

# Conservation of Nature: The Need of the Hour as Reflected in Jonathan Franzen's Novels *Strong Motion* and *Freedom*

T. Isai Amuthavani & S. Kalamani

## Abstract

Human beings are social animals, who depend on the others as they lead their life on earth. They have to rely on nature and the environment also for their well-being. This interdependent relationship should be maintained in such a way that it is beneficial to all. But the anthropocentric attitude of humans threatens nature. People keep changing the environment for their survival and to satisfy their greed, causing damages to nature which like a boomerang comes back and harms the human race itself. The contemporary American novelist Jonathan Franzen, in his novel *Strong Motion*, talks about the anthropogenic earthquakes caused by man and the impact made on the environment. It is a saga of Harvard seismologist who finds the link between the mysterious earthquakes and the waste disposed by the company. In his fourth novel *Freedom*, Franzen speaks about the Mountaintop Removal and its disadvantages. To divert people from paying attention to this issue, Vin Haven established Cerulean Mountain Trust and had a tie up with the coal industry to exact the coal before building a reserve. The aim of the present paper is to bring out the need for human beings to understand the need to protect the environment and to recognize and respect the intrinsic value of other creations and nature as reflected in Franzen's novels.

**Keywords:** Anthropocentric; Earthquakes; Environment; Mountaintop removal; Survival.

Man is a social animal and he has to depend not only on others for his survival, but also on nature and the environment around him for his sustenance. This interdependent relationship should be maintained in such a way that it is beneficial to all. As the famous writer Leo Tolstoy says, "One of the first conditions of happiness is that the link between man and nature

shall not be broken" (qtd.in Coenn). The human world and the environment are interconnected and mutually beneficial. Despite the dependence of human beings on the environment and natural resources for their survival – food to eat, water to drink and air to breathe, they exploit the available natural resources and pollute the environment around them; without realising the consequences, they also dispose the wastes indiscreetly. To meet his personal needs and for his comforts, man often tries to control nature. These changes result in devastating effects on plants, animals, forests, land and waterways and the like. As per the saying "You reap what you sow," man is harvesting threats to human race itself as a result of the environmental and ecological damages he has caused.

The anthropocentric behaviour of humans leads the world to a kind of dystopia. In the philosophical point of view, anthropocentrism defines human beings as the central entities of the world. Their ideology is that the inherent value of human is central and that other beings are means to human end. According to Val Plumwood, an ecofeminist, anthropocentrism causes ecological denial and blindness; it "tends through incorporation to represent the Other of nature entirely in terms of human needs" and "encourages a massive denial of dependency" and a sense of "hyper-separation" (qtd.in Moore 7). Environmentalists state that overpopulation and intense exploitation of natural resources are the cause for natural destruction. On the one hand the development of technology makes human beings happy and contented; but on the other hand, it causes environmental catastrophe. The anthropocentric mindset of humans is concerned only with their own survival and satisfaction of their greedy minds. The human materialistic mind has been the cause of environmental changes and the degradations like climate change, global warming, induced earthquakes and deforestation. Virtuous qualities, values of humanity and consideration of other creatures are slowly disappearing in the present world.

Jonathan Franzen is a contemporary American novelist and essayist. His third novel *The Corrections* (2001), a satirical family saga earned him a National Book Award and James Tait Black Memorial Prize. His fourth novel *Freedom* (2010) received the same appreciation as his third novel. After the publication of the novel, his appearance on the cover page of Time Magazine came with the heading "Great American novelist." Franzen's other novels are *The Twenty Seventh City*, *Strong Motion* and *Purity*. He has contributed a series of essays to the New Yorker magazine. His works are mainly social criticisms and focus on family troubles. He is also a bird lover and a conservationist.

*Strong Motion* (1992) is a story of a Harvard seismologist Renee who discovers a link between the unexplained earthquakes and the disposal of chemical waste by the petrochemical company called Sweeting-Aldren. The author focuses on political issues like activism, abortion, corporate malfeasance and ecological disaster.

