Global Enterprise: Home and Human Relationship in Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*

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Abstract:
Asian-American writer Karen Tei Yamashita’s debut novel, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (1990), problematizes local, national, and global concepts through representative characters from Asia, America, France, and Brazil. Published in 1990, the novel does not miss out on critiquing the global enterprise of capitalism. However, the author engages magical realism to examine the capitalist dynamics operating at different levels of relationships across the Amazon and the world. Setting up the significant actions at the Mataçãno in the Amazon, Yamashita uses magical realism in the characters’ physical and psychological dimensions. Kazumasa Ishimaru from Japan, Jonathan B. Tweep from America, and Michelle Mabelle from France are the non-Brazilian characters. Each of them embodies specific physical characteristics that could be described as magical. The Brazilian characters, Batista Djapan, his wife Tania Aparecida, Chico Paco, Mané Pena, are not non-Brazilian types of magical realist characters; rather, their magical realism depends on their strange behaviors. Both Batista and Tania establish a pigeon message business in São Paulo. They start with a single pigeon but eventually turn the company into a giant “Djapan Pigeons Communication International.” They display twentieth-century consumerism and economic globalization and its impacts on the local people. Through their business, the author thematizes the effects of global capitalism on family and relationships. This paper examines how the growing business or global enterprise problematizes the concept of home and human relationships resulting from miscommunication.

Keywords: Global, home, relationships, capitalist, miscommunication.

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I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest-wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that.... I have always thought that countries in Africa are vastly under polluted; their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low compared to Los Angeles.... Just between you and me, shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the Least Developed Countries?

— Lawrence Summers, confidential World Bank Memo, December 12, 1991 (Nixon 1)

Asian-American writer Karen Tei Yamashita’s debut novel, Through the Arc of the Rain Forest (1990, hereafter Rain Forest), portrays the relationships that exist among local, national, and global forces and raises questions against global capitalism as Lawrence Summers does in the Memo. The novel problematizes local, national, and global concepts through representative characters from Asia, America, France, and Brazil. Published in 1990, the novel does not miss out on critiquing the global enterprise of capitalism. As Nesrin Yavas (2018) points out, “Through the Arc not only reveals the intricate web of relations between characters from countries as far as Brazil, Japan, France, and the United States but also discloses the connections between consumerism, capitalism, trans-national corporations, and global environmental destruction” (4). However, the author engages magical realism to examine the capitalist dynamics operating at different levels of relationships across the Amazon and the world. Setting up the significant actions at the Matacão in the Amazon, Yamashita uses magical realism in the characters’ physical and psychological dimensions. Kazumasa Ishimaru from Japan, Jonathan B. Tweep from America, and Michelle Mabelle from France are the non-Brazilian characters. Each of them embodies specific physical characteristics that could be described as magical. For example, Kazumasa has a ball hanging six inches from his forehead, Tweep has an extra hand, and Mabelle has a third breast. The Brazilian characters, Batista Djan, his wife Tania Aparecida, Chico Paco, Mané Pena, are not non-Brazilian types of magical realist characters; rather, their magical realism depends on their strange behaviors. Both Batista and Tania establish a pigeon message business in Sâo Paulo. They start with a single pigeon but eventually turn the business into a giant
“Djapan Pigeons Communication International.” They display twentieth-century consumerism and economic globalization and its impacts on the local people. Through their business, the author thematizes the effects of global capitalism on family and human relationships.

In Rain Forest, Yamashita “relates her fictional futuristic landscape of the Amazon to real-world issues of environmental colonization, capitalist-driven imperialism, and ecocritical queries into the relationship between nature and culture” (Koontz 18). The novel “insightfully challenges the neoliberal narrative of globalization in which market rationality and empirical science exert a type of total control over an inert and passive nonhuman environment” (Rose 137). Shalini Rupesh Jain in “Pigeons, prayers, and pollution: recoding the Amazon rain forest in Karen Tei Yamashita’s Through the Arc of the Rain Forest” (2016) argues, “[Rain Forest] represents environmental, ethical, and economic dilemmas in an age of planetary environmental crisis, depicting clashes between predatory market forces and indigenous Amazonian communities” (67, emphases added). Jain further claims, “the fictional Amazonian Matacão in Through the Arc of the Rain Forest is the site of a humorous but sustained critique of the continuing ecological crisis in the South American rainforest” (68).

Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn in The Fate of the Forest: Developers, Destroyers, and Defenders of the Amazon (2010) note, “the developed world tends to see the Amazon in terms of trees rather than people and completely overlooks the tribal communities who have inhabited these regions for thousands of years” (quoted in Jain 75). This view supports “the romantic vision of the Amazon that excludes man altogether and proposes a world whose lineaments reflects only the purity of natural forces, freed entirely from man’s despoiling hand” (Hecht and Cockburn 14). However, “this has not saved the forest from rapid environmental depletion, evident in widespread oil and mineral extraction, large-scale lumbering of its ancient forests, and the hunting of its endangered flora and fauna” (Jain 76). Luiz C. Barbosa notes that “from 1978 to 1988 alone, 225,300 square kilometers of Amazonian forest were cleared for industrial and agricultural purposes, causing immense damage to and the extinction of thousands of species of insects, birds, and animals and irreparable harm to the human communities dependent on them for their livelihood” (quoted in Jain 76).
In the novel, “Yamashita’s narrative, in its attentiveness to mixture and interconnection, brings together a myriad of environmental, social, economic, and political forces that destabilize a series of conventionally accepted binaries; including the human and nonhuman, the local and global, and empirical and traditional ecological knowledge” (Rose 125). The novel’s “magical realism works to subvert Western perspectives of the ‘exotic’ South as it emphasizes alternative meanings of magic to include love, care, affect, and empathy” (Jain 74). Jain further argues, “These qualities and values form an integral part of Yamashita’s characters who remain connected and committed, albeit in problematic terms, to their shared environment. Indeed, the environment itself becomes a contested ground upon which these values are endangered and embattled, and transformed but ultimately emerged triumphant” (74). The novel’s chief narrator “is a plastic ball, one that omnisciently voices its unease about the ongoing environmental havoc caused by the ceaseless mining of the forest’s natural resources but refrains from communicating its prescience to its owner Kazumasa in the narrative” (71-72). The satellite ball says, “It might be said that we [the ball and Kazumasa] were friends, but although we were much closer, we were never referred to as such” (Yamashita 3). This friendship is one of the first instances when Yamashita complicates the human and nonhuman relationship through the hanging ball and Kazumasa: the ball is so close but always remains at a certain distance from Kazumasa. Andrew Rose (2019) remarks that this “relationship between the object and its human host suggests a heterogeneous and dispersed posthuman embodiment that envelopes Kazumasa, the satellite-ball and the Matacao itself” (134-135). The ball as a lurking object always reminds the ambiguity that exists in every capitalist enterprise.

The novel exemplifies the resource extracting capitalist venture in the Matacao, Amazon, which is termed by Begoña Simal (2010) as “the metal cemetery,...the junkyard in the jungle” (14). Without considering the disastrous human and environmental impacts, the imperialist resource extraction dangerously dislocates the indigenous people, dismantles their relationship to each other and nature. Yamashita writes:

J. B. was ruthless in his expectations, weaving and tossing
GGG’s net farther and farther, oblivious to any obstacles
in our path: acres of flooded forest—dolphins leaping into the canopy, giant pirarucu waiting in the shallows for dropping fruit; great government hydroelectric dam projects—hundreds of species of plant and animal life bulldozed under, rotting and stinking for miles in every direction; Indian homelands, their populations decimated by influenza. (144, emphasis in original)

