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MILITARY COLONIALISM, PACIFIC NUCLEARISATION, AND THE MARSHALLESE ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGINATION IN ROBERT BARCLAY'S *MELAL*

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Resumo: Este artigo tenta argumentar como *Melal*, de Robert Barclay, é uma ficcionalização da longa história de violência militar e radiação atômica dos EUA nas Ilhas Marshall do Pacífico. Subvertendo a noção idealista ocidental das Ilhas Marshall como um Jardim do Éden e um paraíso tropical, intocado pelo desenvolvimento moderno, este artigo explora como *Melal*, de Barclay, serve como um importante ponto de partida para enfatizar como a vida nos atóis se tornou sinônimo de radiação e um terreno para depósito nuclear, e as diferentes maneiras pelas quais os povos indígenas da região são forçados a lidar com esse paroquialismo da superpotência. Apesar da preocupação dos estudos pós-coloniais com questões de marginalidade, as questões sociais e ecológicas nas Ilhas Marshall têm recebido pouca ou nenhuma atenção do campo. *Melal* parece ser uma grande intervenção que traz à visibilidade pública a verdade assustadora das ramificações sociopolíticas e culturais da nuclearização do Pacífico. Como consequência, o jornal também é um protesto contra a ecocrítica euro/norte-americana convencional que, apesar de se afirmar como normativa, deixou de expressar severamente as percepções ambientais além das fronteiras nacionais européias/norte-americanas.

Abstract: This paper strives to argue how Robert Barclay's *Melal* is a fictionalisation of the long history of military violence and atomic radiation by the USA in the Marshall Islands of the Pacific. Subverting the Western idealistic notion of the Marshall Islands as the Garden of Eden and a tropical paradise unspoiled by modern development, this paper explores how Barclay's *Melal* serves as an important point of departure to bring to focus how life in the atolls have become synonymous with radiation and a nuclear wasteland, and the different ways in which the indigenous people of the area are forced to grapple with the superpower parochialism. Despite postcolonial studies' preoccupation with issues of marginality, the social and ecological issues of the Marshall Islands have received little or no interest from the field. *Melal* seems to be a major intervention bringing to public visibility the chilling truth of the socio-political and cultural ramifications of Pacific nuclearisation. By corollary, the paper is also a protest against mainstream Euro/north-American ecocriticism which despite claiming itself as normative, severely failed to voice for the environmental perceptions beyond the European/north-American national borders.

Keywords: radiation, nuclearisation, environment, Pacific, colonialism, Marshall Islands.

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In August 2015 the world mourned the 70th anniversary of the atomic bombing by the USA on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Standing at the Hiroshima Memorial Park, the Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, declared: "Seventy years on I want to reemphasise the necessity of world peace. [...] To coexist we must abolish the...ultimate inhumanity that is nuclear weapons. Now is the time to start taking action." (As of August 6, 2015, the BBC listed on its website www.bbc.com/news/ world-asia, under the title "Hiroshima marks 70 years since atomic bomb") While the history of the atomic bombing on Japan by the USA is fairly well known to the whole world, the larger part of the world seems to be unaware of a much longer and brutal history of nuclear testing by the USA in the Pacific nation of the Marshall Islands — nuclear tests that had disastrous social and environmental consequences in the region. While the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's message of peace has often been criticised even within his own country as "Abe's peace is a phony peace" (SOBLE, 2015), it is interesting to note how the experience of one single small country like the Marshall Islands, barely visible on the global map, has been successful in moving global policies on such existential issues as that of nuclear disarmament and climate change.[1] At the United Nations Conference on Climate Change held in Paris between 30th November 2015 to 12th December 2015, Tony de Brum, the Marshallese politician and minister was successful in bringing most of the representatives from 195 countries of the world into a consensus on nuclear disarmament and to cut back on carbon emissions so as not to allow the mean temperature of the Earth to rise by more than 1.5-degree centigrade. Despite Tony de Brum's repeated attempts at bringing into visibility the spectacular historical violence unleashed by the USA on the Marshall Islands, most of the powerful countries of the world seem to be apathetic and amnesiac to the legacies of nuclear radiation with which the people of the Marshall Islands have had to live with. Elizabeth DeLoughrey points out that the "hundreds of nuclear tests conducted in the Pacific Islands...have been largely erased from global memory." (ELIZABETH DeLOUGHREY, "Radiation", 2009 p.474, apud CARRIGAN, 1995, p.256) This general amnesia coupled with the geographical invisibility of the Marshall Islands on the global map accounts for why — a field preoccupied with marginality — the region has remained at the periphery of the mainstream postcolonial ecocritical thought. Robert Barclay's *Melal: A Novel of the Pacific* is an attempt to give an imaginative redefinition to the various historical, social and political issues of the environment of the Marshall Islands and to bring to public visibility the chilling truth of nuclear colonialism by the USA on the inhabitants of the Marshall Islands of the Pacific. As

