



## Capitalism, Anthropocentrism and Rivera's *The Vortex*: An Eco-Marxist Perspective

**Bam Dev Adhikari**

*Colombian novelist Jose Eustasio Rivera's novel The Vortex dramatizes the natural world in confrontation with human culture, the confrontation caused by the capitalist culture of accumulation and sale of the commodities. In fact, the natural world and human culture have remained in conflict with each other for the time immemorial. The nature-culture relationship was harmonious for many centuries of human civilizations, however, since the industrialization process brought revolution in manufacturing and consuming, the relationship started to deteriorate and such deteriorations began to be portrayed in literature too. Amazon rainforest is unique because of its thickly grown vegetation and the region's meandering Amazon River and its tributaries. This region teems with a kind of natural plant known as rubber that oozes white sap, the raw material of rubber. The realization of the importance of natural rubber in the capitalist industrialized world ultimately engenders the activities of rubber collection in the Amazon rain forest. Rivera deals with rubber tapping activities in the 1920s, known as the Amazon rubber boom. The novel beautifully portrays capitalistic and anthropocentric aggression in the rainforest that directly impedes the harmonious relationship between the Indians and the natural world and leads to unending human nature conflict. The natural world fights for resistance but in vain. In this essay, I am making an argument that the novelist is conveying a prophetic warning to the humanity: unless human culture stops its anthropocentric activities in the natural world, the day of apocalypse becomes inevitable and unavoidable, when mankind will be able to do nothing except to regret their past actions.*

**Key Words:** anthropocentrism, Marxism, eco-Marxism, confrontation, humanity, exploitation, subjugation.

### Introduction:

Capitalism is an economic system where the capital of the private sector manipulates a major role in the production, distribution and consumption of the resources. Borrowing Marx's terms, Robert Heilbroner enumerates three major features of capitalism: "an all-important dependency on the successful accumulation of capital, wide-ranging use of market mechanism and a unique bifurcation of power into two sectors, one public one private" (1321). It's a system in which, people compete with each other, each trying to earn more than the other. Latin America adopted the capitalist form of the economy from the early days of

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European occupation of the continent and the capitalists from Europe made competition to subjugate its resources. William Glade makes a minute analysis how capitalism evolved in Latin America. According to him, capitalism was a European product and it was imposed forcefully in the new land. In his words, “capitalism was enthroned in Latin America with the arrival of Spaniards and Portuguese” (51). Spaniards and Portuguese occupied the resources, the mines, jungles, rivers, and agricultural land for the benefit of the Europeans. The capitalist production system in Latin America, thus, took Euro-anthropocentric shape in the early days of conquest and colonization.

Man is one of the billions of creatures who share this biosphere but he began to dominate all plants, animals and elements (PAEs) from the early days of human civilization. He thought himself in the centre of the bio-world and started to exploit the entire PAEs for his wellbeing. In other words, he thought he was the self and the entire PAEs were the others. Man’s this self-other attitude, thinking himself in the centre of the universes and treating others as his property is what we call anthropocentric perspective. This self-other dichotomy, in the long run, produced many spillover effects and created, as in the words of Val Plumwood, many “centrisms.” The concept of centrism has been a catchword in the modern academia as Plumwood enumerates, feminism focusing on andro-centrism, phalo-centrism and phalogo-centrism; antiracist theorists concerning with ethno-ocentrism; post-colonial theory critiquing on Eurocentrism, and gay activists criticizing hetero-centrism and so on (120). As Plumwood sees the conflict in the binaries, eco-Marxism believes that the problem of ecology and environment is the product of western anthropocentrism nurtured by industrial capitalism and this conflict is beautifully presented in Rivera’s novel *The Vortex*.

Marxism believes in the class struggle between two classes of the society, the haves and the have nots or the bourgeoisie or the proletariats. The industrialists/capitalists expropriate the workers’ labor and earn surplus money. The surplus, thus, is the outcome of one’s labor and other’s expropriation. Similarly, eco-Marxist critics are in the opinion that the degradation of environment results because the capitalists expropriate nature for the overproduction of the commodities. Nahide Konak explains this expropriation in more detail: “The treadmill of production is directly linked to the ecological crisis since economic growth and accumulation require natural resource extraction which contributes to pollution” (111). True to Konak’s argument, the uncontrolled rubber tapping activities in the Amazon rain forest and the exploitation of the human resources depicted in *The Vortex* is related to the insatiable demand of natural rubber in the capitalist rubber industries of Europe and America. The rubber industries were installed far off in other continents but and environmental and human degradation occurred in the Amazon. The eco-Marxists view it as the exploitation of both natural and human resources to provide luxurious facilities to the people of developed countries. The advancement and progress seen in the Anthropocene is the result of the exploitation of human as well as natural resources and Rivera’s *The Vortex* is an iconic example of these dual exploitations and degradations in the Amazon rain forest.