In this context, Aimee Bahng, in “Extrapolating Transnational Arcs, Excavating Imperial Legacies: The Speculative Acts of Karen Tei Yamashita’s Through the Arc of the Rain Forest” (2008), contends, “J. B.’s enterprising efforts in the Amazon point to the commercial involvement of the United States in Brazil during the early twentieth century and its overtures to incorporate Latin America into its ‘manifest destiny.’ With three arms, he is the living embodiment of the multiply and tirelessly reaching US corporations with interests overseas” (126). The Matacão, with “the systematic imperialist violence” (Ling 10), has become, as Yavas argues that “the almost apocalyptic representation of Rob Nixon’s ‘slow violence,’ which captures environmental racism with all its intricate, invisible power relations. In this case, the targeting of less developed countries for the dumping of the toxic waste of more affluent entails the interdependency of the exploitation of natural resources and the exploitation of human beings” (9). The imperialist “extrapolation and alien invasion” (Bahng 136) complicate the simple life of the indigenous people by unsettling the cartography of the Matacão and their relationship to it. Yavas notes that in the novel, “[t]he intersection between magical realism and ecocriticism...fuels a representational void by giving shape not only to the insidious workings of global capitalism masquerading as ‘scientific development,’ and/or ‘progress’ but also to the slow, invisible environmental violence whose long-term effects bring about human and environmental cost” (1). Yavas goes on, “[Yamashita] uses a deterritorialized environmental approach which reveals the indispensable link between the local/the national and the global that leads to the loosening of ties between culture and geography” (1). About this connection, Ursala Heise notes, “The local bedrock that reveals itself to be at the same time global plastic waste functions as a striking trope for the kind of deterritorialization as a crucial consequence of globalization” (102).
Rain Forest focuses on “the ever increasing difficulty of correlating identities and homes with singular locations” while critiquing the neoliberal capitalist invasion in the Matacão (Chuh 630). The colonial capitalistic enterprise destroys the “simplicities,” representing the balance between the Brazilians and the ecosystems. Yamashita mourns: “[Kazumasa] saw the beauty of the land, smelled the stink of its decomposition, felt the heat of the great forest, tasted the sweat of human labor. And still we moved on, searching for plastic” (145). Here, Kazumasa’s sense of “beauty” and simple “human” is overridden by his capitalist quest “for plastic,” which problematizes human relationships as Kazumasa now is more concerned about profit-making enterprise than the indigenous nature and culture. The transformation is even more evident in Mané Pena, who “had wandered the forest like other others [Indians]—fishing, tapping rubber, and collecting Brazil nuts” before “the fires” and “the government bulldozers” change the Matacão for profit-making (16). Yamashita goes on:

Very rarely now could Mané Pena be found at his favorite spot at the old café. Once, ManéPena had been a rubber tapper in the forest, then a simple farmer on infertile soil. Then he had been a mason on construction sites along the Matacão. Now he had left the labor of his former days for a different kind of toil. He had to places at a specific time. He had to get on airplanes to get there. He used to squint into bright lights....The stress and tension of this new life was a constant challenge to the effectiveness of the feather. Mané Pena had once found the proper balance of relaxation and excitement in the simple feathers of the parrot or pigeon, but lately, he had discovered that his needs were met only by the more sophisticated feathers of rare birds. He was not sure what this meant... (121, emphases added)

The transformation in the characters from humans to machines results from the so-called “models of development employed in Amazônia... [with] dangerous ecological consequences. These models have been devised by Brazilian technocrats as a rational way of incorporating Amazônia into Brazil’s capitalist economy” (Barbosa 15). The transformation disturbs the familial and societal human relationships
as Yamashita records,

Dona Angustia got tired of feather talk, the buzzer on Mané’s fancy watch, autograph parties for books she could not read, photographs of old Mané on the Matação at sunset and the constant crowd of pushy interviews and researches. She was afraid of the telephone machine and always spoke before the beep. She was embarrassed to answer questions in interview, pulling at the hems of her short cotton-print dresses and curling her toes into rubber thongs to hide her rough feet. ManéPena had stepped, barefoot, into a world where Angustia could not follow. She wondered where the old ManéPena had disappeared to, longed for the old days when she could send one of their youngsters to the open cafe to fetch her husband for dinner. She took the embroidered lace towels off the tables and the TV, hauled off the sofa she had brought with her from her first marriage, packed the young ones up and left.

