


Discourses on Disaster Scholarship: A Conceptual Review

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Abstract

This article explores the dominant trends and debates surrounding the framing and conceptualization of disasters in scholarly discourse. While providing a global overview of various disasters, it focuses on how academic disciplines have defined and debated catastrophic events. The study examines how disasters are contested and the paradigms that shape this field. It follows a structured approach, beginning with a review of representative definitions of disaster, followed by an analysis of discourse on major international disasters, and concluding with an examination of prevalent paradigms. Additionally, it considers how disasters are mediated through myths and literary works. As a qualitative conceptual attempt, it draws insights, discussions, analyses, and inferences from secondary sources, including books, journals, and other written materials. The findings indicate while diverse disciplinary discussions have enriched the understanding of disaster scholarship. It concludes that, since disasters are interconnected events and processes rather than isolated incidents, they require a more holistic and comprehensive understanding.

Keywords: catastrophe, disaster, culture, myths, eco-criticism

Introduction

Disaster scholars and researchers have long grappled with the definitional problem of catastrophe. This contention divides disaster scholars into two arguing camps. One contends that disaster is a phenomenal occurrence that results from geological upheavals. This group defines disaster as a nature-induced phenomenon. In contrast, the opponents argue that to view disaster as just a physical event is to overlook a whole array of cascading and intricate processes, such as social, economic, and political factors, which contribute to the severity and impact of catastrophes. These scholars emphasize the importance of understanding how human systems interact with environmental crises, shaping vulnerability and resilience.

This bifurcation not only reflects a phenomenon of disciplinary pushback, where one discipline seeks to discredit the knowledge produced by another, but also undermines the importance of an integrated, transdisciplinary approach to addressing complex problems like disasters. By focusing solely on disciplinary dialectics, this division raises critical concerns related to agency, responsibility, and policy-making. Therefore, what is required is a more nuanced, interdisciplinary approach to disaster research. Proponents of the physical sciences emphasize the need for scientific predictions and risk mitigation, whereas the socially-oriented camp calls for a deeper exploration of power structures, inequalities, and governance in disaster response and recovery. This ideological divide exposes a significant gap in current disaster scholarship, revealing the absence of comprehensive frameworks that effectively combine both the physical and social dimensions of disasters.

Considering this milieu, the article tries to trace the development and evolution of disciplinary definitions within disaster scholarship. Specifically, it investigates the contributions of various academic disciplines to this field and examines whether the existing concepts and definitions of disasters overlap or cohere. To this end, this article employs a qualitative research design within the interpretive paradigm, a widely used

approach in Social Sciences and English Studies. The analysis is based on secondary data from books and journals on disasters, with a particular focus on archival sources that examine how academic disciplines have framed and conceptualized disasters. The study seeks to highlight significant disciplinary contributions and map out the general characteristics and features of disaster conceptualization in academic research. In what follows, I trace the trends and characteristics of the ongoing scholarly debates surrounding disaster scholarship, aiming to shed light on this gap and propose pathways for a more inclusive and holistic approach that bridges the divide between these competing perspectives.

Disciplinary Framing of Disaster

Defining disaster from an astrological perspective, or rather devinized one, David Etkin bifurcates the term into two affixes. Its first part is ‘dis’ and the second part is ‘aster’. He shows that “the prefix ‘dis’ refers to something that augurs bad or ill, and the suffix ‘aster’ means star” (Etkin 4). Pointing out the meaning of the word disaster etymologically, Etkin pitches the word disaster in the “astrological context where calamity results from the unfavorable position of a planet or star” (Etkin 4). Hence, this definition of disaster emphasizes the “unfavorable” (Etkin 4) position of a heavenly body in the occurrence of natural catastrophe.