### ***The Vortex* and Exploitation of Human and Natural Resources in the Amazon Rain Forest.**

Jose Eustacio Rivera’s novel *The Vortex* concerns the activities of rubber tapping in the Amazon rain forest in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which shows, as Daniel L.

Doman remarks, “a clear early 20<sup>th</sup>-century snapshot of the alteration of the forest for economic gain” (1). The South American rain forest covers the areas of Peru, Venezuela, Colombia, Brazil, Bolivia and Ecuador but the novel is set in the jungle territory of the first four countries. This part of the rain forest teems with a kind of wild plant known as rubber tree that abounds in white sap in its veins, which the civilized people called the latex. Humanity found practical and industrial use of this white sap and began to tap the trees from about 1800 A. D. Bradford Barham and Oliver T. Coomes highlight the importance of rubber, “Amazonian wild rubber played a premier role in world markets for several decades, because the region provided the finest quality rubber in the largest volumes to the burgeoning industrial economies of the U. K., U. S. and Europe” (90). Daniel L Doman agrees with the duos and even gives his complements, “Rivera’s novel can be described as a fictional treatise on the deleterious effects of capitalist-driven societal pressures on both northern Amazonia and its human inhabitant, focusing especially on the rubber tapping industry” (3). As a result, the massive collection of rubber in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century gave the origin of the term ‘rubber boom’ at the cost of the lives of thousands of people and millions of plants and animals.

The rubber collectors cruel towards human as well as natural resources. In fact, their surplus on the rubber tapping industry depended on the exploitation of innocent Indian men and women. Robert Wasserstrom in his article “YoFuiVendida: Reconsidering Peonage and Genocide in Western Amazonia” declares the period of rubber boom from 1885 to 1930 (35). Delving deep in the history of rubber export from Latin America, Wasserstrom finds that rubber used to be exported from the continent from the early nineteenth century. He adds, “In 1855, 2,000 tons of cured latex were exported from Brazil; by 1885, this figure had risen six-fold to 12,000 tons” (37). The rubber boom attracted people’s attention internationally and different kinds of people tried to find their fortune in the rain forest. Barhom and Coomes remark: “The promise of the wealth created by the boom attracted investors, traders, adventurers, travelers and prospective rubber workers from all over the world” (1). This crossflow of people in Amazonia produced a different kind of trading system. Wasserstrom writes, “Remote traders and *seringalistas* operated on credit from larger merchants (*aviadores*) in Pará, Manaus or Iquitos. Rubber collected in the forest was sent downriver to these *aviadores*; larger export houses then bought it for shipment abroad” (37). Rivera has built up the hierarchical structure of the workforce like the peon workers, foremen, overseers and traders in Amazonia but he does not mention who the international beneficiaries, the “remote traders or *seringalistas*” are. The chain of the capitalists, thus, expropriates the workers’ labor and makes them collect rubber as much as possible. Thus, the rubber tapping activities and its trading system took complete capitalist form from the very beginning.

The collection of rubber in the Amazon rain forest is another form of the exploitation of the South American continent that began with the arrival of the Europeans in the new land. According to Wasserstrom, the Amazon rubber boom was an important part of the economic and social history of Brazil and Amazonian regions of neighboring countries, being related to the extraction and commercialization of rubber (35). It was a promising period for both capitalists to earn a handsome profit from the black gold and they gave (false) attraction to the common people that they too could be benefited from rubber collection. The names of the

rubber collectors like Barrera, Cayenne, Funes, Zoraida Aryam and Miguel Periz, portrayed in the novel, were the real contemporary rubber barons (Eduardo Neale-Silva 319). The rubber boom, in fact, was a byproduct of the automobile boom in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the efforts of mankind's betterment of the Anthropocene. Jason M. Kelly talks about the simultaneous development in different sector of the capitalist system:

The Anthropocene nearly always serves as a metanarrative of modernity—a narrative in which energy- and resource-intensive industrialization and capitalism have been accompanied by population booms, increased flows of goods and peoples, the central role of nation-states, and demands for improvements in quality of life. (11)

