

A Bigger Picture: the Urgent Call for Climate Justice

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ABSTRACT

Climate change has altered the life of every individual on Earth. One might find the heavy torrents during summer season as unusual or be bewildered at the sudden emergence and spread of zoonotic diseases; both are an effect of the climate crisis that requires immediate attention and impressive action. It is pivotal to understand that every change seen in the environment is either directly or indirectly interlinked with climate change. The study of climate emergency is instrumental to understand the need for climate safety and save the lives of the future generation on Earth. Apart from environmental issues, other social injustices such as racism, discrimination and gender-based violences also have their roots in climate crisis. Thus, climate safety is essential not only for the preservation of the environment but also for accentuating the holistic development of the globe.

Key words: Climate safety, Climate crisis, Climate justice, Climate emergency, Deforestation, Greenhouse gases.

Introduction

The Earth is in need of an urgent call for justice in order to address 'climate emergency.' This emergency can be understood by visualising two images in the mind; the first one of a beautiful, big and blue planet with its magically cool and pleasant breeze from the vast expanse of forests that provide luscious and juicy fruits; medicinal herbs that could treat any ailment and wildlife that knew no boundaries in the limitless expanse of the ever serving Mother Earth. The second image is that of the Earth that has lost its rich blue colour due to the water bodies being polluted by plastics and oil spills; the green and lush forest reserves deforested and converted into agricultural lands or plotted for sale to construct houses and other tall buildings with roads heavily trafficked and congested by vehicles emitting greenhouse gases causing harm to living beings on Earth. If given a choice of choosing either one, it is obvious that everyone would choose the first rep-

resentation of the Earth to live a harmonious life but it is unfortunate to state that humans have themselves been the reason behind the ugly transformation of a once beautiful Earth to the one that is detestable as in the present. As Narendra Damodardas Modi, once stated "Ethics and Equity are at the core of debate of climate change. Debate has to move from Climate Change to Climate Justice."

Climate crisis happens, not only when a whole forest is destroyed but even the felling of a single tree has a very big impact on the environment. The loss of a single tree with deep roots can lead to flooding of the land during heavy showers, along with small crops being washed off because the strong and deep roots of the trees, that holds the soil and absorbs the water is lost.

Nakate is an environmental activist who tries to portray this ugly transformation and the harm that humans have caused to the Earth as well as to her offsprings. She tries to call all the citizens of Earth to address the climate emergency and make the essen-

tial moves to attain 'climate safety.' Vanessa Nakate was born on 15 November 1996. She is a Ugandan climate justice activist and is the founder of the Rise Up climate movement, Youth for Future Africa and the Vash Green Schools Project that aims to install solar panels on all of Uganda's 24,000 schools. She has also spear-headed the Save Congo Rainforest campaign. In *A Bigger Picture* (2021), she posits the essential idea that the communities least culpable in the climate crisis are the most vulnerable to its effects. She first came to the international public attention at the 2020 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, where she was one of the five international delegates, alongside Greta Thunberg.

Climate change is not just associated with the climate pattern or weather in a particular place alone but it is an indicator of change in all aspects of the environment from the grassroot level in felling of a single tree to its effects on Mother Earth such as global warming. The most important aspect upon which Nakate wants to shed light is that the African continent "is responsible for only between 2 and 3 percent of global energy-related carbon dioxide emissions" (2), but yet seven out of ten countries that are most affected by the climate crisis are in Africa.

Those with the fewest resources and who've contributed the least to the crisis are contending with the gravest consequences: more frequent and more serious flooding, longer droughts, periods of extreme heat and rising sea levels. Increased food scarcity, forced migration, economic losses, and higher rates of death are also disproportionately affecting people of color. (3)

Climate justice includes analysing concepts such as equality, collective rights of the community and individual rights along with historical responsibilities for climate crisis. The efforts of the Conference of Parties (COP) which is the decision-making body responsible for monitoring and reviewing the implementation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), are minimal and do not address the needs of the present. The 21st session of the COP was held in Paris, France in December 2015 and produced the first international climate agreement. As per the agreement, the countries or parties that had signed in the agreement had to take serious action to decrease greenhouse gas emissions and stay below the global average temperature increase of 2°C above pre-industrial levels.