The older children had already slipped off one by one to a variety of jobs in distant cities in Brazil. ManéPena rarely saw his family anymore.....It was not the same, not the same full house of poor but generous people who shared everything they had. (150-51)

Here, Don Angustia’s awkwardness and discomfort exemplify how the bond between husband and wife, inside/outside the family, is broken by the capitalist adventure set in Mané Pena’s mind by Tweep and the GGG Enterprise. The mechanic world has left no space for Angustia but to feel unfortunate and insecure, which are reflected in the rhetoric of “poor but generous” versus “fancy...[but] tired.” The miscommunication or no-communication signifies the loss of a collective sharing of joys and grief, a “family,” a home that once existed. The loss is displayed through Chico Paco’s character as well, who becomes a radio evangelist from a religious pilgrim. After the massive extrapolation and transformation of the Matação, Chico Paco “miss[es] the beautiful multicolored sands, that rainbow of changing layers strewn before the azure waves, the salty wind at his back as his jangada—a flat raft with sail—thrust itself out to sea” (26).

Batista and Tania get separated from each other in the novel while
Batista goes to Matacão for business purposes. Tania begins to travel all over the world to tackle their business worldwide. Firstly, it is Batista who shows interest in pigeons. In fact, he has a particular hobby with birds. The pigeons are a popular topic for the neighbors due to their message-transporting abilities: “For some reason, no matter neither how simple nor how silly, the messages brought by the pigeons were more wonderful and exciting than a voice on a telephone” (Yamashita 15). Within a short time, Batista becomes an expert in breeding and caring for pigeons. He also becomes the owner of prize-winning birds. Although Batista sees no huge potential business dimension in his hobby, it is Tania who “discover[s] that she like[s] to haggle over prices, to make deals and even to watch the inflation index. Compared to washing clothing, cooking, and sewing, [to her] this [i]s so much better” (92). And “it [i]s Tania Aparecida’s idea, therefore, that great money was to be had in the pigeon business. Unlike Batista, who was really an enthusiast and sportsman, Tania began to see pigeons as a profitable source of income” (92). About this connection, Caroline Rody(1982) remarks, “In Rain Forest, a feather, a pilgrimage, a love for pigeons, and other simplicities go through processes of absurd, then poignant, then grotesque transformation as global commodity capitalism seizes upon tropical nature” (“The Transnational Imagination” 628). Rody further argues that the “fetishization as commodity echoes Yamashita’s principal concerns: the confusions of magic and market, the attempt by both First and Third World characters to turn singularities (including the rainforest itself) into profit, the tendency to exalt trash while trashing the miraculous” (638).

Batista and Tania need to travel, often separately, to different corners of the world to expand the bird business. Batista’s “enthusiasm for pigeons had been turned into a global business, rendering him, like Mena Pena, all alone, hopelessly missing his wife Tania, who is now afflicted with the global disease of movement, constantly moving between cities as far as New York, Roma, and Paris to close new deals” (Yavas 7). The consistent separation results in Batista’s feeling that he is losing control over his wife. However, he recognizes the crucial part of Tania in the expansion of the business: “[Batista] knew he had to thank her for making DJapan enterprises a real business” (127). Tania’s expertise “[helps to open] new homing posts in towns everywhere. The entire state of São Paulo was soon crisscrossed with
Djapan Greeting Pigeon routes, and other states were eager not to be left behind in this trend” (137). As a result, Tania finds herself “as far from her home as the Rio Grande do Sul, thousands of miles away at the very southern tip of Brazil. From there, it was a short hop to Buenos Aires in Argentina. Djapan Pigeons Communications went international” (137). Moreover, in such kind of business expansion, personal/family relationship gets ignored, and the novel’s narrator illustrates the communication apathy thus:

“Tania Aparecida: Where were you when I called at 2:00 AM yesterday? What were you doing at such an hour?!”
“Darling, 2:00 AM your time is 10:00 AM here. I was in important negotiations,” Tania Aparecida returned.
“Do you know how long it’s been?”
“It’s only temporary. Look how far we’ve come!”
“It’s going to be a year!”
“How time flies!” (138)

The difference in time – “2:00 AM” versus “10:00 AM” – and Batista’s understanding of Tania’s “long” absence, replied as “temporary” by her indicate the gap in Batista and Tania’s husband-wife relationship, where Batista’s emotion for his wife is “negotiat[ed]” for profit-making. A critic like Jain argues that “Yamashita’s advocacy of lesser-valorized modes of communication and relationships between humans that include spiritual kinship and therapeutic touch… broadens the scope of magical realism by drawing attention to modes of living that by their simplicity and pure-heartedness appear to present a way of life that is infused with magic but are instead a celebration of ethical living” (67). The problem, however, continues as the couple misses each other. But do they want to quit? No. Perhaps, their impulse for business is stronger than their emotion. However, as time goes on, Batista becomes more depressed as Tania becomes more and more workaholic. The situation gets more complicated as Batista finds no way to return to his earlier life when he used to find his wife at home every night.