To serve fulfill the demands of “quality life”, the rubber barons occupied the large areas of natural rubber field widely scarred in four countries Venezuela, Colombia, Brazil and Peru on sixty rivers (Rivera records the name of sixty rivers in the novel) to supply rubber to the burgeoning automobile industries of Europe and the USA. Doman still puts it in clear words, “Local authority figures, such as Zoraida and Barrera, represent these Westernized capitalist forces that exploited disadvantaged minorities and the land itself” (5). Thus a few traders exploited the labors of thousands of people and inflict lives of millions of trees and animals causing human as well as environmental degradation.

Amazonia already abounds in myths and stereotypical representations like the myth of El Dorado, the myth of Amazon Warriors, the myth of cannibals, the myth of headhunters and myth of naked natives. Unless the rubber tapping is understood with its geo-economic realities, another item can be added in the list of Latin American myths. The geo-economic reality of the continent is that the Europeans made the Indian natives work for them since the days of Christopher Columbus and this tradition continued up to the time when the novel was written (It is still in continuation even now). Wasserstrom gives the reason of such employment of the Indians: “Debt peonage offered virtually the only way for Indians to acquire tools and other goods. *Forpatrones*, it ensured the steady supply of willing hands” (39). The novel records struggle between man and man, the company owners and workers and man and nature. The technique of the rubber businessmen in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was to lend money to the workers, make them buy imported goods at high prices and put them in arrears lifelong. The capitalists, in fact, took advantage of the naivety of the Indian people and made them their lifetime workers. The novel describes this situation through a character Clemente Silva:

According to the law in these parts, they sign up for two years minimum, and in that time they aren't allowed to change owners. Plus, the workers are usually in debt, and they can't quit while they owe the company money. They are in debt because the company advances them food, tools and supplies, at exorbitant prices. Then it buys their buckets of sap at ridiculously low ones. . . . They can't ever work off their debts, and when a man dies his son sometimes inherits the debt and has to slave in his father's place. (121).

This is how the native Indians are trapped in the rubber industries. The workers collect much latex hoping that their debt would be paid off but the debt always remains unpaid and they work as slaves their whole life.

The novel describes the events that happened in the first and second decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which the names of places, jungle and rivers are true to the reality of the region and even some characters are historical. John Charles Chasteen, the English translator of *The Vortex* finds similarity of rubber tapping in fact and fiction. He writes:

Large scale exporters from outside the region controlled the rubber trade. They had capital, the connections, the warehouse, and the large riverboats needed to bring provisions in and take rubber out. They held their rubber tappers as virtual slaves, through debt peonage, a practice sadly common in Latin American History. (xiii)

The indebted workers spent most of their time tapping rubber and could not grow their own food themselves and they had to depend on the expensive rations supplied by the company. To which Chasteen adds, “The workers consumed overpriced company rations that consistently cost more than the workers earned” (xiii). The workers were in debt for a long time and the owners could sell the workers to other companies receiving the amount of their debt. The buying and selling of the workers in the novel are similar to the instance Wasserstrom's cites from an issue of *New York Times*, in which in 1914, an English man named Joseph “bought the debt of 58 Indian men and 14 women and set out to collect *caucho* along the upper Tigre River” (40). The abuse and exploitation of the Indians is one of the major themes of the novel, in which most of the events correspond with the historical reality, and hence Rivera fictionalizes the facts of the rainforest in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the form of novel, so the text is a testimony of a particular context in Latin American continent.

Rivera aphoristically sums up the context, the environmental encroachment made in the continent in the middle of the novel within one sentence: “Who can save man from his own remorse?” (105). This sentence translates Rivera’s eco-critical consciousness and critique of an anthropocentric perspective. By “remorse” Rivera signals towards Western occupation and exploitation of the pristine land for 400 years or more. To explain the anthropocentric exploitation of the natural world, he creates a myth of Mapiripana, the priestess and guardian of ponds and springs. Mapiripana makes water that flows through ten thousand tributaries of Orinoco and Amazon rivers. The novelist explains the harmonious relationship between the natives and the natural world, “The Indians fear her and she tolerates their activities only when they don’t disturb the peace of the forest” (104). The harmony began to deteriorate when “an evil missionary came to these latitudes, a man wearing an ecclesiastical habit who abused palm wine and Indian girls. Believing himself sent by heaven to destroy superstition, he ambushed Mapiripana on the riverbank” (104). By bringing the reference of “Christian missionary,” Rivera associates the destruction of the pristine environment of the Americas with Christianity too.