Etkin’s definition of any catastrophic event as a phenomenon which no human power or will can avert contrasts sharply with that of Michael. K. Lindell and Calra Prater. They define disaster in terms of the consequences that it leaves behind in the place that it strikes. Lindel and Prater state that a natural calamity refers to “a nonroutine event in time and space” (7). This definition, while it highlights the spatio-temporal unpredictability of disaster, it adds that a disaster triggers “human, property, or environmental damage” (7), integrating human existence to it making an inevitable link between human existence and the harm and colossal devastation a disaster can bring. Lindel and Prater also remark that the relief “requires the use of resources from outside the directly affected community” (7). The need of resources from the outside during and after the time of disaster reinforces

the human dimension to previously understood disaster as a purely astrological and nature-induced phenomenon. Moreover, the absence of any warning heightens the vulnerability and massive disruption the humans are likely witness and suffer which requires an outside intervention for relief and rehabilitation.

In Prater and Lindell's definition, a disaster is characterized by three specific elements: non-routine, devastation, and disaster assistance. Resonating with the idea of Prater and Lindell, R. A. Stallings argues that a catastrophic occurrence is "a social situation as being characterized by nonroutine, life-threatening physical destruction attributed to the forces of nature, regardless of what other factors may seem to be involved (Stallings 263). While Lindell and Prater emphasize physical damage and outside intervention in their definition, Stallings accentuates the social element as a vital component in the understanding of disaster.

Likewise, Ben Wisner and Piers Blaikie add the concept of vulnerability in their definition of a disaster. They maintain that a disaster is recognized as a catastrophic event when "a significant number of vulnerable people experience a hazard and suffer severe damage and/or disruption of their livelihood system in such a way that recovery is unlikely without external aid" (50). Wisner and Blaikie's definition of disaster includes the concept of "recovery" in the understanding of disaster. According to them, a disaster is a nuanced concept as it also alludes to "the psychological and physical recovery of the victims, and the replacement of physical resources and the social relations required to use them" (Wisner et al. 50). Thus, Wisner and Blaikie emphasize that disaster threatens to upset victims' mental and physical wellbeing, drawing attention to incorporate people's physical suffering and mental turmoil.

Anthropological proposition relates disasters to a broader social situation. Defining disaster from the perspective of anthropology, Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susanna M. Hoffman hold that

A disaster is a process/event combining a potential destructive agent/force from the natural, modified, or built environment and

a population in a socially and economically produced condition of vulnerability, resulting in a perceived disruption of the customary relative satisfactions of individual and social needs for physical survival, social order, and meaning. (4)

While echoing Wisner and Blaikie's concept of the physical and mental repercussions, Oliver-Smith and Hoffman, however, deny that disasters are just the result of chance natural events. According to them, disasters should be understood as an intricate phenomenon knitted with the much broader context of human-induced social and economic environments.

Psychological literature of disaster as found in the definition of Alexander C. McFarlane and Fran H. Norris reveals its mental repercussions on disaster victims. According to them, a disaster is a "potentially traumatic event that is collectively experienced, has an acute onset, and is time-delimited" (4). They hold that a calamity not only causes physical damage but also affects people psychologically. This implies that a study of a calamitous event, whether nature-induced or caused by human error, should call for the psychological dimension of any calamitous occurrence.

These reviews show that defining what counts as disaster is a very complicated and protracted endeavor. As shown, different disciplinary perspectives explain a disaster from multiple points of view. The common feature of the definitions above is their focus on a widespread and overwhelming threat ranging from the massive physical disruption to traumatic repercussions. While these explanations magnify some common characteristics of disaster, they also demonstrate the concept that being a complicated phenomenon, a disaster can elicit different perspectives and discourses from diverse domains of disaster scholarship.

Given the multidimensional nature of a disaster, disaster scholars note that no consensual definition of a disaster exists. In the article "Theorizing Disasters: Nature, Power, and Culture," Oliver-Smith holds that one first comes across many theoretical challenges in giving a clear explanation of a disaster. However, according to him, anthropologists have

to some extent solved this problem by explaining disasters from both “natural and social scientific perspectives” (25). Oliver-Smith, as an anthropologist, classifies natural catastrophe into two categories: first, the “slow-onset phenomena” that includes such calamitous occurrences as droughts and toxic exposures, and second, the “rapid onset events, such as earthquakes and nuclear accidents” (25). He pioneers the examination of the disaster from the perspective of social science. In this regard, Oliver-Smith and Hoffman contend that disasters and their responses afterwards arise within an “eminently social” context (12). Oliver-Smith emphasizes that a disaster is a complex phenomenon, and therefore requires a multidimensional perspective for the comprehensive understanding of the field. He also attempts to address the demarcation problem by clarifying disaster as a nature-induced and human-induced calamity.

