

# DISASTER MANAGEMENT IN A DYSTOPIAN NOVEL: A CASE STUDY OF JJ AMAWORO WILSON'S *DAMNIFICADOS*

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**Abstract:** *Several years ago, the large number of people living illegally in the so-called Tower of David, an abandoned high-rise building in the Venezuelan capital of Caracas, caught the attention of the world's media. Based on this unlikely source of inspiration, a similar such skyscraper forms the centrepiece to *Damnificados*, a dystopian novel by JJ Amaworo Wilson, which was first published in 2016. Set in a nameless country, this innovative and engaging novel frequently turns to magic realism in its depiction of the 'damnificados', a motley crew of squatters who are under constant threat from external perils, both natural and man-made. Under the guidance of the novel's hero, Nacho, strategies to manage these threats are developed and implemented, with significant implications for the building's inhabitants and their welfare. Accordingly, this exploratory contribution aims to identify and apply a relevant disaster management framework to the first of the many calamities portrayed in the novel, which is where the building and the city surrounding it are inundated by a catastrophic flood. In evaluating the inhabitants' response through the lens of the framework, this study thereby provides an interdisciplinary overview of how disaster management strategies can be represented in literary texts.*

**Keywords:** *flood, crisis management, PRR model, Torre de David, dystopian fiction, emergency response*

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## Introduction

The first couple of decades of the current millennium have unfortunately seen a wide range of catastrophes, both natural and man-made. In the former devastating floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions can be included, whereas human activity is to blame for tragedies like war and environmental pollution. Though strategies for dealing with man-made and natural disasters may be common knowledge for those dwelling in parts of our planet where such hazards are lamentably commonplace, the impact of the recent COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic has also arguably heightened global public awareness of disaster management in the context of epidemiological safety and security.

With the societal, economic, and geopolitical ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic being well-attested, scholars from the fields of languages, literature, and culture have also documented the impact of this disaster. This broad array of research ranges from analyses of the pandemic's effect on multilingualism, translation, and interpreting (e.g. Blumczynski & Wilson, 2022; Liu & Cheung, 2022) to evaluations of relevant literary and creative responses (e.g. Favaro, 2021; Dāwes, 2022). Yet, disasters have provided a source of inspiration for authors for many centuries – indeed, one of the geneses for the numerous travails of Voltaire's *Candide* (2006 [1759]) was the terrible Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, a disaster which quite literally shook the intellectual world of that time, with corresponding implications for developments in literature and philosophy over the ensuing decades (Dynes, 2000). Turning to more modern responses to catastrophes, even in pre-pandemic times *The New Yorker* claimed that the somewhat pessimistic era of the late 2010s was a “Golden Age for dystopian fiction” (Lepore, 2017). With many of these fictional responses perhaps acknowledging broader public concern about the future impact on human society of increasing political uncertainty, climate change, and the seemingly inexorable advance of technology, the straightforward definition of a dystopia<sup>1</sup> potentially represents both a warning and a threat for the years to come.

In a broadly interdisciplinary manner, this article offers an overview of the disaster management strategies present in a prizewinning dystopian novel, *Damnificados*, which was first published by California-based PM Press in 2016. The author of the work is JJ Amaworo Wilson, a British-American-Nigerian writer and lecturer who was born in Germany but is currently resident in the United States (Amaworo Wilson, 2023). Indeed, as will be mentioned later, the author's extensive international experience permeates the novel, which is set in an alternative world similar to our own, yet inspired by magic realism. In fact, the plot of *Damnificados* is distinguished by the presence of many natural and

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1. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a dystopia as simply “An imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible; opposed to utopia” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2020).

human-induced calamities and crises, such as plague, pandemic, war, flood, and famine. Accordingly, using a well-known practical disaster management framework as a template, this overview outlines a case study of the first of the major disasters that take place in the novel.

### **The inspiration for the novel and an overview of disaster management**

In observing paratextual elements of the book, the front cover of *Damnificados* features an image of the so-called Tower of David (Spanish: *Torre de David*), a partially-constructed high-rise building in Caracas, the capital city of Venezuela. Officially known as the *Centro Financiero Confianzas*, work on the abandoned skyscraper was begun during the early 1990s, when Venezuela – a country with abundant natural resources – was enjoying an economic boom fuelled by its substantial oil and natural gas reserves (Caldieron, 2013, p. 139). However, similarly to many resource-rich countries, the rapid overdevelopment of this sector subsequently brought about a severe financial crisis, and as such the building was left incomplete.

While Venezuela has continued to suffer significant economic and socio-political challenges for many years, the Tower of David began to receive considerable media attention in the English-speaking world during the country's acute economic crisis in the early 2010s (see e.g. BBC News, 2013; The Guardian, 2014). During this period, the abandoned skyscraper was occupied by squatters, homeless people, and families seeking safety and shelter, who seemingly created a kind of parallel society within its walls. As a result, the tower and its occupants have been the subject of scholarly interest from various fields, disciplines, and perspectives (see e.g. Fonseca & Schlueter, 2013; Blackmore, 2017; Wilson, 2022).