The Spaniards had entered the new world with excuses for evangelizing and civilizing the barbarians, which is alluded by the novelist in the words “sent by heaven to destroy superstition.” In a sense, anthropocentrism originated from Christianity as it is written in Genesis 1:

27 And God created man to his own image: to the image of God he created him: male and female he created them.

28 And God blessed them, saying: Increase and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it, and rule over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and all living creatures that move upon the earth. (4)

The missionary's each effort to control the natural resources of the new land, to destroy Mapiripana was foiled and eventually, the missionary was imprisoned by the goddess for many years. Earlier the Europeans had not entered the new land with the intention of the permanent settlement but they were trapped there as they made relationships with the local women like the missionary being imprisoned by Mapiripana. Because of the union of the missionary and Mapiripana, an owl and a vampire bat were born, and in turn, these children began to suck their father's blood. By this analogy, the novelist refers to the growth of Mestizos, a mixed-race born out of white father and Indian mother. The novelist suggests that the Europeans created Frankenstein's monster, which in turn, tried to kill its own creator. The implied meaning is clear that the Europeans' anthropocentric (the best Eurocentric) perception of the natural and human world in the Americas is brought into confrontation, and Rivera gives a message that this practice can ultimately devour the creators/architects themselves. The personification of Mapiripana, thus, shows the consequences of the euro/anthropocentric capitalism in Latin America. By relating the myth of Mapiripana and the missionary with the rubber tapping industries in the Amazon rain forest, Rivera asserts that capitalism exploits both human as well as natural resources.

Though the novel is set in the jungle territory of four Latin American nations, no government is present in the jungle and the traders run the *de facto* government themselves. Rivera includes an episode with a French naturalist to show how this *de facto* government is active in the jungle territory and to show the similarity between the exploitation of human beings as well as the natural resources. In one memorable scene of the novel, the naturalist takes the picture of an old scarred rubber tree and he discovers that his local guide Clemente Silva has similar scars on his back. He compares two pictures with wounds and crisscrosses together and finds that both human beings and natural trees are equally exploited. This action is interpreted by Doman as "metonymically creating a picture of a plea for both environmental as well as social justice" (5). Jenifer French still becomes more specific while commenting on these two pictures, "Rivera blurs the boundary between the human and the natural in order that we may better understand our mutual vulnerability and the economic violence to which we may both be subject" (153). The human being and the natural world are exploited by the same agent, the capitalists and so the remark made by French is what the eco-Marxists always stand for.

The Indian workers are exploited by different layers of exploiters. The overseers, who work for the investors and traders, also exploit the workers by manipulating their account books. Clemente Silva speaks of such cases, "And of course, the most systematic abuse is not in the jungle, it's in the account books. . . . Boys who inherit enormous debts from fathers, who the company murdered, from their mothers, who the company used as prostitutes—debts that will never be paid" (137-38). These people either die in the company while collecting rubber or they are sold by the company receiving the outstanding (?) amounts of their debts. The rubber companies prepare a strong workforce to collect latex. The chain of command, the hierarchal structure made by the capitalist is so invulnerable that the workers are forced to

collect rubber without any kind of resistance. These capitalists have subdued the human force but the natural forces try to make different kinds of attempts for resistance.

The Amazon jungle is sometimes referred to as “the green hell”, from where most people do not return. The region is a fearful place with, as the novelist describes, “limitless green dungeon, surrounded by immense rivers on all sides” (148). Amazon River has its tributaries in all four countries depicted in the novel and these rivers take the lives of thousands of people every year. This is such a place, where even the mosquitoes come to one’s face like a cloud. After mosquitoes, Silva describes the army of tambochas, “The approach of the tambochas meant that all workers must drop their tools, leave their huts, lay down fire lines and seek refuge. Vomited from hell or who knows, the poisonous, carnivorous ants called tambochas migrate in numberless armies through the jungle” (159). The enslaved workers are sandwiched between natural forces and their employers. Their owners want latex from them and the natural forces try to stop them from collecting latex but it’s the natural world that usually becomes a loser.

