IARJSET ISSN (O) 2393-8021, ISSN (P) 2394-1588

International Advanced Research Journal in Science, Engineering and Technology

Impact Factor 8.311 ⁜ Peer-reviewed & Refereed journal ⁜ Vol. 13, Issue 11, November 2026

DOI: 10.17148/IARJSET.2026.131117

Rethinking Ethics During Pandemic - An Analysis of Sequoia Nagamatsu's *How High We Go in the Dark*

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Abstract: Globalisation, rapid technological progress, climate change, and pandemics all contribute to situations where certain groups of lives are seen as less valuable, less useful, and therefore disposable. In today's world, waste doesn't refer only to discarded objects but also to human and non-human lives. The problem arises when human beings categorise lives in terms of productivity or utility, and those who do not fit into these categories are pushed aside as 'waste.' Jean-François Lyotard's 'performative principle' is significant, where "the criterion of performativity is efficiency: a statement is accepted if it performs better than another" [1]. Zygmunt Bauman, in his work *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (2004), explains how societies produce 'human waste'. He shows that as society develops, it also pushes certain groups, such as migrants, the poor, and the sick, by treating them as unwanted or useless. Extending Bauman's idea, not only humans but also animals and nature are treated as waste when they are no longer considered useful. Sequoia Nagamatsu's *How High We Go in the Dark* (2022) is a novel set in a future shaped by climate change and altered due to deadly viruses, depicting realistically how people struggle with loss, survival, and ethics. This paper argues that Nagamatsu's novel treats both non-human entities and certain human lives as waste during the times of crises by applying Bauman's theory and Lyotard's performativity principle.

Keywords: Wasted lives, Zygmunt Bauman, pandemic literature, anthropocentrism, bioethics, Lyotard's performativity.

Waste is often understood as discarded objects or garbage, but in the twenty-first century, the term waste applies to life itself. "Waste is never purely about disposal; it is also about how value is denied or reassigned" [2]. Human and non-human lives are frequently devalued and treated as expendable when they no longer serve social, economic, or scientific utility. This issue becomes especially urgent in times of planetary crisis, such as climate change and pandemics, where survival and progress are often pursued at the cost of ethical reflection. As Mary Douglas observes in *Purity and Danger*, "Dirt is matter out of place" [3], reminding that waste refers not only to material category but also a judgment about what belongs and what does not. In this sense, the pandemic in Sequoia Nagamatsu's *How High We Go in the Dark* (2022) highlights that societies assign value and disposability to both humans and non-humans in moments of crisis.

Sequoia Nagamatsu's novel *How High We Go in the Dark* was published in the year 2022, provides a powerful literary space to apply Bauman and Lyotard's ideas. This novel is structured as interconnected stories set in the aftermath of a plague which is caused by the melting of Arctic ice, the novel explores how humans and non-humans alike are caught in cycles of survival, grief, and disposability together. Bauman and Lyotard reveal how modernity generates both 'wasted lives' and 'performative lives' in societies to rethink ethics during pandemics. Nagamatsu's novel becomes an important literary space to examine this tension, showing how climate change and disease force characters into positions where the value of life itself is questioned.

Zygmunt Bauman's *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (2004) provides a framework to understand this process. He argues, "... the production of 'human waste'… is an inevitable outcome of modernization" [4]. Migrants, the poor, the sick, and others pushed to the margins are treated as excess, as burdens rather than people who owe their right to live with dignity. The problem arises because human beings often have an anthropocentric perspective, categorising life by its utility. Gay Hawkins notes, "Waste is never simply an object, but always relational, produced in and through cultural, economic and political systems" [5]. What cannot serve economic, scientific, or social progress is declared useless and therefore discarded.

Jean-François Lyotard's, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) states that modern societies evaluate everything according to performativity. "The criterion of performativity is efficiency: a statement is accepted if it performs better than another" [1]. In a world dominated by pandemics and climate instability, lives are judged by

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efficiency, artificial intelligence replaces humans, patients become research material, and animals become biotechnological tools. Those who cannot perform within an, utilitarian system are easily discarded. This raises urgent ethical questions that if life is measured only by productivity, what happens to dignity, care, and justice in times of global crisis.