While most of the earthquakes are caused by movement of the Earth's tectonic plates, activities of human beings can also produce earthquakes. Activities carried out both above and below ground level like building reservoirs, extracting resources such as coal or oil, and injecting fluids underground for waste disposal may change the stresses and strains on the crust.

In *Strong Motion*, the greedy chemical industry, Sweeting-Aldren was engaged illegally in dumping toxic waste into the well which resulted in a swarm of earthquakes. The company had been injecting effluents for a decade. Since nothing happened, they continued with their dumping process. Suddenly it reached a critical level resulting in a little shake; when the swarm continued for months, they stopped dumping for a while. When a large amount of fluid is pumped into the underground for storage or disposal, the fluid flow causes pore-pressure variation, altering fault strength and initiating earthquakes.

After two years, the company again started to pump the wastes into the well with high pressure which led to catastrophic seismic activity. Renee, the seismologist suspected that the company's injection of noxious waste into the well was the cause for induced earthquakes in Boston and its vicinity. Renee explains the cause of earthquakes in the following lines:

It happens after you've been pumping lots of liquid underground, and basically it's as if the rock down there gets slippery from all the extra liquid. The classic example was in the early sixties, at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal, outside Denver. The Army was making chemical weapons and generating millions of gallons of toxic liquid waste and pumping it down a 12,000-foot well. Denver had always been pretty quiet seismically, but about a month after the pumping started they started recording all these earthquakes. On average about one a day, none of them bigger than 4.5 or so. Whenever they stopped pumping, the earthquakes stopped too, and when they started again, so did the earthquakes. (158)

Renee collected several evidences to prove the crime and documented them. She went to the Environmental Protecting Agency (EPA) to report about the company's illegal activity. She had a talk with the deputy regional administrator, Susan Carver. When Renee showed the documents to the officer, Carver did not pay any heed. When Renee questioned Carver as to whether the EPA had visited the company to make sure that they were treating all those wastes as per the rules, Carver rudely replied "The answer is no. We have been lowering probes into their tanks. We have not been watch-dogging their internal processes. We have neither the staff nor the legal right to go checking every pipe and every valve in every factory in America" (253). At last, the officer said that the Sweeting-Aldren was not polluting the air or water and firmly declared that the company was following the regulations of EPA. The efforts taken by Renee went in vain.

Though the EAP knew about the cause of earthquakes, it failed to take action on the industry. To make matters worse Renee was shot by an anonymous person and was admitted in the hospital and thus Renee's investigation was stalled. However, she had put a brave effort to bring out the real face of the company to the world with the help of her lover Louis. The illegal activities of the company damaged the environment. It also brought a lot of casualties and many of them were injured; to make matters worse, Louis's grandmother was killed in that tremor. The ruins of Sweeting-Aldren's facilities in Peabody were revealed to the world by Renee and Louis. The company's illegal activity had been explained in the following lines:

Twenty-three of the deaths and 110 of the injuries had been suffered by company employees caught in the initial explosion of two process lines and the ensuing general conflagration. The earthquakes had disabled various fire-control systems, and balls of combusting ethylene and sheets of flaming benzene had ignited storage tanks. A blast apparently caused by ammonium nitrate levelled process lines that otherwise might not have burned. White clouds rained nitric acid and organic reagents, the hydrocarbons and halogens combining in an environment as high-temperature and low-pH as the surface of Venus, but considerably more toxic. Cooling and drifting, the vapor plume descended on presidential neighborhoods and left a whitish, oily residue on everything it touched. (472)

The greediness and materialistic attitude of man become the cause of his own destruction. His failure to protect the environment leads to his dan-

ger. This has been shown through the incident. The report of United States Geological Survey (USGS) published in 2015 stated that most of the man-made earthquakes triggered in Oklahoma State were caused by injection of waste water by the oil industry. In 2017 a database was collected by geophysicists at Durham and Newcastle University in the United Kingdom and recorded 730 cases of man-made earthquakes that have occurred in the past one fifty years. Other causes of seismicity are mining, hydrocarbon extraction and storage, ground water extraction, reservoir impoundment and hydraulic fracturing. Additionally, earthquake risks include landslides, liquefaction, ground shaking and surface fault displacement.

