

The Precarity of Hope in Fatimah Asghar's "I Don't Know What Will Kill Us First: The Race War or What We've Done to the Earth"

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Abstract

Fatimah Asghar's poem titled "I Don't Know What Will Kill Us First: The Race War or What We've Done to the Earth" (2019) offers a sombre reflection on negotiating with hope at a time of grave environmental precarity as well as cultural insecurity in an increasingly volatile society fraught with racial tension and violence. Asghar, a contemporary American poet of Muslim Indo-Pakistani origin, highlights how the individual subject has to encounter multiple facets of vulnerability at the same time through the poem. This brief critical analysis of "I Don't Know..." examines how the poem, garbed in language alluding to nature's beauty and bounty, hints at the possibility of a dark, uncertain, and uninhabitable future. This essay also explores how the poem brings the focus back on the individual--his/her lives, memories, and experiences--to move away from the impersonality and objectivity in the familiar rhetoric around climate change and instead foreground an intimate and personal perception of the looming threat.

Keywords: *Environment, Climate, Earth, Race, Anxiety, Culture*

In recent years, literature has increasingly attempted to draw attention to the precarious existence on Earth in the face of unprecedented and unrestrained climate change potentially endangering and radically altering life and, more specifically, human lives, on the planet. Along with scientific discourses, political debates, and all kinds of intellectual punditry trying and hoping to make sense of the times we live in and the uncertainty that has engulfed our planetary existence, literature too has sought to give voice to the resultant anxieties

about the future of human life on Earth. Fatimah Asghar's poem "I Don't Know What Will Kill Us First: The Race War or What We've Done to the Earth"¹ (2019) serves as a sombre meditation on the contemporary cultural anxieties pervading our psyche both at the individual as well as the cultural level. The ominous title of the poem, carrying unmissable connotations of cultural and planetary decline, sounds like a personal premonition that, nonetheless, echoes fears deeply entrenched in the society.

Fatimah Asghar is an American poet of South Asian origin whose writing often reflects her experience of growing up and living in America as a Muslim immigrant and woman of colour, testifying at once to the cosmopolitanism and the cultural tensions beneath the surface. Her poems frequently offer a glimpse into a world seen through the eyes of a person who belongs to the ethnic and religious minority--someone who can be simultaneously an insider and an outsider, assimilated and yet distant. "I Don't Know...", in particular, is rooted, on the one hand, in the increasingly volatile cultural and political landscape in early twenty-first century America and, on the other hand, the impending climate crisis in the age of the Anthropocene. This terse essay wishes to offer a concise reflection on how the poem juxtaposes complex and conflicting emotions in the face of looming crises on multiple fronts.

As Asghar herself stated, "I Don't Know..." emerged out of a moment of respite from the persistent feelings of ennui and anxiety that accompany her:

I think about the ways that our world feels unsustainable—some of the most pressing ways being the race war that always feels like it's boiling right under the surface, and climate change/disaster. This poem is about a day that I got lost in a conversation with a friend, and it felt like things slowed down around me, and I was able to put those fears aside and just appreciate what was around me. And how hopeful that is, getting lost in the words and presence of someone you love, having them put a pause on the impending doom that seems right around the corner at all times. (Asghar).

As we read the poem in light of the poet's admission of its origin, the duality in the poem becomes all the more prominent. On the one hand, the poem is unmistakably an expression of angst at a moment of social and environmental crisis and, on the other hand, it is resplendent with hope for the possibility of a better future. Featuring an unnamed speaker addressing an unspecified second person, the poem brings back the focus to personal experiences, past memories, and incidents from everyday life--drawing the conversation back to the intimate and the deeply personal. Sam Illingworth, in his essay on poetry's ability to address the climate crisis, argues that "Poetry has a profound ability to help reframe global issues, taking obscure concepts and couching them in language that is both intimate and familiar" (Illingworth). Asghar's "I Don't Know..." aspires to perform a similar function--it positions the individual at the centre of the frame and translates both the social and the global into language of remembrance, loss, and hope felt with a passionate intensity.

In the poem, the butterflies and the returning bumblebees evoke the imagery of nature's bounty--warm and sunny like an idle spring afternoon. However, this image is soon interrupted by an ominous reminder that the greenness of the park we still have today should not be taken for granted, nor the grass and the leaves. Asghar's use of language is careful and measure, almost minimalist to the point where meaning is loosely floated in the air and never stressed. For example, the simple addition of the word "today" to the line "the park is green" alters the connotation of the line; "today" marks the only point of knowing and, by logical extension, tomorrows are steeped into the realm of the unknown, the uncertain, and the unfamiliar. The threat that is posed by climate change--the possibility of the bumblebees, the butterflies, and the green grass disappearing into something else unarticulated yet--is slow, steady, and calamitous. By situating it against the "race war," in the same decade that witnessed numerous incidents of racial strife including the horrific killing of an African-American suspect while his arrest that would ultimately trigger the "Black Lives Matter" protests, Asghar draws

¹Henceforth referred to as "I Don't Know..."

attention to the inherent precarity that defines existence today, especially for people belonging to minority and marginalised communities in the contemporary United States fraught with racial and religious fault lines.

The poem ends with an effort to establish a connection between knowledge and hope in its attempt to offer an answer to the uncertainty and precarity defining human existence at the present moment. The deliberate ambiguity of the closing lines offer two interpretative possibilities. The first offers unadulterated hope--affirming the possibility of survival even against overwhelming odds. The second invites the reader to fill the void of the unknown with something that can be imagined. Like the fate of the butterfly in the jar that can only be speculated but not known, one can fill up the blank canvass of the future with hope. Therefore, despite the ominous and decidedly pessimistic title of the poem, it nonetheless chooses to offer a note of hope. Thus the speaker's recollection of past memories are not merely elegiac but a reminder to the fine moments that might still be possible to reclaim in the future.

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