



Research Paper

Envisaging Environmental Apocalypse: Nature in Select cli-fi Narratives

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ABSTRACT: Global warming is one of the most significant issues that deserve our attention in this twenty-first century world of frequent hurricanes, cyclones, floods, droughts etc. All these are signs that nature has started responding back to centuries of exploitation by humans. Many writers attempt to address these climatic disasters taking place around the world and to illustrate a simmering planet through their works. This paper is an attempt to analyze the portrayal of nature in the short stories included in the collection *Loosed Upon the World; The Saga Anthology of Climate Fiction* from an eco-critical point of view. These narratives which portray the possibility of an environmental apocalypse if climate change goes unchecked are limited in its scope as they mainly focus on human attempts to overcome the catastrophe using technology.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: Ecocriticism is a branch of literary studies where environmentalism and ecology crossing the boundaries of science and geography have turned into humanities. Cheryll Glotfelty, often considered as the father of Ecocriticism, has defined it in the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* as "the study of the physical relationship between literature and physical environment" (xviii). It aims to examine environmental ideas and depictions in cultural space. Narratives are analyzed in order to find out how various depictions of nature become useful as responses to environmental crisis. The basic premise is that there exists really a global environmental crisis. The discourses related to nature should be critical of its human plunder and politically focus at correcting that abuse.

KEYWORDS: Nature, Ecocriticism, global warming, climatic disasters, environmental apocalypse, natural resources, shallow ecological approach

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I. INTRODUCTION

Global warming is one of the most urgent issues to be addressed at a time when the accretion of carbon in the atmosphere is redrafting Earth's fate. It is a truth that "there was never a time, of course, when the forces of weather and geology did not have a bearing on our lives- but neither has there been a time when they have pressed themselves on us with such relentless directness" (Ghosh 83). Humans do not qualify as a major catalyst in triggering these altering atmospheric conditions and climate issues. The exigency of the issue is so obvious that the large number of novels and stories produced every year in relation to the issue has finally led to the coinage of the word climate fiction or cli-fi by the journalist Dan Bloom. As many novels and short stories have come out in the genre of climate fiction, we need to pay our attention to how nature is represented in these works, whether it is presented as the threatening 'other' that has to be kept in control or it is given a voice.

Representation of Nature and Environmental apocalypse in *Loosed Upon the World; The Saga Anthology of Climate Fiction*

Loosed Upon the Earth is an anthology of climate fiction that contains twenty-six narratives which portray climate change in a variety of ways. The work edited by John Joseph Adams can be considered as a wake-up call which encourages us to rethink our use or rather abuse of natural resources. While many consider arguments regarding climate change as mere hoax, the anthology portrays different situations where nature responds to centuries of human exploitation. The main causative factor behind the issue is capital-intensive industrialism. The narratives show that the various aspects of the misuse of nature will translate itself into a severe menace to the future generation. It makes us reminded of the fact that we have reached an age of natural limits and direct our attention to an area which we often tend to ignore.

Lawrence Buell says in his *Environmental Imagination* (1995) that apocalypse is “the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (285). Almost all of the climate fiction narratives use this image of cataclysm. The first story in the collection is Paolo Bacigalupi’s “Shooting the Apocalypse” which narrates the story of Texas hit by hurricanes entirely devastated. The story can be considered a warning that if we continue to use, or rather exploit our resources, soon we will have to encounter a situation similar to the one in fictitious Texas. It includes references to pollution and forest fires which do coincide with the reality around us. However, the story doesn’t broaden its scope to the real causes of such an apocalypse. It doesn’t criticize humans for the way they exploit natural resources or for the destructions they have caused upon the earth. Though stories like “Shooting the Apocalypse”, “The Myth of Rain”, “Staying Afloat” etc. make one think about the natural limit of resources, they take an entirely human-centric approach emphasizing the notion that natural resources exist for the use of humans. This corresponds with shallow ecological approach which believes that animals, plants and other natural objects should be conserved for the benefit of humans. “The Myth of Rain” deals with this attitude as human attempts to store gene sequences of different species can be associated with this. In McGuire’s story, we have a group of environmentalists attempting to collect diverse species in zoos, DNA banks and private collections. Birds and animals are taken out of their natural habitat and are cleared for humans as creating space for humans is considered much more important than the preservation of endangered species. Capturing them and putting them in zoos curtail all their freedom. In a way, animals and birds are made into artifacts. Though humans ought to pay for the ruins they have caused to earth, the non-human world is also suffering because of them.