Miles Wilson, a geophysicist pointed out that “with hindsight we probably shouldn’t be surprised by any anthropogenic cause. All anthropogenic projects influence forces acting in the Earth’s crust, for example by adding or removing mass, so we shouldn’t be surprised that the Earth responds to these changes and that in some cases earthquakes are the response” (qtd. in SSA). The ever-increasing demand for energy and mineral supplies may lead to a number of generated earthquakes in the future. Minerals are, no doubt, very much essential to the country’s economic prosperity. However, the extraction and mining of these natural resources beyond the particular level has a negative effect on the environment.

Coal mining is a place where the coal is extracted from the earth; mining could be done in two ways namely, underground mining and open surface mining. Underground mining is done through digging and constructing entrance tunnels or shafts and directly excavate the mineral where it is deposited. Surface mining is a method of extracting minerals to clear the surface of the earth by taking away the overlay soil and rock. Surface mining includes strip mining, open-pit mining and mountaintop removal mining. These processes adversely affect the ecosystem. The land becomes barren after mining and it is available neither for industrial use nor for agricultural purpose; trees and species are badly damaged or smashed and the degradation of soil quality causes land-slides and the nearby water also becomes contaminated.

Jonathan Franzen has an apocalyptic vision of Mountaintop Removal (MTR) mining method and its impact, which is expressed in his novel *Freedom*. The novel is a saga of Berglund family. Walter, the main character, devotes himself to campaigning against population growth and also for the protection of birds which eventually make him involve in mountaintop removal coal mining and natural-gas drilling in West Virginia. The novel also focuses on climate change, dysfunctional family and politics.

According to Franzen "Mountaintop removal as currently practiced was ecologically deplorable—ridgetop rock blasted away to expose the underlying seams of coal, surrounding valleys filled with rubble, biologically rich streams obliterated" (224-23). MTR is termed as "strip mining on steroids." Vin Haven, an affluent business man had friends in big political figures like George and Laura Bush, Dock and Lynne Cheney. "Vin had accumulated a nine-figure fortune by profitably losing money on oil and gas wells in Texas and Oklahoma" (223) and he lived off selling fuel. He planned to set up a trust called Cerulean Mountain Trust to save the endangered bird Cerulean in North America. In order to establish a trust in Southern West Virginia, he had a tie up with non-renewable energy industry. The company had confirmed that before constructing a reserve, they extracted coal from the mountain using MTR. He was overjoyed that he would be able to reap the benefits from mining and his desire to establish a bird reserve would be achieved.

Vin appointed Walter who was working in Nature Conservancy as executive director of the trust. Walter believed that after mining, that land was reclaimed and a sanctuary was built for Cerulean. Only later did Walter realise that Vin has used him to safeguard himself. Vin got a secret information from the vice president that the president intended to make specific regulatory and tax code changes to make natural-gas mining in the Appalachians productive. Vin used this opportunity and purchased enormous land along with the mineral rights in Wyoming state and West Virginia. He used the trust and Walter to cover his objective. Vin loved birds and he also needed a "little gift bag (money)" (229). Though Vin had shown more interest in money rather than the birds, to appease the people and environmentalists he acknowledged that his only goal to construct a sanctuary was to save the birds from extinction. He said to Walter that "Once we get the coal out and start reclaiming, people will see you were right" (503). It convinced everyone that he was excellent and that they would never question or oppose him.

