Representing Postcolonial Disaster: Conflict, Consumption, Reconstruction

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Project Summary

From the South Asian Tsunami to the Haitian Earthquake, the last decade has witnessed a significant rise in the number of catastrophes experienced worldwide. These have highlighted the challenges and vulnerabilities faced by communities in the face of environmental hazards, inspiring sustained reflection on global responsibilities for prevention and aid. This project seeks to position such events in historical perspective as part of a much broader array of post-World War II crises and catastrophes - both social and environmental, chronic and acute - which have had disproportionate effects on the world's poorest communities, many of which are still grappling with the legacies of western colonialism. Departing from conventional methods of studying disasters, which tend to focus on North American and European examples, the project compares how a wide range of global catastrophes are portrayed in postcolonial literature and film. It argues that, taken together, these texts have much to reveal about how we think about disaster, providing new insights into vulnerability reduction that respond to local cultural contexts and to global processes that can heighten as well as mitigate risk.

The project is situated in relation to the growing body of disaster representations produced in recent years by writers and filmmakers as diverse as Tahmima Anam, Dionne Brand, Kamau Brathwaite, James George, Tareque Masud, Raoul Peck, Kamila Shamsie, and Indra Sinha. These depict the everyday human consequences of catastrophes and their deep-lying causes, and require critics to focus as much on past and present experiences of real-world disasters as on future apocalyptic scenarios (such as those presented in The Road or The Day After Tomorrow). The perspectives generated by creative texts are especially valuable for disaster risk reduction when read alongside social science-based approaches. This is because researchers across numerous academic fields are now identifying a clear need to humanize and add cultural and historical depth to our understanding of disasters' social and environmental effects, and to look at how creative narratives and aesthetic forms shape different interpretations of catastrophes.

The project will establish the extent to which postcolonial texts challenge, reject, or reconfigure key disaster studies concepts such as resilience, risk, adaption, sustainability, and vulnerability. At the same time, it will explore how disaster studies insights can help frame and inform textual readings of specific disasters. It will contribute to Care for the Future's core aim by providing historicised analyses of how aesthetic works can help us think through the tensions between continuity and change in the wake of real-world catastrophes.