the Maori author Patricia Grace enthusiastically endorsed on the back cover of the novel that *Melal* is "a wrenching story of people — voiceless, powerless — as they attempt to survive the horrors of nuclear testing, relocation, Western arrogance and domination."

Although the contemporary environmental depredation of the Marshall Islands is primarily associated with the USA ─ a country generally regarded as the vanguard of planetary ecological consciousness but which ironically has done much more to "reinvent the imperial tradition for the twenty-first century" (LAZARUS, 2006, p.20), the association of the coral atolls with the Western colonial powers dates back to the fifteenth century. There had been a Spanish invasion on these islands as early as in 1494, which was followed by British visits. (BROWN, 2014, p.40; ROYLE, 1999, p.211) The islands got its name after the British captain, John Marshall, who surveyed the islands from 1788. (ROYLE, 1999) However, it was the Germans who were the first important colonial actors on the islands, for it was they who occupied the islands as a coaling station in 1878. Subsequently, in 1885, the islands became part of a formal German protectorate. (ROYLE, 1999, p.211) During the First World War, the Germans lost control of the islands to the Japanese who took formal administrative control of the islands under the League of Nations charter in 1920. (ROYLE, 1999, p.211; BROWN, 2014, p.40) Japan, however, started treating the islands as part of their home country and they transported so many Japanese there that the Marshallese became a minority on the islands. During World War II the Americans ousted the Japanese from the Marshall Islands and the other areas of Micronesia and established military bases at Kwajalein and Enewetak atolls, the former being the US force's largest airbase in Micronesia. In 1947 the United Nations incorporated the Marshall Islands into the Trust Territory of the Pacific to be administered by the United States, and the Japanese settlers on the Marshall Islands were repatriated. However, the US abused this treaty. In their race against the Soviet Union for nuclear supremacy during the Cold War era, the USA prioritised their national security against the interest of the Marshallese as they used the Marshall Islands as "empty" spaces to conduct nuclear tests.[4] Between 1940 to 1950 USA carried out sixty-six nuclear tests mainly on the Bikini and Enewetak Atolls of the Marshall Islands. (ROYLE,1999, p. 211; KISTE, 2001, p. 209) The most infamous of these thermonuclear tests was the Bravo blast at Bikini Atoll on March 1, 1954, which was almost a thousand times more powerful than the bombs dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. (McARTHUR, 2008, p.264) The violent blasts carried out by the USA subsequently after the Bravo test besides severely contaminating the northern atolls of the Marshall Islands and often incinerated entire

islets. The islanders of the atolls were not only forced to relocate leaving behind their homelands, but they were also abandoned on uninhabited islands where they faced starvation due to limited subsistence resources or allowed to die due to radiation effects. Despite the conclusion of the nuclear testing in the 1950's and the Marshall Islands gaining independence in 1991, the United States Army continues to occupy Kwajalein Atoll as a key strategic location for military purposes. Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles with inactive warheads shot from Air Force Base in California use the lagoon at Kwajalein as a test site for target practice. The Kwajalein Missile Range assumed even greater significance during the 1980's with Ronald Reagan's "Star Wars" agenda.[5] Thereby, for centuries the local inhabitants of the Marshall Islands have been subjected to multiple colonialisms, military exploitation, and environmental degradation.