Batista’s situation is further complicated because the cause of his depression seems more to be a result of his jealousy for his wife’s successes and her transition from a housewife into an international business mogul. Tania has broken out of the traditional role reserved for married women. She has taken up a role that the husband typically
occupies: “Batista read the newspaper articles with a mixture of pride and jealousy. Tania Aparecida was in most of the photographs, her hair cut and waved in some new style. Batista stared at her features, trying to find the woman he loved within the black-and-white newsprint” (Yamashita 134). Also, Tania seems to be the less affected one who “wove the Djapan Pigeon Communications network farther and farther over the globe and, as she had always wished and dreamed of, traveled abroad for the company to New York, London, Paris and Las Vegas” (138). Yamashita shows how the reversal in the role, Tania’s transformation from a housewife to a tomboyish business tycoon, creates panic in Batista.

It is not strange that their separation as a result of traveling affects their married life. They now communicate via the telephone, their pigeon message service, fax, conventional letters, or postcards. Tania’s “months of absence [are now] turned into years” (174), and Batista has started to fall short of imagining her the way she is in his mind while she stays at home. Although Tania’s behavior changes due to the long-distance, Batista still loves her:

[J]ust when he was beginning to fear that he was losing his memory of her, that he would not recognize her if he saw her, that the memory of her face was only of the photographs she had sent him, he would catch a whiff of some scent, some odd perfume in the air that could only belong to Tania Aparecida. Then the memories would flood back in rushing torrents, his heart heaving, a deep moan cupped in his throat. He often thought that it would be easier if Tania Aparecida were dead, but then he knew it would be worse. (197-8)

Here, Batista laments the loss of home and human relationships through the rhetoric of “fear,” “photographs,” “scent,” “perfume,” and “dead.” His wailing shows how Tania’s living “memories” are transformed into the mere “photographs” hanging on the wall. Tania’s human presence is no longer felt; she is only present in “scent” and “perfume.” The feeling is so heavy on Batista. He feels suffocated in such a long-distance relationship, where capitalism offers monetary freedom but takes away the freedom of life and human relationships’ joys. Batista appears to be a man in a dilemma due to the loss of his home. Indeed, his home is not the material home in São Paulo City,
where he lives. Instead, to him, home means the presence of his wife. In this gap between Batista and Tania, Yamashita critiques capitalism’s working apparatus, which has no limits indeed. Batista starts imagining a Tania in his dream, like a migrant or wanderer, who summons an ideal image of homeland in order to soothe his loneliness.