Indeed, this real-life occurrence has served as a source of inspiration for *Damnificados*. Despite its title, the novel is written in English and has won several prizes (Amaworo Wilson, 2023). It has also been translated into other languages, with the German version reviewed in the prestigious weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel* (Barragán, 2020) and the French translation reviewed in *Le Monde* (Marivat, 2019). Narrated by a third-person omniscient narrator, the book is divided into twenty-eight chapters, each of which – in a manner reminiscent of a nineteenth-century novel (Weiss, 1971) – opens with a chapter heading that summarises the main happenings of the plot. The novel's title comes from the name given to the ragtag motley crew who take over an abandoned skyscraper in a nameless city. Consisting of around 600 people, they are termed 'damnificados', a Spanish term which refers to victims in the sense of "survivors of a disaster" (*Collins English-Spanish Dictionary*, 2023). The book chronicles their struggle to survive against a series of harsh external threats, including both

natural and man-made disasters. Among themselves, a microcosmic functional society is created, headed by Nacho, the novel's hero who needs crutches to walk. He is also multilingual, multitalented, and highly capable in the image of the so-called 'competent man' model (see, e.g. Schneider, 2011). As hinted at in the preceding section, the novel is magic realist in approach, and many 'fantastic' events occur in the work. Though, as mentioned previously, the locale is nameless, nonetheless the descriptions and much of the nomenclature used seem to suggest Latin American influences. However, it is also worthy of attention that many of the placenames, characters, and other terms in the text reference a range of other languages, such as French, German, Czech, and Romanian.

Turning towards a brief presentation of disaster management, a variety of different theoretical frameworks and approaches are used. Indeed, in his study, Sementelli (2007) outlines several taxonomies of crisis and disaster management informed by the differing processes and tools used. As such, he highlights that these approaches can include four major groupings, such as more abstract ones based on economic theories, and more policy-focused ones grounded in social theories, to which can be added administrative-based approaches from management studies, as well as decision-based initiatives founded on top-down approaches.

With regard to relevant frameworks, the Prevention, Preparedness, Response, Recovery (PPRR) model provides a convenient frame of analysis for the purposes of this article. It has been widely used in disaster management (e.g. Lewis, 2006, p. 48) and has evolved over the years since it was developed in the 1970s, though other emergency management models have of course emerged in the ensuing decades (e.g. Wenger, 2017). As highlighted by Chaudhary and Piracha (2021, p. 1112), the PPRR model encompasses the full scope of disaster management, with the first two stages (Prevention and Preparedness) occurring before the event, whilst the last two (Response and Recovery) are initiated as soon as the disaster has happened. Though the PPRR framework has been the subject of critique (see e.g. Cronstedt, 2002), the model remains important, as demonstrated by its enduring role in the Australian context. By way of example, extensive official guidelines are available regarding the implementation of the framework in Queensland (Queensland Government, 2023), and it is also utilised in New South Wales, where "the framework continues to define how government agencies plan for and manage emergencies" (Holley and McArthur, 2022, p. 69).

Although the use of literary case studies may arguably be somewhat uncommon, case studies based on fictional works have previously been discussed within the social sciences, especially in the domain of business and management (e.g. Alvarez & Merchán, 1992; Rhodes & Brown, 2005; Gerde & Foster, 2007). In

the specific context of portrayals of fictional disasters, catastrophes in several Hollywood films have also been discussed and analysed (e.g. Jerry, Thomas, Hill & Cutter, 2000; Haney, Havice & Mitchell, 2019). Accordingly, by taking one of the book's many disasters as a case study, this contribution aims to examine whether the disaster management strategy adopted by Nacho in *Damnificados* can be said to align with the PPRR model.

### Presentation of the case study and findings

The current case study under analysis comprises an overview of the reaction to a catastrophic flood, an event which in the real world is often conceptualised in warlike terms (see e.g. Gorchev, 2022). The disaster was selected for analysis owing to its important role in defining the squatters' continued survival in the building. Taken from the opening chapters of the book (numbers 5-9) (Amaworo Wilson, 2016, pp. 35-92), this first major natural disaster in *Damnificados* is reminiscent not only of the Bible, but also of calamitous inundations such as those in Gabriel García Márquez's novel *In Evil Hour*, a noted work of magic realism (García Márquez, 2014 [1968]). In the case of *Damnificados*, the scenario is contextualised by information detailing the aftermath of the so-called "First Trash War", the subsequent construction and abandonment of the tower as well as the exodus of dispossessed people to the derelict building. Then, the rains start, with the omniscient narrator intoning that "What they don't know is that the rain will soon become a flood, an inundation unseen here for a thousand years" (Amaworo Wilson, 2016, p. 37). At first, some of the damnificados – including Harry, one of the tower's designated bakers – do not think that anything seems to be out of the ordinary:

"Listen, it's rainy season, right? Rains every year. Then it dries up, right? And everything goes back to normal."

"Look outside."

Harry glances out the window. Sees a car sailing by. (Amaworo Wilson, 2016, p. 45)

The situation worsens, and the rising floodwaters mean that the tower soon becomes completely cut off from the outside world: "All he can see is a lake of water, fifteen feet below the first floor and rising fast" (Amaworo Wilson, 2016, p. 47). Accordingly, the responsibility rests on Nacho, the novel's hero, to deal with this problem.