Rather than subscribing to the romantically inflected Western discourse of the islands as the Garden of Eden, a tropical paradise ─ "Almost Paradise, Kwajalein Missile Range" (BARCLAY, 2002, p. 242-243), unspoilt by development, and the indigenous Marshallese as the primitive noble savage, Barclay's subversion of the Western narrative serves as an important point of departure to bring to light about how the atolls have become synonymous with radiological destruction, nuclear colonialism, and radioactive contamination and the various ways in which the Marshall Islanders have been confronting the devastating environmental repercussions of nuclear colonialism by the USA as late as in 1981. The term 'Melal' is an archaic Marshallese word meaning playground of demons, a place not habitable by people, thereby signifying its association with a deserted isle, a wasteland, and a nuclear graveyard. Though the novel is written in the background of the Bravo blast of 1954 at Bikini Atoll, the blast or the incidents leading to the blast does not feature directly in the novel. Instead, the nuclear holocaust is referred to in the novel indirectly as a nightmarish incident through the narratives of the characters ─ the widower Rujen Keju and his two sons, the teenage Jebro and the twelve-year-old Nuke ─ the names perhaps suggesting not only a cultural transition from the indigenous to the imperial but also an ironic domestication and naturalisation of the nuclear presence in the area. While Jebro is named after "the king of the stars, the greatest hero ever in the Marshall Islands", Nuke is named after "the most powerful thing on Earth." (BARCLAY, 2002 p.04) Jebro recollects how his mother Iia, who had been a witness and a victim of the nuclear explosion, had once described the blast to him; how she told him the story of "the bomb", which incidentally was also the story of her arrival at Kwajalein atoll:

> She said that as a little girl on Rongelp, one morning just before dawn, she saw from a window what she thought was a moon rising in the west. It was so bright that trees, the ground, the lagoon, everything became awash in its reddish glow. Not long after that a tremendous wind blasted in, so strong that some homes were badly damaged and even some of the trees were blown half out of the ground. That seemed to be the end of it, and everybody knew it was from an American bomb [...] a few hours later she watched a strange, dark cloud, blow over the atoll. An ashy powder began to fall. No one knew what that was, and the other children played in it while it formed a two-inch layer on the ground [...] Later it rained, the powder coming down from the sky in the rain and washing into the cistern. The drinking water turned yellow. It tasted bitter. So did the fish caught that day, having been powdered while in water at the bottom of canoes. (BARCLAY, 2002, p. 60-61)

The violent blasts incinerated entire islets and severely contaminated the entire island region. The inadequate safety measures taken by the USA for the general protection of the Marshall Islanders against such a radiological fallout amounts up to a story of deception, lies, and abuse. The meticulously planned nuclear testing may be understood as a form of casual environmental racism indulged in by the US authorities toward the indigenous inhabitants of the region, where the indigenous Marshallese people were treated as guinea pigs so that "the Americans could test what happens to people as a result of their bombs." (BARCLAY, 2002, p. 81) This implicit imperial racist attitude of the USA becomes quite evident when one notes that in 1953 the US Atomic Energy Commission communicated to the American Congress that "tests should be held overseas until it could be established more definitely that continental detonations would not endanger the public health and safety."(apud SMITH-NORRIS, 1997, p.06) Seeking "empty" test spaces, the USA decided to carry on with its Cold War programme of nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands. But the island region was not *terra nullius* but inhabited by indigenous peoples for thousands of years. The people living on these islands for hundreds of years were forcefully relocated to other islands, and were ensured by the US administrative authorities that this would be "for the good of mankind and to end all world wars." (MCARTHUR, 2008, p.264, apud BROWN, 2014 p.40)[6] Thus, the USA which is otherwise accepted as the vanguard of modern environmental activism appears to be hypocritical when it comes to matters of planetary environmental consciousness, the USA clearly having two separate environmental safety standards, one for the citizens of their own country, and another for the citizens of other countries or people living far away from their national mainland, primarily the less fortunate postcolonial countries located in the global South. Thus USA's desire and ability to rupture the lives of those "who may live at a

geographical remove but who remain intimately vulnerable to the force fields of U.S. foreign policy" (NIXON, 2002, p.34), a phenomenon which Rob Nixon otherwise calls "superpower parochialism" is an extended version of what Lawrence Buell calls the "environmental doublethink." (p.04).