However, the implied increase in temperature can be disastrous not only to humans but also to the entire biodiversity of the Earth. In the words of Nakate, "A planet that's 2°C hotter is a death sentence for countries like Uganda" (3), that are already facing severe climate crisis along with accumulation of toxins in the natural environment.

Climate crisis is not a problem that awaits the future but is consuming the present itself, due to which Africa is severely affected and the effect is deepened by the "lack of access to health care and vaccines for people of color; the upturn in the incidence of child marriage and domestic violence; and the delaying of urgent action on the climate urgency" (6). Nakate urges the younger generations to protest for ecological justice and against climate crisis. She states that the leaders are far away from the needs of the reality and the efforts are not sufficient, the planet is being annihilated and many lives have been lost as well.

Nakate, understanding the present scenario, stands up as an African voice against climate crisis through her ceaseless climate justice protests and has become one of the most dynamic young activists in the world. She held her first climate justice strike in Kampala on January, 2019 and progressed on to strike in various other parts of the country. Later, in the same month she held a strike in front of the Ugandan Parliament. In December 2019, Nakate participated along with other young climate activists such as Greta Thunberg and Alejandro Martinez in COP25 that took place in Spain. She was chosen as a UNICEF goodwill ambassador. Apart from her role as an activist in attending conferences and conducting strikes, Nakate started the Green Schools Project, an initiative that aims in transition of schools in Uganda to solar energy and taking them forward by installing eco-friendly stoves.

The Congo Basin Rainforest Ecosystem stretches into parts of six countries in Africa and is known as the world's "second lung" (83). It is rich in biodiversity and is a global carbon sink, "sequestering upto 600 million metric tons more carbon per year than it emits" (83). Despite its importance in balancing the carbon dioxide present in the environment, deforestation rose by 12% in Congo Rainforest though most of the economies were in lockdown due to the pandemic. It was destroyed for various reasons such as furniture, palm oil extraction, building materials and fossil fuels. It is essential to understand that what happens to an ecosystem like the

Congo Rainforest not only affects the people in Central Africa alone, but the impact is worldwide. Climate change does not occur for a single country or continent, instead it affects the whole globe. It is also known that “warming temperatures” means “more food insecurity” (89). In countries like Uganda where a vast population depends upon agriculture for its income, an increase in temperature may cause reduction in the productivity of crops which can be a nightmare to Africans.

Deforestation does not stop with increased amount of carbon dioxide in air but causes other catastrophes as well, such as floods and droughts that ultimately leads to displacement, poverty, food insecurity, malnutrition among children, spread of diseases especially contagious ones and so on. Forests prevent floods, drought and landslides because the roots of the trees withholds water, thus ensuring a decent water level in the ground and makes a firm stand by penetrating deep into the soil holding the earth particles and preventing landslides. It helps regulate rainfall and even stabilise local climate. The timber derived from deforestation are processed to various parts for its conversion to furniture or other uses, by opening logging roads. The roads open up “previously inaccessible parts of the forest to large-scale hunting, poaching and conversion of land to agriculture” (85). Logging leads to speculation for fossil fuels and valuable metals. Extracting minerals and metals causes intense pollution along with other discomforts such as long hours of hazardous conditions for workers with low pay; mines pose a serious threat to children who can easily be turned into child labour for low or no wages and it comes with the risk of sexual abuse of women.

Deforestation endangers wildlife and is the main cause for conflict between people and fauna. Wild animals are left without a place to live and so, they invade human habitation in search of food and shelter. Every day all over the world, there are numerous news reports that state of humans, being attacked by wild animals because forest habitat dwindles whereas agriculture expands. Thus, deforestation is not only a stab for climate justice but it endangers the sustenance of life on Earth itself.