The novelist makes his spokesperson Clemente Silva speak in favor of the natural world and through him, the novelist tries to give a message to the reader. Silva speaks of the natural world:

Man is puny, insignificant, and vulnerable in the vastness of the jungle. It would instantly triumph if all natural forces cooperated to wipe us out. But perhaps they can’t. Perhaps, it isn’t time for that final, cataclysmic struggle, not yet time to invoke cosmic forces and die in a blaze of glory. But the time will come here is rebellion worthy of Satan’s leadership. (148-49).

Silva speaks like an eco-critical philosopher and speaks of man’s vulnerability and insignificance compared to the vast natural world. The novelist has become prophetic and he means to say that time will come and the natural world will make a great leap to devour its intruders. In response to the millions of blows, the natural world will strike one blow and that will bring cataclysm in a nature-culture relationship. Similarly, the workers are exploited by the rubber barons taking advantage of the workers’ unorganized condition. The famous Marxist slogan from *A Manifesto of the Communist Party* is worth mentioning here: “all the workers of the world, unite.” Rivera means to say that time will come and the natural world will make such a resistance that the human being will not be able to go through it. Similarly, if all the workers of the world unite, the capitalist will have no hold in the labor of the workers and the natural resources. Antonio Callari, Stephen Cullenberg and Carole Biewener in the “Introduction” of *Marxism in the Post Modern Age* write about the rethinking of Marxism. In this re-thinking, the Marxists have to respect and seek out “the insights of civil rights activists, artists, liberation topologists, queer theorists, environmental activists, nativists and anti-imperialists” (7). Similarly, Rivera means to say that if the united workers co-work with ecologists and environmental activists, both the natural world and human beings will be able to free themselves from the grip of the capitalists.

Conclusion:

The novelist concludes the novel with a shock given by the natural world to humanity. He gives a central message that man has harbored the cause of his destruction within himself, the cause is his greed and avarice, nurtured by capitalism. It’s the greed of man that entices

him to fight with his fellow human being. Cayenne, who had five thousand slaves in the Amazon, is shot dead while he was descending downstream with a load of rubber in his canoe. Cayenne spent years in the Amazon jungle and exploited human and natural resources to the extremes but for nothing. The novelist passes his comments on Cayenne's death through the protagonist of the novel, Arturo Cova: "Good radiance to a foreign invader who came to enslave my compatriots, cut down our trees, slaughter our Indians, and steal or rubber" (213). Cova's sentence, in a sense, is the gist of eco-Marxist philosophy. It's the eco-critical and class consciousness that makes a native Colombian shot Cayenne charging him of exploiting Colombian people and Colombian nature, "my compatriots" and "our trees." By showing a rubber baron's death Rivera ends the novel in hope and speaks in favor of the natural world and native people.

The infrastructure development in the Anthropocene is the result of violence and aggression in the natural world causing ecological imbalance. The Europeans made their loots in the South American mines for about four hundred years and finally, they made their encroachment in the Amazon rainforest. The industrialists in Europe and the USA used their emissaries in the Amazon and exploited the innocent Indians' labor by alienating and estranging them. Human luxury is the sole cause of the Amazon's ecocide and genocide, for natural rubber was required in newly boomed automobile industries in the west. The Amazon rubber tapping activity was the largest exploitation of natural resources up to that period (the 1920s) and Rivera gave a prophetic message of complete ecocide in the industrial world later in the twentieth century much earlier than the term 'eco-criticism' itself was coined. Thus, *The Vortex* gives a central message that the development and advancement of the human world was made possible by exploiting the human as well as natural resources. The chain of exploitation of both these groups will come to an end if the workers unite themselves and begin to work, in the words of Jhan Hochman, as the plaintiff of the natural world. Rivera's intention prophetically resembles what Hochman discussed much later after the publication of *The Vortex*. Hochman argued that the natural world cannot speak for itself and the environmentalists should play the role of ventriloquists. Taking about the rights of the jaguar, Hochman remarked, "why should animals not be represented by people, just as people are represented by people" (190). I agree with Hochman and submit my contention why should Marxists not speak against the exploitation of rubber trees, the ecology? If it applies to man and animals why is it not applied with ecology?

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#### A Note about the Author

Bam Dev Adhikari has been teaching at Tribhuvan University for more than two decades. He is now working as an associate professor at Tri-Chandra Multiple Campus. Mr. Adhikari is interested in Spanish American literature and he has already presented papers and got his articles published on Spanish American authors like Jose Estacio Rivera, Ricardo Guiraldes, Romulo Gallegos, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Mario Vargas Llosa and Isabel Allende in home and abroad.