Barclay depicts Ebeye Island as one of the most densely populated islands in the world, a squalor, as if a modern-day version of slave camp, which as Jebro puts it that "Ebeye was a land made ugly." (BARCLAY, 2002, p.79) Thousands of Marshallese live on seventy-some acres of land, most of whom have come to the island upon being relocated from other islands. Rujen Keju, for instance, came to the Island when he and his family had to leave their homeland at Tar-Woj. They were "removed from the island in 1965, when the Americans took most of the lagoon and several of the surrounding islands to be used as a bull's-eye for ballistic missile testing." (BARCLAY, 2002, p.23) Rujen's wife Iia had to leave her native land Rongelap on the island of Malu even earlier when "Malu was poisoned by radioactive fallout from the sixty-six atomic and hydrogen thermonuclear bombs detonated nearby at Bikini and Enewetak." (BARCLAY, 2002, p.80) The story of the forced relocation of Rujen Keju and his family is symptomatic of a much larger history of displacement and migration of the Marshallese peoples in the region. Such forceful relocations of the subaltern indigenous inhabitants of a region in the name of global peace and the welfare of mankind is nothing less than an indefensible abuse and total disregard of the land ethic and the collective environmental imagination of the people in the region. The idea of bringing world peace and security through violence and use of weapons of mass destruction is unambiguously critiqued by Barclay as he begins the novel with a few lines from a petition signed in 1968 against the Americans by the displaced islanders of Kwajalein Atoll: "*We believe in peace and love, not in the display of power to destroy mankind. If maintaining peace means killing and destruction of the fruits of man's efforts to build himself a better world, we desire no part of it.*" (BARCLAY, MELAL, 2002 ix, emphasis in original) Barclay evokes the natural beauty of Rujen's ancestral homeland Tar-Woj with its lush green vegetation to stand in sharp contrast to the polluted horrors on Ebeye Island and the materialistic vulgarities of Kwajalein Island where the American missile testing facility is stationed. Moreover, the depiction of the adventures at sea carried out by the teenage American boys allows Barclay an opportunity to describe not only the complexity of life in the Pacific Ocean but also to express a philosophy of life:

> Death ruled the ocean. The ocean itself was not a dead thing, having never been alive, but the life in it existed only as a byproduct of death. Every living thing in the ocean was fleeing from something trying to kill it and eat it, and every living thing was out to suck the life from something else. You could cut open a living shark and it would eat its own guts. The same thing was true of life on land, even with people — if one thing wanted to live then it had to take the life of another, to kill, swallow, and then crap out as much life as it needed to stay alive. Life was a shark eating its own guts, an eel chomping on its own tail, a twisted game where the goal was not to win, because nothing ever did, but to put off losing for as long as possible and to have a good time doing it. (BARCLAY, 2002, p. 214)

This philosophy is embraced by the teenage American boy Travis Kotrady, who, out on the ocean for adventure is responsible for sinking Jebro's boat. However, Barclay makes it clear that such a philosophy stands at odds to the Marshallese culture which believes in symbiotic relationships, an organic connection between humans and the non-human environment having its ideological foundation in the mutual sharing with others of whatever little one has.

The anthropologist Roger Keesing once argued that Pacific interest in land rights was a postcolonial invention, part of the broader creation of "myths of ancestral ways of life that serve as powerful political symbols [...] Land and spiritual connection to it, *could not* have, other than in a context of invasion and displacement and alienation, the ideological significance that it acquires in such a context." (ROGER KEESING, 1989"Creating the Past: Custom and identity in the contemporary Pacific", apud KIRSCH, p.175, emphasis in original). Keesing has however been rightly criticized for ignoring the importance that the value of the land had to the people in the region in the past. Barclay depicts both the environmental imagination and the sense of belonging of the Marshallese to their land by referring at the beginning of the second part of the novel to the petition sent to the United Nations by the Marshallese leaders: "*Land means a great deal to the Marshallese. It means more than just a place where you can plant your food crops and build your houses, or a place where you can bury your dead. It is the very life of the people. Take away their land and their spirits go away.*" (BARCLAY, 2002, p.273, emphasis in original) In describing the rituals of a burial concerning the death of Rujen's father Ataji, Barclay (2002, p.24) comments: "Marshallese custom was that the clan and family members remain six days after a burial, whereupon the soul comes up from the ground, finds the sun rising in the east, and walks to the water to wash." This dynamic model of a genealogical understanding of the land and water extends both spatially and temporally, as the Tongan scholar Epeli Hau'ofa puts it that