As one’s natural habitat is destroyed or encroached by settlements, “wild animals come into contact with humans – raising the potential for transmission of disease, as with Ebola or HIV/AIDS” (102). The COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as an outcome of humans disturbing the wildlife as

it is believed by scientists that the SARS-CoV-2, spread to humans at one of Wuhan’s open-air wet markets. It is also known that the corona viruses behind Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) developed from bats. Nakate herself supports the fact by stating :

Scientists are telling us that zoonotic diseases like COVID - 19 will become more common in future as we encroach on habitats where wild animals live; continue to use, raise and sell wildlife in close proximity to human communities; and confine billions of domesticated animals in factory farms. Climate change is likely to increase the frequency and deadliness of such diseases. (6)

The famous American actor and producer, Leonardo DiCaprio who is also a prominent climate change activist gave a call in 1998 to “bring together the best minds in science, conservation and philanthropy to urgently respond to a growing climate crisis and the staggering loss of biodiversity threatening the stability of life on Earth.” If climate crisis had been evident in 1998, then it is definitely late in 2022 to stress on the same. However, the situation has now reached its peak and immediate action has to be taken as climate crisis has transformed into a situation of climate emergency.

Climate crisis not only affects the environment and causes harm to living things but it can serve as the root for various unexpected happenings, as Nakate states “The UNFCCC itself says that climate change ‘is recognised as a serious aggravator of gender-based violence,’ including domestic abuse . . . in the context of sexual and reproductive health” (137). It illustrates a hike in the incidents of domestic and family violence in rural areas after a set of continuous forest fires and droughts that depress the income of farmers resulting in their despondency. The pandemic itself, has been seen as a result of humans encroaching habitats of the wildlife as explained previously, but another study indicates that the “disruptions, job losses, illness, stress and enforced togetherness brought about by the COVID pandemic have increased the instances of *gender-based violence*” (137; my emphasis). Apart from violence by family members against women, certain landowners stress on trading sex with women for nourishment or lodging and many such victims are left on the streets which can prove dangerous.

Women can be compared to nature or the environment because women and nature are exploited

and degraded by the patriarchal activities that are evidential through many instances that takes place around the world everyday. One such fact that proves the association is that the United Nations Development Programme has discovered that during natural disasters or more accurately labelled as 'climate disasters,' women become the prey for physical and sexual violence. The Nigerian ecofeminist and climate activist Adenike Oladosu once stated that "women are disproportionately affected by climate change because of their closeness to their environment" (136); it still stands true because women become the first victims of any mishappenings as they require to fulfill the basic needs of the family and take care of their children whether floods, droughts or diseases. The victimisation can happen in various forms such as droughts and locusts' invasion as it happened in Kenya, more child marriages because the family might receive the 'bride price' which would be useful in feeding the other children and in worst situations it can also lead to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Thus, though everyone are affected by the climate crisis, it is women and children who form the frontline and so it is crucial to accept climate emergency and take the required 'climate action.'

The climate emergency has strongly instilled the seeds of cosmopolitanism in all ecoactivists and climate activists as Nakate states "Responsible governance means recognizing that if *any* of us are to address the climate crisis adequately, then we must include *everyone*" (183). Being together and acting simultaneously can be the only way to achieve climate justice. The ultimate aim of climate justice to reverse the fatal effects caused by pollution and destruction can only be achieved if climate action takes place throughout the world in an effective manner. 'Climate governance' is the utmost need of every nation in the world; it refers to the governance of a country that actively participates in climate action and would lead to climate justice in the near future.

The cosmopolitan view of countries towards climate emergency is crucial for the survival of the future on Earth which might otherwise, turn futile. In order to attain climate justice, climate action must be universal and immediate because "Climate change is stealing their lives, not their future. It's already stealing their present" (90) states Kaossara Sani. Oladosu agrees with this cosmopolitan outlook towards climate justice as she posits :

A combination of decreasing rainfall, increasing

temperature, and other climatic elements will destroy the economic livelihood of people, be they in Africa, Europe, or Asia. Creation of internally displaced persons and camps, desert expansion, resource control, armed conflict, and finally, failing democracies. In some way, therefore, *we are all Africa*. (93; my emphasis)