A major challenge in defining disaster is attributed to the specific methodology that different disciplines adhere to. Disaster scholarship has largely focused on the “infrastructural, demographic, political, ecological, and socioeconomic aspects of disaster . . . totally ignoring the cultural aspects of disasters” (Oliver-Smith, “Conversations” 37). Oliver-Smith argues that the lack of emphasis on the multidimensional component of disaster and the existing problem of “disciplinary compartmentalization” (37) has led to the ambiguity about the conceptual issue of disaster. He indicates that to view disaster as an isolated event is to undermine “both the intellectual integrity of disaster studies as well as its research enterprise” (37). For Oliver-Smith, disaster should be understood as “a collectivity of intersecting processes and events” (38). He contends that disaster scholars should adopt multiple perspectives for the comprehensive understanding of disasters. He notes that an adequate approach to a disaster should be able to encompass its multidimensional aspects.

Concurring with Oliver-Smith, Susanna M. Hoffman opines that the “neglecting [of] the deep cultural roots of every aspect of disaster” is a “tragic deficiency” in the disaster research (21). The cultural aspect of disasters is explicitly stated here, with a suggestion to bring in cultural context while defining a catastrophe. The aspect of “multidimensionality”

(“Conversations” 37) that Oliver-Smith speaks of is also reiterated in the book *At Risk*. In it, the writers urge to examine disaster “as a complex mix of natural hazards and human action” (Wisner et al, 5). Wisner et. al contend that a lot of human activities exacerbate the repercussions of such natural phenomena as earthquakes and volcanoes. Therefore, it is sometimes difficult to pinpoint the features that separate human-induced disaster from man-made disaster. This implies that for its multidimensional aspect, a disaster should not be regarded as a random event but as one that lies in the intersection between human actions and nature.

Reinforcing the view that disaster is multidimensional and complex, Souheil El Masri and Graham Tipple hold that catastrophic events should be understood in the context of other phenomena. They contend that natural events are “complex” and their ramifications can be seen on human, socio-economic, cultural, political and physical domains (6). This view resonates with the definition of all natural catastrophes as being “located at the nexus between humans and nature” (Vacano and Zaumseil 19). This interconnection unveils the social aspect of disaster, requiring disaster researchers to explain and interpret disasters as the events that are “socially constructed and experienced differently by different groups and individuals . . . (Oliver-Smith “Conversation” 38). So, Masri and Tipple, addressing all kinds of disasters as the multidimensional phenomena, expand the area of disaster scholarship by contextualizing catastrophic events onto broader matrices.

A recent definition encompasses the issue of the overall impacts that disasters exert on different sections of the affected human environment. In 1992, the United Nations theorized that a disaster is the event that paralyzes the response capability of the affected community. A disaster is labelled as a global event that incapacitates “the functioning of society, causing widespread human, material, or environmental losses which exceed the ability of the affected society to cope using only its own resources” (Coppola 25). Two significant features of disaster are prominent in this definition. First, it is potentially highly disruptive in terms of human and

material loss. Second, based on its severity and magnitude, a disaster merits being categorized as an international catastrophe.

In Charles E. Fritz's definition also, the aspect of disruption features as a key characteristic of a disaster. Furthermore, Fritz considers it as the spatio-temporal phenomenon that causes a massive social and physical harm of far-reaching consequences. Fritz maintains that a disaster is "an event concentrated in time and space, in which a society or one of its subdivisions undergoes physical harm and social disruption, such that all or some essential functions of the society or subdivision are impaired" (655). In his definition, Fritz too reiterates disruption as a key property of disaster.

The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) points out a three-fold component of a disaster: scale, intensity and consequences. Approached from this perspective, a catastrophe exceeds the normal "functioning of a community", triggering massive deaths and material losses (UNISDR 9). A natural calamity strikes with widespread devastation and its destruction is complete and paralyzing.