For Batista, Tania has become a lost identity now, and it might be impossible for him to get back to the former home with his wife. It could be argued that they might have their home back as they lose everything around the end of the novel, and as Batista sentimentalizes on having their home thus: “Batista knew that Tania Aparecida was coming home. He knew because he had written it down out of habit for the weekly pigeon message. Having lost all pigeons, Batista stuffed the small piece of paper away in his pocket” (210). They do not have any pigeon now to carry over the message. The irony is that the business they have started to carry over messages for people is currently unavailable to carry over their message. However, it could be further argued that there is at least a kind of hope in the restoration of the home as Batista “see[s] a small figure emerge on the horizon, the figure of a dark-skinned, saucy woman he knew so well” (211). This woman could be Tania, but again there is no clear clue she is the one. It might be his imagination playing a trick on him, making him construct a Tania “so well.” This might be the result of the DDT’s caution of bombing the forest to get rid of the typhus endemic, which creates “a dense fog over everything-the town, the Matacão, the farms and plantations, and the beautiful and still-mysterious forest” (201-202). On the other hand, it could be argued that their long separation due to the global business makes them unknown to each other physically and psychologically and that Tania might not be looking for the home Batista looks for as she has experienced her economic emancipation. So, ideally, there is no chance for Batista to get his home back anymore. Jain aptly reflects this uncertainty while she claims that Yamashita’s “use of magical realism simultaneously represents the value-laden ethos of a pre-literate society, even as it arguably portrays them as defenseless against the onslaught of capitalism’s encroachments” (67). The “altruistic understanding of their world...leaves the entire indigenous community with an almost unrecognizable ecosystem” (Koontz 19, 24).
Darren Dean in *Brazil and the Struggle for the Rubber: A Study in Environmental History* (1987) censures: “[the] historical accounts of tropical plantation agriculture seem customarily to be written as though the subject of study were an industrial rather than a biological process, and as though the ecological conditions of production were unimportant to historical outcomes” (6). Yamashita notes this treachery in her “Author’s Note” to the *Rain Forest*: “Claude Lévi-Strauss described it all so well so many years ago: *Tristes Tropiques*—an idyll of striking innocence, boundless nostalgia and terrible ruthlessness” (n.p.). Lévi-Strauss’ remarks in the chapter “Crossing the Topic” in *Tristes Tropiques* — “After being yellow, then white, gold become black” (90) — find expression in Yamashita’s novel where she “mourn[s] for a bygone era in which communities lived in greater concord with their surroundings before the process of colonialism and modernization changed their environments in such drastic ways” (Jain 78). *Rain Forest* thus “evokes...[a] long-suppressed and forgotten colonial venture in a contemporary guise and foregrounds the value of reading the novel as an example of postcolonial science fiction for its double vision in incorporating a ‘forward-looking glance that is also haunted by historical retrospection,’ calling attention to ‘imperial legacies of exclusion, exploitation, and displacement’” (Jain 78, emphases added).

The fictional representation of the Matacãno in the Amazon explicitly configures the interconnectedness between humans and nature. The representation also shows how the abuse of nature could result in a vicious ecological imbalance because “[w]e are indeed living in a ‘transnatural world’ where nothing remains untouched, everything has been directly or indirectly contaminated by human actions, and culture and technology have invaded what used to be the inviolable realm of nature” (Simal 16). Edward Mallot (2004) argues that “Yamashita’s seemingly bizarre combinations of commodity theory and magic realism allow her to demonstrate how the rhetoric of the former seems informed by the flourishes of the latter, but more importantly, it offers her a context to critique modes of production and consumption in global markets” (115). Patrick Murphy (2000) claims that Yamashita creates characters who “resist their total absorption by capital through the emphasis of their lives on love, empathy, generosity, and other personal attributes, that is, on those qualities that define subject-to-subject relationships rather than subject-to-object domination” (187).
In the text, “[the] narrator’s knowledge and power are not flaunted but unsettled or deconstructed by the force of desire, specifically, the desire for a human relationship” (Rody, “Impossible Voices” 621-622). Yamashita “posits the creation of a utopia when human relations with the natural world are in harmony, and a dystopia when this harmony is wracked by greed” (Jain 75). However, it could be argued whether the characters are successful in resisting the vicious cycle of commodification and profit, creating total alienation from families and communities.

The leaked World Bank Memo cited at the beginning indicates the politics behind the imperialist undertaking of waste management in the name of globalization that risks the under-developed countries’ ecological balance. Arundhati Roy, writer-activist, prominent critique of globalization, writes, “I think of globalization like a light which shines brighter and brighter on a few people and the rest are in darkness, wiped out. They simply can’t be seen. The lobotomy in the west is that you stop seeing something, and then, slowly, it’s not possible to see it. It never existed, and there is no possibility of an alternative” (qtd. in Nixon 1). The “fog[gy]” relationships in the indigenous community resulting from the capitalist extraction of nature create disorientation at their own home, land. They do not have the power to fight back as they “have lost their environmental self-determination and ability to define the human-nature relationship, left only with a collective cultural memory of what has been lost” (Koontz 24). As a result, the relationships amongst the indigenous people within and beyond families are wrecked. There remains little chance to rebuild those relationships as the characters lost the energy and agency to find the meaning of their ‘home’ once again.

Works Cited


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