It is unfortunate that whatever destruction or degradation happens in one place affects the whole Earth such as the destruction of the 'second lung' causes the atmospheric air to be filled with greenhouse gases (GHG) and the basic act of breathing itself becomes harmful due to intense pollution and lack of trees that sequester the GHG. It remains the reason behind ecoactivists stressing on global solidarity. Oladosu rightly stated that:

No country, no matter where, is just a country. What happens in the Congo Basin rainforest doesn't just affect people in countries in central Africa; it influences weather patterns across the world. The climate crisis respects no geopolitical borders, political bloc, or regional trade associations. So, what happens in the Congo isn't just the business of the Congolese, or their neighbors. It concerns all of us. (92)

The dream of many environmentalists is that all citizens of Mother Earth have to come together to save her from the patriarchal hands named humans and their destructions. The Togolese environmentalist and writer Kaossara Sani sums up this idea in her statement, "We are those who are destroying this planet, and no matter where you come from . . . We have to clean up the mess together (171)".

Industrialisation and urbanisation have been the major thieves behind 'environmental crimes' since earlier times as evidently portrayed in novels such as *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Coming to birth* (1986) till recent times through works such as *Dance of the Jakaranda* (2017) and *How Beautiful We Were: A Novel* (2021). The same situation and its importance that has to be reinforced is depicted in *A Bigger Picture* as well. There are various instances in which Nakate records the industrialisation and urbanisation that happens throughout the African continent.

Nakate criticises the government's environment authority for giving permission to two sugarcane companies to deforest a huge area out of Bugoma Forest in western Uganda for the prosperity of the sugarcane industries. The Ugandan climate activist Evelyn Acham states the destruction of Mabira Forest in Uganda as the biggest obstacle to addressing

the 'climate catastrophe' as she thoughtfully posits:

Our system has no accountability. Every citizen needs to be heard; every voice matters; every sector. The leaders are looking at making money and people are not thinking to develop communally. If people's mindset could change, and people start thinking about their fellow citizens and their well-being, we could have a very big impact.

Animal-based foods and putting aside certain plots of land to produce feed crops for them leads to destruction and depletion of natural resources, especially in Uganda. According to a 2014 report, the FAO (Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN) explicated that even under the scientific and proven methods of management practices, such activities would lead to more disastrous conditions because the competition for land, feed and water is immeasurable that it would cause exhaustion of existing resources; and this again, may lead to excess depletion of natural resources as men would start encroaching the forest habitation once their lands are busy with other crops, which would complicate the whole condition.

Another incident that rises out of industrialisation that occurs in Africa is that of extracting oil through digging oil wells and transporting them via pipelines which is casually known as 'black gold' by many all over the world. The innocence of Africans are exploited by the outsiders and they make money through promising acts such as providing employment in the construction, operation and maintenance of the wells and its pipelines. However, the major drawback of oil wells and pipelines includes resettlement of families above the land where the wells and pipelines are to be constructed, the risk of pipelines running through forest reserves, leakage of pipelines and oil wells that can cause intense damage to the farming land through which oil may seep through turning the air and water poisonous along with gas flares rising from the oil industry leading to global warming and sickness. The adverse effects of oil drilling had been clearly pointed out in *How Beautiful We Were: A Novel* written by a Cameroonian-American novelist, Imbolo Mbue as:

The dirty air had gotten stuck in his lungs. Slowly, the poison spread through his body and turned into something else. It was the poison—the baby was too pure for the filth in the village well's water, the toxin that had seeped into it from Pexton's field (8-9).

The use of plastic not only pollutes the environment but has other hazardous effects such as preventing water from seeping into the soil causing low levels in groundwater table, being consumed by animals and when these animals are eaten by humans it can cause various diseases in the human body. It is important for the government to change the current strategies to face the unfolding climate crisis. Nakate posits the fact that "Coca-Cola produces four million plastic bottles per week, in Uganda alone". It must be understood that most of the plastics are created from oil and the fossil fuel industry is trying to convert more oil into plastic and petrochemical that can aggravate the already serious situation of climate crisis. The Ugandan FFF (Fridays For Future) activist and Founder of End Plastic Pollution Movement, Sadrach Nirere explains "Our individual actions are undermined as companies continue to produce plastics with minimal or no responsibility towards the plastic pollution problem they create".