the Marshallese or more generally the Pacific Islanders' conception of the environment consists in an understanding of their islands "as part of the universe comprising not just land surfaces, but also the surrounding ocean...the underworld with its fire-controlling and earth shaking denizens, and the heavens above with their hierarchies of powerful gods and named stars." (MICHELLE KEOWN, 2007. *Pacific Islands Writings: The Postcolonial Literatures of Antearoa/New Zealand and Oceania*, apud KEOWN, 2007, p.04) This sense of belongingness of the Marshallese to the land and their larger environment finds an echo in Tony de Brum's speech, the Marshallese minister, at the Seventh Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference at the United Nations on May 11, 2005: "for the indigenous people it is not that simple. Our land and waters are sacred to us. Our land and waters embody our culture, our traditions, our kinship ties, our social structures and our ability to take care of ourselves. Our lands are irreplaceable." (TONY DE BRUM, 2005, Web). Tony de Brum's words lay bare the truth that for the Marshallese, displacements of their population and the destruction of their cultural language and tradition amount nothing less than "genocide".[7] It is precisely this notion of genocidal victimisation of the Marshallese by the USA through the forceful occupation of their lands and waters that finds a reverberation in the words of Jebro:

> We've lost too much knowledge of how to be Marshallese, our land too and all those that used to keep us busy, like fishing, building canoes, teaching the ways of navigation — all our old magic. I think now we try to copy the Americans, but we can never have the life Americans have. Marshallese boys are in a hole between two worlds, and maybe the rope is a way for many of them to get out. (BARCLAY, 2002, p.129-130)

Jebro's reminisces how his elders "spoke of Marshallese being at one time the greatest fisherman and navigators in the world" (BARCLAY, 2002, p.41), but then so much has been forgotten that they now "can't support themselves without canned food and bags of rice." (BARCLAY, 2002, p.130)

For the people of the Pacific Islands in general and the Marshall Islands in particular, "land anchors people in place...and gives them identity." (LAURENCE MARSHALL CARUCCI, *Nuclear nativity: Rituals of renewal and empowerment in the Marshall Islands*, 1997, apud KIRSCH, p.175) To the Marshallese, both "identity and...land exist beyond the economic, beyond the surface layer, beyond the map that we see [...] It is a spiritual tie to land and it is a tie to land that can never be broken... ." (NANCY J. POLLOCK, "A perspective on cultural loss by the Enewetak people", apud KIRSCH, 1999 p.175) For them, relations to the land is a very important continuing factor, for as Carucci points out, "the tie

continues to persist over time and space, no matter where you are." (LAURENCE MARSHALL CARUCCI, *Nuclear nativity: Rituals of renewal and empowerment in the Marshall Islands*, 1997, apud KIRSCH, p.175) It is this spiritual connection with the land that forces Jebro to go to Tar-Woj, an island that has been placed off-limits by the USA military authorities. Rujen chides Jebro for his decision to camp at Tar-Woj saying that it is against the American law. But, Jebro is obstinate, for he feels that "Tar-Woj misses her family," (BARCLAY, 2002, p.09) and stresses that "Nuke has never seen his home island [...] Maybe that's more of a crime than a law." (BARCLAY, 2002, p.10) When Rujen refuses to lend Jebro his boat to prevent him from going to the island which might create troubles for them, if caught by the Americans, Jebro determines to go there by some other means "to the island of [his] birth, where coconuts, pandanus, and breadfruits fall to the ground and rot because that is the Americans' law." (BARCLAY, 2002, p.10) The intensity of Jebro's sense of belongingness to his native land is indicated by the way he feels attached equally to his matrilineal as well as his patrilineal homelands of Malu and Tar-woj, not just because of "the power that having a right to be there gave him, but also a responsibility to the land, to be a part of the life it sustained." (BARCLAY, 2002, p.80) Jebro's sense of bioregionalism is part of the greater Oceanic environmental ethics shared by the indigenous people as Barclay describes the experience of a man in his boyhood, who, when he came to learn that as a result of the nuclear blast "his rightful land, his inheritance, had become nothing more than part of a gaping crater in the reef, almost two hundred feet deep and one mile around, he knew right then that the bomb had destroyed part of his soul." (BARCLAY, 2002, p.80)