In the chapter *Songs of Your Decay*, Laird is a man infected with the Arctic plague. He knows he is going to die, and instead of receiving care as a patient, his body is offered for science. He volunteers to live in a body farm, a field where cadavers are left to rot so scientists like Aubrey can study decomposition. As the novel notes, "He volunteered on his own and he's still alive" [6]. Here, Laird has lost hope of medical treatment or recovery; he sees himself as waste and useful only for research. In Bauman's terms, Laird is treated as a kind of 'human waste' [4]. His identity as a father, brother, or friend is erased, and he is reduced to a research subject. Lyotard's notion of performativity helps deepen this reading. Laird's body is accepted by science only because it 'performs' efficiently as data for decomposition studies, not because of his human dignity. This reflects an ethical shift where society often turns the dying and the dead into instruments of knowledge, valuing efficiency over care.

One of the most striking examples comes from the story *Pig Son*. A doctor who lost his son to the Arctic plague, along with other scientists, develops genetically modified pigs capable of hosting human organs for transplantation. Once the organ matures inside the pig, it is harvested for surgery, leading to the pig's death. The pig is thus reduced to a medium of efficiency, a biotechnological tool for saving human life. The intrinsic worth of the animal is erased. Snortorious, a pig who develops both a brain and vocal cords, raises profound ethical questions when he confronts the humans: "You are a doctor. He is a doctor… I am a pig. What job is pig?" [6]. From Bauman's perspective, the pig represents a form of 'non-human waste,' a life exploited and discarded once it has served its purpose. From Lyotard's viewpoint, the pig's value exists only through its performative capacity, its efficiency in producing usable human organs. Both frameworks expose the anthropocentric attitude that denies animals ecological role and dignity.

In the chapter *Speak, Fetch, Say I Love You*, Aki becomes deeply attached to an AI robot dog that carries the recorded voice of his late mother, Ayano. The machine, designed to perform comfort and care, takes the central role in Aki's grieving process, while his father is pushed aside as less capable and less 'performative.' The boy Aki spent all his time with the robotic dog instead of his father. In Lyotard's terms, the father becomes a figure of wasted life, devalued because he cannot match the efficiency and emotional impact of technology. Nagamatsu here reveals how grief, technology, and performativity reshape family bonds, raising questions about whose presence is valued and whose is dismissed.

Environmental waste also emerges as a central theme. The novel opens with a scientist researching in the Arctic and accidentally releasing an ancient virus and due to the climatic changes, the permafrost melts which leads the virus to spread worldwide, symbolising how human driven climate change destabilises ecosystems. The Arctic landscape itself becomes 'wasted.' The Arctic is not a fertile land due to its less performativity it is considered a wasteland. The ancient virus is dumped in the Arctic region for centuries, like the waste dumped in the landfills, which transforms into a great ecological catastrophe in the novel. The scientist's negligence transforms nature into a catastrophe.

The chapter *Before You Melt into the Sea* centres on a funeral enterprise Eden Ice which sculpt ice sculptures of the deceased people. As the hospitals did not allow the infected people's corpses to be taken home for the funeral proceedings, people contacted Eden Ice to place an order for the ice sculptures of their loved ones to complete the funeral. Arctic ices in large blocks are used to carve the body of the deceased in the exact height, body width, even the skin colour and tattoos are matched precisely. "My company provides artistic alternatives to burial and cremation, one of the many "new death"" [6] Even after the spread of the Arctic plague, the ice was considered as a waste. Later after the completion of the funeral, the sculptures are thrown in the sea, which sows the seed for further ecological collapses, disrupting the environment.

As Rob Nixon explains, 'slow violence' means damage to the environment that happens slowly, is often unseen, but still causes serious harm. Nixon considers slow violence as, ".... a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction dispersed across time and space" [7]. In the novel, the Arctic plague represents this slow violence. The scientist's research and human use of resources treat the Arctic only for its usefulness, what Lyotard calls 'performativity,' and ignore its real value. The Arctic is used like a throwaway place, becoming the starting point of the virus, and a warning sign that when something is categorised as waste through the lens of anthropocentrism, then it can turn into the cause of disaster.

Sequoia Nagamatsu's *How High We Go in the Dark* reveals that pandemics and climate change create both human and non-human 'waste lives.' By applying Bauman's theory of wasted lives and Lyotard's idea of performativity, the novel shows that dignity is lost when life is valued only through utility and efficiency. From humans reduced to research

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subjects, to animals used as tools, and neglected lands turned into catastrophes, the novel urges readers to rethink ethics in moments of global crisis, ignoring and damaging land and neglecting lives will finally may harm everyone.

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