Along with the serious threats industrialisation and urbanisation poses to the environment, there are certain benefits from them as well such as the use of clean cooking stoves that had replaced the burning of charcoal, thus reducing the demand for charcoal and saving forests. Burning firewood or charcoal has been the primary source providing energy for heating and cooking for most of the world's population and it is very much true in Uganda because 90% of its population is dependent on charcoal and firewood. Nakate points out the threats that burning of firewood or charcoal can cause to the environment as:

In addition to contributing to greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions, burning firewood or charcoal causes nearly four million premature deaths worldwide *every year* from "childhood pneumonia, emphysema, cataracts, lung cancer, bronchitis, cardio-vascular disease, and low birth weight," because of smoke inhalation. Twenty thousand of those deaths occurs in Uganda; 5,700 of them are children (108).

In contrast to the traditional method of providing energy, cleaner cooking stoves had made a revolution because of its greater benefits for the society such as usage of less wood but turns out to be more efficient and least toxic. It would reduce fuel consumption to half and "roughly translates to one

stove lowering GHG emissions each year by up to two tons of carbon dioxide equivalent". It had been the custom of schools in Uganda to ask their students to carry some firewood from their home for the cooking that takes place in the school. However, once the clean cooking stoves were introduced and the consumption of firewood also decreased, it was not mandatory for the students to carry firewood to school and the children would also eat regular cooked meals. The environmental benefits of this transformation is that fewer trees would be cut down and so, forests can be preserved in a better manner and GHG emissions will also be greatly reduced.

All the nations have to take immediate climate action to undo the 'heat-island effect' and 'energy poverty.' Heat-island effect is the heat that is re-emitted by infrastructures in the city such as buildings and roads, which is more intense whereas natural landscapes like forests and oceans re-emit the least amount of the Sun's heat. Energy poverty refers to an individual's high percentage of income that has to be spent on his energy bills that pushes him to a situation where one has to reduce the consumption of energy which negatively impacts their health and well-being. The cities found in India can serve as the best example for the amount of heat radiated by its tall buildings, tar roads, automobile and industries as well as the energy bills that an average middle-class family has to pay can be seen as burdensome because with all other prices rising, the electricity consumed is also charged at exorbitant rates.

The GHGs that are emitted by industries, automobiles, generating power, deforestation, manufacturing and so on, lead to pollution and obviously climate change. The greenhouse gases that are rising in concentration are carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs), hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) and ozone in the lower atmosphere. Estimates show that "more than one-third of GHGs are generated by the global food system, and the livestock sector alone is responsible for at least 14.5 percent of GHGs" (119). However, cases of extreme pollution can cause intense damage to humans who were its producers itself. Studies confirm that pollution is the major aggravating factor of respiratory diseases such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, asthma, inflammation of the lungs and lung cancer. According to a 2019 survey, 21 cities out of 30 that are categorised as most polluted,

are located in India. Nakate refers to this statistics in *A Bigger Picture* as she states, "In Delhi, widely considered to be one of the most polluted cities in the world, more than 50,000 people died in 2020 due to air pollution. Another instance in which she speaks about climate catastrophe is that, "The burning of the Amazon rainforest in 2019 caused almost 2,200 hospitalizations for respiratory diseases in the region".

Climate crisis not only shows the adverse effects of loss of biodiversity, degradation of quality in human life, death of living beings, increased rate of zoonotic diseases, climate disasters and gender-based violence, but it also indicates various social injustices such as racism of which Nakate herself, had been a victim. Nakate rightly states:

The pandemic has disproportionately affected those with fewer resources; less access to health care and enough nutritious food; more cramped living conditions; work that makes social distancing difficult; and underlying health conditions that put them at greater risk from the virus. A majority of these are people of color. This too, echoes the climate crisis.(6)

Nakate had gained popularity after she voiced out the fact of being cropped out of the photo taken by the Associated Press news agency that featured Greta Thunberg, Luisa Neubauer, Isabelle Axelsson and Loukina Tille at the World Economic Forum but Nakate "the only non-white activist—had been cropped out" (68). She attributes this social injustice to the racism observed by the very people who had the power to eradicate it from the society as she explains, "You didn't just erase a photo. You erased a continent" (69). She also brings out the racist opinions that Africans and other people of colour comment on her activism as "The climate change agenda is for white people . . . Leave to whites what is for whites" (74). The doctoral student Chelsea McFadden in *The Journal of Sustainability Education* states that the cropped-photo was a classic example of "white saviorism" as she wrote "The idea of the white savior is that there are people suffering in the world, which is codified as third world and racialized in the context of climate change, and that the only ones who can fix it are white people".