The Keju family and the rest of the Marshallese were not only forced to leave their homelands where myths, history, genealogy, and identity were inscribed into the landscape, but they were also shifted to and abandoned into uninhabited islands where they had to face near starvation. The Ebeye Island to which the Keju family and the other Marshallese were relocated was one of the worst slums and shantytowns in the Pacific, exemplifying almost an American version of apartheid in the Pacific. As Barclay describes it, "On Ebeye, the land did not support very much life, boasted no crops, few pigs, no ground water, no jungle, no grass, no stands of fruit-bearing trees. The people's lives were sustained not by the land but by money flowing in and then out like the tide...." (BARCLAY, 2002, p.79) Even more heinous was the "human experiment" that the Marshall Islanders experienced after the Bravo blast. Within hours of the blast, "[a]n ashy powder began to fall" downward from Bikini Atoll. (BARCLAY, 2002, p.81) Children started playing in it, while some people who thought it to

be rare, collected it in washtubs without realising that it was highly radioactive. Despite political and environmental protests from other countries, the American government tried to downplay the impact of the test by describing it as "a negligible hazard." (SMITH-NORRIS, 1997, p.11) Nevertheless, the results of radioactive radiations started to become apparent from that very day itself:

> By that night people began to vomit. Their skin and their eyes and their mouths became inflamed, burning hot [...] Iia said she watched the faces of her friends and relatives become red with pain, and after about ten days the hair on their heads and their body hair was falling away, their burned skin was peeling off in patches, their fingernails were becoming discoloured and falling off, their fingers bleeding. (BARCLAY, 2002, p.81)

None of the islanders had been pre-warned, and nor were there any instructions for evacuation or relocation. More severe were the long-term effects of the blast. The sufferers of such "slow violence", as Rob Nixon terms, were the islanders, essentially marginalized people who had come to be treated as dispensable by their wealthier brethren, people whom Arundhuti Roy has otherwise described as "nothing but refugees in an unacknowledged war." (ROY, 2001, p.65) The slow radiological violence that the Pacific islanders had been subjected to was "driven inward, somatised into cellular dramas of mutation that —– particularly in the bodies of the poor — remain unobserved, undiagnosed, and untreated." (NIXON, 2002, p.06) Barclay graphically describes the long term effects of such "slow violence" in Keju's family:

> Iia had been evacuated to Kwajalein atoll from Rongelap when she was nine, after her island accidentally received too much fallout from one of the atomic bomb tests at Bikini---the Bravo test. She was burned, and had some other trouble, but not nearly as bad as most because she had been sick that day and had remained inside her house [...] Jebro was Rujen and Iia's first born and they had wanted more, a girl, but she had miscarried once before giving birth to Jebro, three times before Nuke, and then the one after. (BARCLAY, 2002, p.20)

Despite being "burned" and experiencing what Rujen calls "other troubles" as a result of the radiation, Iia still considers herself to be lucky as she never had to suffer from "thyroid cancers" that most were suffering from; but then she always had troubles to conceive and gave birth to "jellyfish babies" which many Marshallese women called "monster babies" because they "looked inside-out", an abnormality which finally killed Iia. (BARCLAY, 2002, p.82) Rujen recalls how even after "the doctors said [Iia] had recovered" (BARCLAY, 2002, p.20), they used to come and took her to their ship "to examine her and take her blood, and

once they took a little piece of bone from her chest" though "[t]he doctors never said [...] that Iia better not try having any babies." (BARCLAY, 2002, p.21) Rujen, who at least initially had been an ardent admirer of the American way of life, the death of his wife, made him realize the truth behind the vicious motive of the Americans, even though he was more than willing to turn a blind eye to it:

> He knew, but who was he going to confront and accuse, the U.S. Army, the Navy, the entire American country? He had heard the rumours that they did it on purpose, because they wanted to know what things their bombs could do, but Rujen never believed that and neither did Iia. How could he believe that? For the President and the Army and the Navy and all the leaders of America to think together to do something so awful on purpose to peaceful Christian people, while at the same time they fought the evil powers and gave the Marshallese so much and strived to fill the world with peace and good and freedom—all of them, thousands of them together, would have to be completely *wudeakeak*, insane. It made no sense. (BARCLAY, 2002, p.21-22)

The Americans who are generally hailed as the global champions of liberty, equality and fraternity, continued to occupy the Marshall Islands as an impact area for their missile tests even after the conclusion of nuclear testing in the 1950's (BARCLAY, 2002, p.144) turning a blind eye to the right to life and human rights of the Marshallese. The environmental racist attitude of the US government becomes evident in Henry Kissinger's purported statement when he was the Secretary of State: "When there are only 90,000 people out there, who gives a damn?" (DOWELL, 1988, p.26, apud McARTHUR, 2008, p.03) Barclay's *Melal* makes obvious such broad interconnections between environmental racism, colonialism and nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands.

Barclay counterposes the environmental apathy of the Americans towards the Marshallese environment with that of the U.S led conservational attitude towards non-humans, pointing out the fact that American environmentalism while posing itself as planetary, was at root profoundly parochial.[8] Barclay indicates at least two different versions of environmental advocacy here. While the Americans are bent on saving the dolphins, a signature megafauna species which has received a totemic status in global environmental conservation movement, the Marshallese, on the other hand have their own indigenous version of environmental realism, one that is much more organic, elemental in scope and conforming to the local realisations of their natural/environmental cycles. When Crawford Pelton, the lab guy at the Kwajalein sewage treatment plant tells Rujen that it is illegal to catch or kill dolphins, that one "can't kill dolphins — it's like whales" (BARCLAY, 2002,

p.97), Rujen asserts his indigenous vision of the environmental reality: “I don’t think that’s the law, [...] I never heard anybody say not to catch dolphins, not to catch anything except...you know, Marshallese used to say don’t catch some things because it was poison, or some things if it was breeding season.” (BARCLAY, 2002, p.97) Midway through the novel, this conflict between the environmental worldviews of the Americans and the Marshallese assumes a crisis proportion. Hurt by what Rujen sees as disrespect towards Marshallese traditions and custom, Rujen refuses to lend support to the American-led campaign of saving the dolphins. When Foster Rick, a civilian employee of the American Army at Kwajalein base criticizes Rujen for his taking of dolphin’s meat and tells him that he has been given the responsibility to enter into a negotiation with the people accused of catching the dolphins which swim into the lagoon, Rujen expresses his displeasure:

> Marshallese don’t go looking for dolphins, chasing them in the ocean, but it’s a Marshallese custom that when you see a dolphin come inside the lagoon, that’s a gift. If you refuse to take it then you get bad luck — that’s the custom. No *negotiations* can change this. (BARCLAY, 2002, p.120)

In a further illustrative sequence of events, Nuke takes pity on the turtle that he has caught at sea and allows it to go away. Nuke compares the situation of the captured turtle to that of the lives of the Marshallese boys who “are in a hole between two worlds”, caught between their indigenous values and the American lifestyle. (BARCLAY, 2002, p.130) Nuke comprehends this dilemma through an analogy: “I think it’s strange how turtles live in the water but have to breathe air [...] It’s like they can never decide which world they want to live in, so they try and live in both. I think it would be very hard to live as a turtle.” (BARCLAY, 2002, p.129) Jebro, who is much more vocal and passionate about the past glory of the Marshallese history and culture, tries to contest his ambivalent position as a Marshallese by engaging in local cultural ideational fantasy: “I won’t be some worker with a fishing hobby. I’ll be a fisherman whose hobby is a job making money [...] Someday I’ll build a good boat and do nothing but fish all day, and I’ll teach others how to fish too. That’s my way out of the hole.” (BARCLAY, 2002, p.130)