There also exists a typology to categorize disasters. Mechthild Von Vacano and Manfred Zaumseil identify four distinctive types: "natural," "technological," "social" and "anthropogenic" (6). They maintain that classifications can also be made in terms of the "scope of disaster impact, speed of onset, duration, the size of the affected area, and social preparedness of the affected community" (6). As per this category and definition, Vacano and Zaumseil classify earthquakes as "sudden onset events of short duration, usually affecting a relatively small geographic area" (Vacano and Zaumseil 6).

International experiences show that the features and nature of disasters overlap. It is therefore difficult to differentiate between natural disasters and human-induced disasters, meaning the features that distinctly separate natural calamities from the catastrophes that are caused by human activities are indistinguishable. This interconnection indicates that the cause for what is otherwise called a natural catastrophe inheres in what Anthony

Oliver-Smith and Susanna M. Hoffman deem a “built environment” (4) of human society. In this regard, scholars recognize the “element of human error, negligence, or intent” (Coenraads 11) even in natural disasters. One glaring case of disaster that has entailed “human error or negligence” (Coenraads 11) is the Fukushima nuclear power plant of Japan. This calamity is an illustration of how “disasters emerge from the mutual interaction between the environment and human societies” (Vacano and Zaumseil 19). Some of the global seismic events have also been studied “as events that originate in and through the environment” (Smith and Petley 9). There are plenty of catastrophic events that have been studied from such a perspective. They include the 2011 tsunami in Japan, the 2010 Haiti earthquake, the Kobe earthquake of 1995, the 2006 Java earthquake¹ and the like. These are among large-scale events that have led to tremendous aftermath discourses and drew intense public resentment.

As the discourses above reveal, disaster should be understood at multiple levels, not just as natural phenomena but as one that has a human element too. In this regard, disasters not only cause massive destruction at the physical level but also bring about an overwhelming reorientation in defining it from a completely new perspective.

No clear account exists about when natural occurrences first drew academic interests. As Amos Nur and Dawn Burgess illuminate, although the urge to understand natural occurrences “was intrinsic to every known society” (73), there still lacks a consensus among disaster scholars about when the serious research inquiry was conducted in this field. In “What is a Disaster? Anthropological Perspectives on a Persistent Question,” Oliver-Smith clarifies that academic study of disaster is a more recent scholarly enterprise. He studies that catastrophic events have received the attention of scientific scrutiny for “roughly seven decades” (18). However, the root of a recorded systematic disaster studies, according to Russell R. Dynes, goes as far back as Rousseau’s observation of the consequences of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, which is recognized as “the first modern disaster” (113). Dynes

¹ These are the examples of common knowledge and therefore requires no citation.

recounts that Rousseau studied that the lack of swift action, evacuation system and dense population exacerbated the impacts of the 1755 tremor (99). Dynes claims that Rousseau's analysis is the first systematic and organized study on any natural disaster.

A litany of studies on different cataclysmic events exists in different disaster literatures. For example, the earthquake that occurred in Alaska in 1964 was considered "the most studied seismic event in U.S. history" and was "the first earthquake to receive serious attention" (National Research Council 26). Other global recorded natural disasters, including the earthquake, analyzed from various scholarly perspectives included the 2005 Hurricane Katrina; the Italy earthquake of April 6, 2009; the Gujarat earthquake of 26 January 2001; the Haiti earthquake of 12 January 2010; the 1995 Kobe earthquake, the March 11, 2011, Fukushima Earthquake, and the 2006 Yogyakarta earthquake. Given the variegated contexts in which these catastrophes happened, these international calamities were studied from multiple scholarly perspectives. Although it is beyond the prospect of this study to examine these cases elaborately, the common theme that undercuts all of them focused on using a disaster as a chance for change, as an opportunity for the sustainable post-disaster development.

Vacano and Zaumseil sum up the key features of a disaster and recognize four distinctive variables: "destructive character," "disruption to community," temporal event and "external assistance" (5). Similarly, Daman Coppola views that an international disaster has the potential to cripple "the functioning of society, causing widespread human, material, or environmental losses which exceed the ability of the affected society to cope using only its own resources" (25). Three prominent features of a disaster stand out in all the definitions surveyed so far. First, it must disrupt the response capability of a community. Second, it causes massive human and material loss. Third, based on its severity and scale, a disaster is classified as a global catastrophe.