Through MTR, trees were cleared as they were cut and burnt; this amounted to deforestation and soil erosion. In order to save one species, another cannot be extinguished because "Every species has an inalienable right to keep existing" (232). After clearing the flora and fauna, the mountain top is removed using machines called draglines and explosives till they reach the coal seams. The explosives caused air pollution and released various deplorable gases in the atmosphere. Notably, methane released during coal mining process was twenty times more powerful than greenhouse gases. Later the overburden (rock and soil overlying a mineral deposit)

was pushed into the nearby Valley and streams, forever burying rivers and streams and this practice is known as "valley-filling." Clean water becomes contaminated and it affects the aquatic life and scarcity of drinking water. After mining the untamed mountain transformed into contaminated swaths of land.

MTR project involves "sacrificing mountain ridges and displacing poor families from their ancestral homes" (227). Mining induces human displacement and resettlement; people have to vacate their homeland and settle in other places. They have to undergo risks like landlessness, homelessness, joblessness and food insecurity. In the novel the families in Forster Hollow had been relocated by Vin. At first it was not accepted by Coyle Mathis and other family members because, their ancestors lived in the place. Later Vin along with Lalitha who was the assistant of Walter, convinced them by saying that all of them would get a job at LBI company making body armour.

Richard Schiffman interviewed Indiana University researcher Michael Hendry about the impact of MTR; he talks about the devastating effects like "Blowing up mountains, deforesting large tracts of land, polluting streams, destroying roads from all the trucks going by, coating the landscape in dust, making people sick..." (np). Even though Vin did everything to extract coal from the mountain – displacement of people, destruction of forest – his plan ended in failure. Walter did not like the activities of Vin, but he was silent in order to build the reserve. He could not tolerate the malevolent activities of both, the LBI and Vin and the damage done to the public and the environment. In the Trust meeting he attacked everybody who was behind the environmental damage and shouted that, humans are "A CANCER ON THE PLANET" (515).

Water's speech became viral and the public lost hope in Cerulean Mountain Trust. The Trust had terminated Walter from the job. After he came out of the Trust, Lalitha died when her car collided with a coal truck. Thus, the greediness of man, makes him selfish trying to control nature and others around him. As poet Wordsworth says in his poem "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour" that nature would be "... the nurse,/ The guide, the guardian ..." if any man tries to establish his connection with nature; "that Nature never did betray/ The heart that loved her;" (np) but when man goes against nature and tries to destroy it, that will result in damaging the human society itself. The article "The Relationship of Man and Nature" states that when people have a long-term view of things, they will be con-

cerned about the environmental degradation and the loss of benefits of future generation as man fails to protect the environment and establish a good relationship with nature. The article insists that man becomes

... aware of the need to preserve nature's balance . . . There is no automatic force in nature which will carry human beings forward irrespective of their own efforts. We need a new creed - to be stubbornly faithful to the facts of life; and a new determination - to contribute our effort in doing the right things.

Our hope is in education. The problem is not as simple as two plus two, quickly answered and as readily disposed of. This is a problem for statesman like people who take a long view, who look not at the next vacation or the next balance sheet or the next election, but at the future of mankind. (4)

Franzen has expressed his concern over population explosion through his novel *Freedom*. Overpopulation is one of the major causes of environmental devastation. It took hundreds of thousands of years for the world population to reach one billion, and then it surged sevenfold in just 200 years. The global population surpassed 7 billion in 2011, and it is anticipated to expand to 8.5 billion in 2030, 9.7 billion in 2050, and 10.9 billion in 2100, as reported by *United Nations*. Because of overpopulation, there is a greater demand for natural resources, food, fuel and shelter. The forest has been destroyed in order to build houses, and for farming, mining, oil extraction and infrastructure expansion. More consumer items are needed for people and they are transported by vehicles. The use of fossil fuels for transportation has expanded, and various enterprises have sprung up to meet people's demands. All of this has led to the ecological disaster such as air pollution, water pollution, and deforestation and the mother earth has become extremely contaminated. Walter comes to know that everybody is trying to cheat him and that they are only pretending as if they are interested in the well being of others. When he is asked to address the gathering after the signing of the contract between LBI company and Vin, the owner of the sanctuary, could not but shout at them. The author to emphasize the attitude of human beings, has given the following passage, as Walter shouts at them, in capitals:

WE ARE ADDING THIRTEEN MILLION HUMAN BEINGS TO THE POPULATION EVERY MONTH! THIRTEEN MILLION MORE PEOPLE TO KILL EACH OTHER IN COMPETITION OVER FINITE RESOURCES! AND WIPE OUT EVERY OTHER



LIVING THING ALONG THE WAY! IT IS A PERFECT FUCK-  
ING WORLD AS LAONG AS YOU DON'T COUNT EVERY  
OTHER SPECIES IN IT! WE ARE A CANCER ON THE PLANET!  
A CANCER ON THE PLANET! (515)

Walter and his assistant Lalitha were deeply concerned about the environment, the extinction of species and habitat fragmentation. Humans ruined the environment in order to survive and live a life of luxury. Along with Lalitha and Richard he had tried to raise youth awareness campaigns regarding population issues. Nobody talked about the fundamental problem, he continued, and it was like an elephant in the room. Walter showed Richard a bar chart of population in the United States alone, and he went on to discuss the future effects of population pressure around the world :

... the population's going to rise by fifty percent in the next four decades. Think about how crowded the exurbs are already, think about the traffic and the sprawl and the environmental degradation and the dependence on foreign oil ... global carbon emissions and genocide and famine in Africa, and the radicalized dead-end underclass in the Arab world, and overfishing of the oceans ... And yet" – he gave Katz another chart – "we're going to add another three billion by 2050... And Yet *nobody* is talking about the problem publicly. It's the elephant in the room, and it's killing us. (233-34)

The development and deployment of technologies and anthropogenic pollutions of air, water and land are also causes of environmental degradation. The human impact on the environment is global warming, deforestation, ozone depletion, acid rain and water scarcity. The vast majority of the risks are emission of carbon dioxide and methane gases and climate change, especially the later one is the greatest threat to global health in the twenty first century asevinced by the World Health Organisation. It is the new challenge faced by humans and wild animals, with its impact on man's livelihood and communities. Fossil fuels, which include coal, oil, and gas, are the primary causes of climate change, contributing more than 75% of all greenhouse gas emissions and around 90% of all carbon dioxide emissions. A report of the *United Nations* pointed out that "As greenhouse gas emissions blanket the Earth, they trap the sun's heat" (np) which is the result of global warming and climate change. Weather patterns are shifting as a result of warming temperatures, which is also disturbing the natural order.

Franzen's concern and rage over this issue of climate change could be seen in *The New Yorker* article "What if We Stopped Pretending?" He says that human beings must understand that climate catastrophe is inevitable and that it cannot be stopped and there is "the point of no return." This article received backlash from various environmentalists that Franzen is discouraging the efforts taken by the activists. But Franzen does not dissuade the activists from what they are doing to help humanity. As the past cannot be retrieved, and whatever has happened cannot be undone, he wants people to accept the truth. He assures that there is a hope to defer the destruction of the earth as humans can still stabilize and preserve nature and other living creatures on earth. He says, "In the short term, however, half measures are better than no measures. Halfway cutting our emissions would make the immediate effects of warming somewhat less severe, and it would somewhat postpone the point of no return" (np). Besides scientists, government and non-governmental organisations, the individuals also have the responsibility to preserve and protect nature.

Humans are departing from the warmth of Mother earth by damaging natural resources because of their greed and inhuman attitude towards nature. She punishes her children (humans) for their wrong doings but she never hates or rejects them; her punishment should help them to realise and remedy their wrong doings and to rectify their mistakes. As loving and caring children of compassionate Mother earth, humans have to repair their mistakes and return to nature. The present generation is able to survive with the help of the inheritance (nature) given by their forefathers, who have led a stable and exemplary life. Gratitude, humane and empathetic attitude towards others and nature are the essential values required to maintain peace and bring together man and man and man and nature. So they can show their gratitude to mother earth for giving them her resources and by using them in a responsible way.