Melal is an important ecologically inspired text that brings to public visibility the reality of the environmental damage done to the Marshall Islands, a postcolonial country in the global South. It is a revelatory piece of writing that explores the fact that some of the most cataclysmic environmental hazards in modern history have been ignored by and in mainstream environmental debates. It also brings to light the chilling truth, that those very

countries in which the contents of the modern environmental imagination have been born are in fact responsible for the environmental destruction of the Marshall Islands. Barclay's novel also gives legitimacy to the assertion made by the Indian environmental thinker Ramachandra Guha, that mainstream American ecocriticism is theoretically inadequate since it fails to deal with environmental issues arising out of military intervention by the US as well as the rest of the West. Thereby, Barclay's novel may be understood as a vocabulary of protest not only against American environmentalism but also against the hegemony of American ecocriticism.

Notes

1. For details, also see Jonathan Soble, "At Hiroshima's 70th Anniversary, Japan Again Mourns Dawn of Atomic Age." 2015. *The New York Times*, Aug 6, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/07/world/asia/hiroshima-honors-70th-anniversary-of-atomic-bombing.html?_r=0. Accessed 22 April 2016. Web.

2. For details, also see Simone O Delden. 2002. "Problematizing the Postcolonial: Deterritorialization and Cultural Identity in Robert Barclay's *Melal*.' *World Literature Written in English* 39.2: 38-51.; Najita, Susan Y. 2006. *Decolonizing Cultures in the Pacific: Reading History and Trauma in Contemporary Fiction*. New York: Routledge.

3. For a detailed sociological study on the Pacific Islands, see Dirk H. R.. Spennemann. 1998. "Japanese Poaching and the Enforcement of German Colonial Sovereignty in the Marshall Islands." *The Journal of Pacific History* 33.1: 51-67; Kirsch, Stuart. 2001. "Environmental Disaster, 'Culture Loss' and the Law." *Current Anthropology* 42.2: 167-198; Smith-Norris, Martha. 1997. "'Only a Dust in the Face of the Wind': An Analysis of the BRAVO Nuclear Incident in the Pacific, 1954." *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 6.1: 01-34; Davis, Jeffrey Sasha. 2005. "'Deserted Isles' and the Reproduction of Bikini Atoll." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95.3: 607-625.

4. For details on the nuclear policy of the USA during the Cold War, see Martha Smith-Norris. 1997. "'Only a Dust in the Face of the Wind': An Analysis of the BRAVO Nuclear Incident in the Pacific, 1954." *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 6.1: 01-34.

5. The "Star Wars" or its formal name Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) was a proposed missile defence system initiated during the tenure of the American President Ronald Regan in 1983 to protect the USA from ballistic strategic nuclear weapons. SDI was nicknamed largely in the mainstream media as "Star Wars" after the popular 1977 film by George Lucas.

6. This is how more often than not, it is the people from the margins who are made to face the consequences of the so-called 'development' projects necessary for the betterment of humanity, initiated by their 'developed' brethren. In an entirely different context, mention may be made of the nationalist and developmental slogan of the Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru addressing to the villagers who were to be displaced for the construction of

the Hirakud Dam in 1648: "*If you are to suffer, you should suffer in the interest of the country...*" (Cited in "The Greater Common Good" by Arundhati Roy)

7. For details, see Alex Pashley. 2015. "Climate change migration is 'genocide' says Marshall Islands minister." *Climate Home*, October 5. http://www.climatechangenews.com/2015/10/05/climate-change-migration-is-genocide-says-marshall-islands-minister/

8. For details, see Ramchandra Guha. 1989. "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique." *Environmental Ethics* 11.1: 71-83.

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