from his houses. I accompanied him. He was untidying waterfowls one by one and again tiding them with boat. There were more than 20 waterfowls. He told me: we are doing this so as in night nobody could steal my waterfowls. I have to keep them near the house. He brought back all the waterfowls and again tied them in the water near his house. Three dogs were there, one of them was continuously barking while other two were sitting away from each other. I asked, what if your dogs would eat these waterfowls? Akber replied: No they will not eat them, rather they will protect them. We have trained them who is family and who is not. And now they know what to eat and what to protect.

The important thing here is not only how Akber and Baradi has trained their dogs, but it is also how dogs have learned, especially learn to live with waterfowls, their favorite food. This enforces to think that how nonhumans making their moves in this game of collaboration, where they not only transforming their relations with humans but also with other nonhumans. How dogs would have controlled their appetite of eating waterfowls that they in past have been searching for to eat? Animals are known in human history as having no control over themselves, indeed this is how history divides animals and humans, giving superiority of later over former. But here dogs are negating such humanistic history, providing an alternative thought, like humans they also learn, cooperate, respond, react and understand the ecology around them. They also know how to make their moves in the world, hence they also take decisions with whom to collaborate, when, how and where.

Conclusion

Life indeed came out of the precarious of precarious conditions, and it survived and thrived. Today, with the rise of Anthropocene, life again is facing the challenge of survival but it is surviving not only through evolutionarily biological changes but also by transforming its relations with ecology and beings in ecology.

References

- Blaser, M. (2013). Ontological Conflicts and the Stories of Peoples in Spite of Europe: Toward a Conversation on Political Ontology. *Current Anthropology*, 54(5), 547-68.
- Descola, P. (2013). *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Chicago: *University of Chicago Press*.
- Eugene, F. S., & Crutzen, J. P. (2000). The Anthropocene. *Global Change Newsletter* 41, 17-18.
- Haraway, D. (2003). *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Others*. Chicago: *Prickly Paradigm*.
- Haraway, D. (2008). *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: *University of Minnesota Press*.
- Kirksey, E. (2015). *Emergent Ecologies*. Durham: *Duke University Press*.
- Kirksey, E. (Ed.). (2014). *The Multispecies Salon*. Durham: *Duke University Press*.
- Kirksey, E. S., Nicholas, S., & Brodine, M. (2013). Hope in the Blasted Landscape. *Social Science Information*, 52(2), 228-256.
- Kirksey, S. E., & Helmreich, S. (2010). The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography. *Cultural Anthropology*, 25(4), 545-576.
- Kohn, E. (2013). *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human*. Berkeley: *University of California Press*.
- Memon, N., & Birwani, Z. (2002). Degradation of Manchar Lake: A Case of Human Disaster. Karachi: *Shirkat Gah*.
- Povinelli, E. (2012). The Will to be Otherwise/The Effort of Endurance. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 111(3), 453-57.
- Rose, D. (2009). Introduction: Writing in the Anthropocene. *Australian Humanities Review* (47), 87.
- Tsing, A. (2012). Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species. *Environmental Humanities*, 1, 141-154. Retrieved from www.environmentalhumanities.org
- Tsing, A. L. (2015). *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibilities of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: *Princeton University Press*.
- Viveiros de Castro, E. (2014). *Cannibal Metaphysics*. [P. Skafish, Trans.] *Minneapolis: Univocal*.