According to Franzen a small goal could be achieved through simple actions. Ample preparations should be made during fires and floods. Further he advises people to obey law and order, do the right thing having concern for others and the earth and try to protect and conserve whatever nature has given so that the future could be secure. He says in his article in *The New Yorker*,

Keep doing the right thing for the planet, yes, but also keep trying to save what you love *specifically*—a community, an institution, a wild place, a species that's in trouble—and take heart in your small successes. Any good thing you do now is arguably a hedge

against the hotter future, but the really meaningful thing is that it's good today. As long as you have something to love, you have something to hope for. (np)

In the present world, man has become self-centred and egocentric and bothers only about his own existence and satisfaction without having any concern for others or the environment. His materialistic attitude, selfishness and wickedness make him swerve from the right path. The time has come for him to take up the responsibility of his own actions. Whatever he does to the environment, is coming back to him in many forms. Scientists and activists keep warning people that they have to take necessary steps to save the earth from environmental degradation. So people should work for environment protection and for the welfare of others, without being carried away by greed or political and economic gains, like Vin of *Freedom* or the owner of Sweeting-Aldren company of *Strong Motion*. People should remember that preserving and protecting the environment also becomes one of the major responsibilities of man.

As Franzen emphasizes in his novels *Strong Motion* and *Freedom*, we should be ready to share the available natural resources for human growth, having the survival of all on earth as our concern. If man does not act realising the need of the hour and mend his ways, and pay due regard to the values of others and the environment, his life on earth will be in danger. It is worthwhile to make a note of what Theodore Roosevelt said regarding environmental protection. "To waste, to destroy our natural resources, to skin and exhaust the land instead of using it so as to increase its usefulness, will result in undermining in the days of our children the very prosperity which we ought by right to hand down to them amplified and developed" (qtd.in Nicholls 99). It is time human beings act with humanness towards their fellow beings as well as the environment.

### **Works Cited:**

Climate Action. *United Nations*. <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange>.

Coenn, Daniel. *Leo Tolstoy: His words*. BookRix, 2014, [https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/Leo\\_Tolstoy/qJzTAAwAAQBA-J?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=Coenn,+Daniel.+Leo+Tolstoy:+His+words.&printsec=frontcover](https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/Leo_Tolstoy/qJzTAAwAAQBA-J?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=Coenn,+Daniel.+Leo+Tolstoy:+His+words.&printsec=frontcover).

Forst, Robert. "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." *Poetry Founda-*

tion, <http://poetryfoundation.org>.

Franzen, Jonathan. "What if We Stopped Pretending?" *The New Yorker*, 8 Sept. 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/what-if-we-stopped-pretending>.

---. *Freedom*. 4<sup>th</sup> Estate, 2010.

---. *Strong Motion*. Harper Perennial, 2007.

Hendryx, Michael. "A Troubling Look at the Human Toll of Mountaintop Removal Mining." Interview by Richard Schiffman. *Yale Environment* 360, 21 Nov. 2017, <https://e360.yale.edu/features/a-troubling-look-at-the-human-toll-of-mountaintop-removal-mining>.

Moore, Bryan L. "Introduction: Anthropocentrism, the Anrthropocene, and the Apocalypse." *Ecological Literature and the Critique of Anthropocentrism*, Springer International Publishing, 2017, pp. 1-45.

Nicholls, Steve. "Angels From the North." *Paradise Found: Nature in America at the Time of Discovery*, The University of Chicago Press, 2009, pp. 93-105.

Seismological Society of America (SSA). "Database of earthquakes triggered by human activity is growing – with some surprises." *PreventionWeb*, 28 Sept. 2017, <https://www.preventionweb.net/news/database-earthquakes-triggered-human-activity-growing-some-surprises>.

"The Relationship of Man and Nature." *The Royal Bank of Canada Monthly Letter*, Vol. 41, no. 4, May 1960, pp. 1-4, <http://www.rbc.com/aboutus/letter/pdf/may1960.pdf>.

Wordsworth, Willia. "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour." *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org>.