Conclusion

It is necessary to assess and give attention to the existing climate crisis after analysing all the climate

disasters that had happened in the past and continue to occur today. Climate justice must be achieved as soon as possible because it is not an instant process but takes a lot of time for the environment to reverse the damage done. However, it is not only for Uganda or Africa alone, but it is the entire Earth that is suffering from this fever as the Earth's temperature is rising everyday and that day when Earth would transform into something uninhabitable, is not far. All the continents, countries and states have to take necessary steps towards this crisis of climate emergency and it is high time that every individual understands his role in the environmental pollution and climate crisis at a larger context. Thus, the ray of hope for life on Earth must not be destroyed by the ones that are living right now. It is better late than never and so, every citizen of Earth must be responsible and take the required steps to save the Earth from the devastation through which she is being strangled. Nakate has made her best efforts to educate and enlighten people on the present situation and now, it is the individual's turn to accept the harsh reality and start making the changes to gift the future generation, a world that is toxin free and safe for life. Nakate has meticulously sculpted the sufferings of Earth in the following lines which is relevant not only to Africa but to other countries and continents as well:

A Uganda devoid of forests to regulate temperatures, soak up rainfall, hold topsoil, prevent the silting of rivers, and provide biodiversity; a country with average temperatures of 3.3°C (5.94°F) above pre-industrial levels, and with an irregular food supply and subject to increasingly catastrophic weather events - this is a future no child should have to face.

But in Uganda, millions are. (105)

If there is a will, then there is always a way to bring climate justice to the planet Earth. Despite the limitations, human beings as individuals or as part of an organisation should work to have 'climate hope' in the upcoming years. They have already started the activities towards climate hope as there is decline in the usage of coal, the fall of oil and natural gas, emergence of affordable, clean and renewable sources of energy such as solar power, investment in energy efficiency projects across construction, the frequent usage of electrical vehicles (EVs) that can reduce the carbon footprint of an individual's transportation and regenerative agri-

culture that has the capability to restore vast tracts of agricultural land; transforming them from carbon sources to carbon storage and also making the farmland more resistant to the effects of climate change.

Many businesses are in support of climate action because corporations have realised that investing in clean energy is a smart move. For example, RE100 is an initiative that brings together corporate businessmen who have committed themselves to 100 percent renewable electricity and as of 2020, 225 corporations have come together in joining RE100. It includes 3M, Facebook, IKEA, Microsoft, Google, eBay, GM, Fujitsu, Tesco, Walmart and Visa.

The UN has called upon many countries to take up 'climate education' as a holistic approach to combat the climate crisis and to achieve climate justice. New Zealand, Italy and Mexico have made their pledges to create a 'climate curriculum.' In the wake of an economic crisis like the Global Financial Crisis or the COVID-19 pandemic, 'green recovery' proposals has brought environmental, regulatory and fiscal reforms to pave a path towards prosperity. Climate hope must be considered as an optimistic way of explicating the devastating effect of climate crisis and the call for climate justice is an emergency as Greta Thunberg posits:

We can no longer let the people in power decide what is politically possible. We can no longer let the people in power decide what hope is. Hope is not passive. Hope is not blah, blah, blah. Hope is telling the truth. Hope is taking action. And hope always comes from the people. So we can't save the world by playing by the rules, because the rules have to be changed. Everything needs to change and it has to start today.

Climate justice is a process rather than a concept that includes the just division, fair distribution and equal sharing of the climate tribulation and its responsibilities to treat and reverse the climate change.

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