With regard to *Prevention*, the first stage of the PPRR model, the millennial nature of the flood means that it can be characterised as an event that cannot be averted.

In terms of *Preparedness*, the subsequent stage of the model, at this point in the novel the ‘damnificados’ had only just begun their occupation of the skyscraper. Indeed, Nacho had organised the nascent community, and the building had been spruced up and made safe for human habitation (Amaworo Wilson, 2016, p. 14). In addition, Nacho had performed a skills audit of the squatters, with the aim of finding out any useful capabilities that members of the community had to share and teach each other, thus contributing to the improvement of the living conditions. Furthermore, Nacho supervised the organisation of schooling for the damnificados’ children to promote the acquisition of basic literacy skills (Amaworo Wilson, 2016, p. 20). Additionally, he also managed to organise basic defence measures for the building (Amaworo Wilson, 2016, p. 20), which although are not directly relevant to this current incident, nonetheless prove useful as the events of the novel proceed (Amaworo Wilson, 2016, p. 16). However, despite their eventual usefulness, all of the above measures were not taken in anticipation of any specific natural or man-made disaster.

Moving to the *Response* stage of the framework, Nacho’s initial reaction to the catastrophic inundations is to organise a headcount of everyone who lives in the skyscraper, with the objective of ensuring that everyone is accounted for and to identify whether any of the damnificados are missing (Amaworo Wilson, 2016, p. 45). The rains also impact the building’s energy supply, causing a power cut. Nacho remains keenly aware of the consequences of the outage for sanitation purposes, as well as regarding the tower’s ability to provide food for its inhabitants (for example, the lack of electricity means that the ovens in the building’s bakery cannot function) (Amaworo Wilson, 2016, pp. 46-47). Accordingly, he introduces a system of food rationing, and ensures that the squatters have a proper supply of candles, matches, torches, and batteries. Additionally, Nacho requests that those residents with gas cookers make them available for general usage (Amaworo Wilson, 2016, p. 49).

This response to the flood, however, is stymied by the arrival of a plague of mutant disease-carrying mosquitos (Amaworo Wilson, 2016, pp. 49-51). In scenes redolent of the lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic, Nacho orders that all gatherings in the skyscraper are banned and the building’s school is closed. As the situation worsens, Nacho is conscious of the fact that the damnificados cannot cope alone, stating that “We have to get a message out” (Amaworo Wilson, 2016, p. 52), thus highlighting the importance of crisis communication. In terms of doing so, initially the tower’s flock of carrier pigeons are suggested as a possible means of contacting the outside world. However, this is thwarted by a practical problem: all of the pigeons have either come to an untimely end, been consumed for food purposes, or have escaped (Amaworo Wilson, 2016, p. 52). Fortunately, a creative solution is reached. Using bedsheets which have been sown together, the damnificados make four large linen rectangles, on each of which the word “HELP” is painted in capital letters in eight different languages.



These are then hung on each side of the building's exterior, with the hope that the necessary assistance will be provided (Amaworo Wilson, 2016, p. 53).

Regarding *Recovery*, the fourth and final stage of the PPRR model, the crisis communication initiative appears to have had an effect when salvation arrives in the form of a boat “weighed down with sacks, crates, polythene bags” (Amaworo Wilson, 2016, p. 54). These provisions are shared out among the damnificados (Amaworo Wilson, 2016, p. 61), before – at long last – the rains eventually stop and the floodwaters begin to recede (Amaworo Wilson, 2016, p. 71). Subsequently, life in the tower starts to get back to normality, as heralded by the return of the electricity supply and other utilities (p. 82). However, displaced by the floods that have covered the city and the surrounding territories, more and more people start to appear, seeking refuge in the tower (Amaworo Wilson, 2016, p. 91). At this juncture, Nacho realises that the building will require additional protection and defence in the long term (Amaworo Wilson, 2016, p. 92), an insight that proves useful for the further disasters which occur as the novel proceeds.

### **Concluding remarks and suggestions for future research**

As illustrated above, this exploratory overview has demonstrated that elements of disaster management are indeed present in Nacho's response to the catastrophic flood. As previously outlined, these are in accordance with the PPRR model, and therefore it can be said that Nacho's strategies are broadly aligned to this framework. With no way of preventing the flood, limited generic preparations had been made but these were not specific to that particular case. However, there was a thorough and effective response to the disaster, ultimately leading to a successful resolution and recovery for all concerned.

Of course, the catastrophe analysed here is a fictional one, noting that, as mentioned previously, disaster management theories are not commonly applied to literary works. In terms of some suggestions for future research, there is clear scope for applying the PPRR framework to some of the later disasters which take place in *Damnificados*, thus gaining additional comparative information and also examining whether any lessons have been learned from the preparation and implementation of relevant measures. In addition, given the current popularity of fictional works with dystopian themes, it could also be fruitful to see how the disaster management strategies in *Damnificados* could compare with those presented in other literary works. Accordingly, there are numerous avenues for in-depth comparative work on this interesting and thought-provoking topic.

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