Mythological and Literary Renditions

In addition to the various disciplinary discourses as pointed out above, some interesting mythological explanations of catastrophic events also abound. The reliance on “one or some supernatural beings” (Nur and Burgess 73) as responsible factors causing “natural cataclysms such as earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions, and hurricanes” (Nur and Burgess 73) illustrates mythological explanation of disaster events. Mythological approach to catastrophic occurrences reveals how different natural calamities were perceived and narrated in different phases of human society, showing how early human beings conceived natural events in mythological terms. A common mythological view is to regard natural disasters as “acts of God”, which occur “without any apparent direct human involvement” (Coenraads 11) and often strike without any warning.

The belief to attribute natural events to some supernatural forces remains dominant in the 18th century Europe. During this time, all scientific views of natural phenomena were severely doubted and frowned upon. In his book *The Lisbon Earthquake*, Thomas Downing Kendrick provides an account of the dispute between science and the Church on the cause of the earthquake that struck London in 1750. The assumption that “earthquakes are God’s instruments” to punish the errant was prevalent during this time (Kendrick 19). Although the 1750 disaster did not have much disruption, the tone of premonition that “divine admonitions were serious” (Kendrick 12) resonated with the dominant discourse in the disaster literature of the time. In 1750, any attempt to attribute the seismic calamity to “natural causes” without a “reference to God” (16) was intolerable. Viewed from this theological perspective, those who blaspheme God are the real perpetrators of disasters and are responsible for natural disasters.

However, the Lisbon earthquake unveiled a new philosophical discourse, questioning the fundamental beliefs about the relationship between God and the world. Thus, the 1755 Lisbon earthquake ushered in a new perspective of religious and philosophical rhetoric. Reflecting this development, Etkin argues this disaster “engaged society in a religious and

philosophical debate that challenged their most fundamental assumptions about God and the world in which they lived” (xxi). Kendrick’s observation here opens up a new component of disaster. He demonstrates that disasters like an earthquake are regarded as the manifestation of God’s retaliation on the errant and the transgressors.

Some topographical regions are prone to certain types of disasters. The inhabitants of such regions create a system of folklore and legends to express the natural calamities that they experience. These are the unique places where disasters are conceived in the form of “ceremonies,” “rituals,” “myths,” and “legends” (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman, “Why Should” 11). In various ancient cultures, natural occurrences were regarded as the manifestation of the ferocious dimension of supernatural entities. For example, in the West, the Greek civilization was the earliest human society to attribute the origin of earthquakes to mythology. According to Greek mythology, Poseidon is the god that presides over the Sea and is responsible for earthquakes. He is referenced in the works of Homer and Hesiod as “enosichthon” (Nor and Burgess 75), which means an uncanny creature that keeps shaking the earth intermittently. Similarly, the Japanese culture exemplifies an interesting case about the origin of the earthquake. For the Japanese, an earthquake happens because of a catfish living underground that brandishes its tail to cause the entire earth to shake, resulting in an earthquake (Nor and Burgess 75). Haruki Murakami’s book *after the quake*—written following the 1995 Kobe earthquake, contains a story entitled “super-frog saves Tokyo” (Lewis 134). Likewise, in Sumatra, native myths about the earthquake fault-line show that the Earth is seen as being perched precariously on the cow-like horns of a monster (Frazer 218). Another tribal myth in the British Columbia portrays the ongoing fierce fight between a Thunderbird and a Whale, which results in such periodic natural catastrophes as earthquakes and tsunamis (Ludwin et al. 144). Such supernatural explanation of disaster shows the fact that disasters are also rendered through myths and stories. Thus, many cultures are rife with myths that provide supernatural explanation of natural catastrophes, giving rise to what is called disaster culture.

Literary renderings, such as poems and paintings, project natural phenomena through rich imagery and colors. They are employed to articulate the aftermath losses, sufferings, hopes, and resilience. Abhi Subedi describes artistic texts as “a versatile and visceral medium of capturing the moments of alarm, resistance, hope and agony” (25). Subedi holds that imaginary delineation of disasters forms a viable means to etch out the human poignancy and plights in any post-disaster conditions. One of the most enduring and striking renditions of natural catastrophes is the painting of the April 1815 Mount Tambora eruption. The connection between volcanic disasters and the horror literature that they inspire is frequently articulated in various literary works. For example, Lord Byron’s “Darkness,” John Keats’s “To Autumn,” and Li Yuyang’s “A Sigh for Autumn Rain” are believed to have been inspired by the 1815 volcano’s weather effects (Bate 71). This human aspiration to portray disasters through literary pursuits reveals that disasters have for long motivated painters and poets.

In a similar vein, Voltaire memorializes the 1755 earthquake through *Poem on the Lisbon Disaster* (a poem), and his novel *Candide*. According to Etkin, these literary books “took a much more critical approach to the human condition as it relates to God’s justice” (xii). Voltaire’s writing on the earthquake denies the prospect of any unseen forces and unleashes criticism on the existence of any generous god.

More recent views on disaster foreground that idea that it is not just that disaster comes to us, it is also true that anthropocentric activities invite disasters. Eco-criticism in literary studies tried to reinforce this idea that how the nature and culture in a symbiotic relationship. Like other disaster studies that relate a natural event to its effects on human beings, eco-criticism also examines human-nature linkages and is defined “as a study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glottfelty and Fromm xviii). Primarily, eco-criticism stands on the premise that “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and being affected by it” (Glottfelty and Fromm xix). Glottfelty expresses his premonition about the impending threat to “the planet’s basic life support

system” owing to damaging “human actions” and predicts about “our headlong race to apocalypse (Glottfelty xx). Thus, Glottfelty foregrounds the hostility between human and nature, and nature’s retribution in the form of “apocalypse” (Glottfelty xx). Glottfelty questions human tempering with nature and regards human activities as menacing threat to “global environmental crisis” (xx). In this connection, the studies in corrective literary response to the environmental crisis, advocating a more responsible outlook towards nature, are some effective ways to bring more nuanced understanding about natural disaster in relation to human existence. Reading a close nexus between nature and human culture by examining literary texts can promote an eco-pedagogical approach as one of the effective ways to broaden the discourse of disaster scholarship (GC and Joshi 14). Moreover, the emphasis can be brought by making pedagogy concentrate on environmental communication.

Discussion and Conclusion

Conceptually, the intellectual engagements with the evolving discourse on catastrophes in the preceding sections revealed that disaster is an interconnected event, characterized by a myriad of processes and intersections. Apparently, catastrophic occurrences such as floods, landslides, the disaster from technological hitch, earthquake and many others are ascribed to extraneous factors, the most obvious being nature. However, many disciplinary theoretical discussions, as reviewed above, show that there is more to it than it meets the eye, which debunks the notion that the disaster is a natural calamity.

Disaster scholarship and research have advanced the field of inquiry into catastrophes in different ways, unfolding their various dimensions. Disasters are usually understood as the manifestation of physical phenomena. Disaster scholars, however, recognize that natural calamities should be defined as “social constructs” (DeLeo 70). This concept reiterates Anthony Oliver-Smith’s claim that catastrophes “do not simply happen, they are caused” (“Peru’s Five-Hundred-Year Earthquake” 74). Such

definitions explain disasters as human-induced events and reflect the idea that a disaster is more a complicated phenomenon than just a physical form.

Scholars have approached the concept of disasters from multiple perspectives. Sociological, psychological, environmental, and anthropological study link disasters to manifold human conditions. These identify different causal chains, unfolding different factors responsible for disasters. Blaike et al embed disasters in political and economic ideologies that intensify the vulnerability of people. Sociological insight identifies disasters not just as the ferocious form of nature but as one that straddles the intersection between human society and nature. It shows a nexus between disasters and man-made human environments. Researchers on the psychological dimension of disasters claim that a catastrophic event has the high potential to inflict trauma on the victims, thereby focusing on how the disaster victims can cope with the aftermath situations. Similarly, ecological concern addresses the challenges of how disasters and environmental degradation are interlinked and how a holistic measure can be adopted to find a solution to this issue.

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