Many of the stories depict a situation where the issue of climate change has affected our basic necessities like water. People are deeply struggling and these stories can make us rethink our present use of natural resources. Water scarcity, one of the consequences of global warming, is well dramatized in narratives like “shooting the Apocalypse”, “A Hundred Hundred Daisies” etc. The struggles that humans face due to the shortage of water are depicted clearly but the ways in which these shortages affect animals, birds etc. are not even mentioned once. In “The Tamarisk Hunter”, the protagonist is appointed to destroy a certain species of tree that consume large amount of water. This shows the human tendency to consider themselves as the owner of natural resources existing in nature. Most of the narratives on climate change project the idea that ‘unlimited progress’ is possible and with the help of technology humans can reverse the impact of their activities on earth. For instance, short stories like “Kheldyu”, “Mitigation” etc. speak of technology-enabled carbon sequestration. This can create a false notion among the readers that there exists a possibility for reversing global warming without changing their style of living. They think that they can go on disrespecting nature, continue exploiting nature and finally use technology for reversing the effects of global warming. In reality no such technologies are proven to exist and these are mere “idea” technologies. The only solution to sequester carbon is by controlling human activities that lead to increasing amount of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere. So it seems that the real solution is not a techno-fix but a social fix.

Several of the stories like “The Precedent”, “Outliers”, “Eighth wonder”, “Racing the Tide” etc. exaggerate the real issue so much that the readers may reject climate crisis as a mere hoax. In spite of exaggerating reality, “The Precedent” repeatedly emphasizes the fact that the issue of climate change can be tackled only by changing the human way of life. Sean McMullen’s story set in 2035 is interesting as it involves punishing all those who have exploited earth for their greed. The story clearly shows some of the things which twentieth-century men can do for Earth. Completely ignoring the role of humans in climate crisis and the way in which they exploited nature, several of the climate fiction deal with post-climatic crisis. For instance, the stories like ‘Shooting the Apocalypse’, ‘Outer Rims’, ‘Kheldyu’ and several others are very much restricted in its scope to the impact of climate change and related problems on people. The belief in the superiority of humans over other beings can be sensed in all these narratives.

“Flapping its Wings” by Vandana Singh reminds the readers that our ancestors who lived in harmony with nature shared an intimate connection with nature. The connection that Irene’s grandfather had with whales depicts his caring attitude towards nature which cannot be found in modern man. The interconnectedness between humans and the non-human world is resonating here. On the other hand, modern man tends to ignore the nature that sustains them. The narrative “...Can Cause a Tornado...” contains description about climate change and the impact of climate change especially on poor sections of the society. It is from the perspective of a poor girl. She feels that Dharti Maa herself has turned against them because instead of treating her like a mother, humans have treated her like a slave. She keeps wondering why earth has responded back in such way that the poor people who do have comparatively less role in exploitation of nature too are affected. Nature is often identified with feminine power. In opposition to a nurturing mother, here we are witnessing another side, a female who is uncontrollable.

Some of these cli-fi narratives pits the human world against the destructive power of nature and depict nature as the threatening ‘other’. Rather than focusing on the interrelationship between nature and humans, ways to overcome the destructive force of nature through technology is emphasized in many of the stories. The issue

of environmental justice can be identified in stories by Sean Mcguire, Vandana Singh etc. Compared to multinational corporations and rich people, poor people use less quantity of resources but are forced to suffer more in the wake of an environmental crisis. It is not that the rich section of the society won't get affected by the depletion of water resources or by climate change. It's just that when the crisis takes place at a lower scale limited to a particular region, they can access resources of other regions with the money and power they wield. This is also a reason why the rich do not take up the issue of climate change and its consequences seriously and are very much focused on earning more. On the contrary, the poor sections of the society are more vulnerable when ecological crises and natural calamities occur.

The story by Alan Dean Foster deals with the problem of rising Oxygen. "That Creeping Sensation" fits well into the genre of science fiction. The harmful consequences of oxygen seem ironical in this age of global warming which takes place due to increased amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. The reality is that the melting rate of ice is accelerating and soon we will start realizing the urgency of the issue. The warming up of earth at an alarming rate can lead to storms, crop losses, faster melting of ice etc. resulting in the heavy rains of Kim Stanley Robinson's *Forty Signs of Rain* and mega-droughts like the ones that feature in Paolo Bacigalupi's and Nancy Kress's stories. *Outer Rim* by Toiya Kristen Filey seems to give a kind of warning that if the warming up of earth continues at the same rate, many of the places we see today will be underwater in future. Several of the places in the story have disappeared in the same way. The characters express their concern regarding this issue that one day the whole world will be under water. "Where will the land be next year/One day the whole world will be under water" (39). When Branden says that all those trees will be gone, he is not feeling any kind of emotional bonding with nature. He says as if expressing a fact and doesn't long for what is going to vanish soon. While Karl Schroeder's "Kheldyu" clearly portrays human indulgence and selfishness, Louis Truder's "The Yesteryear's Snow" shows humanity delving into hitherto unexplored lands. Humans aim at making maximum profits even at the cost of other beings. Even uninhabitable part of nature is not spared from human intervention. These stories clearly show human endeavor to organize their superiority over nature.

In some narratives, nature and ecological crises merely exist as a back drop for the story where human characters are given all the prominence as in "The Rainy Season" by Tobias S. Buckell. It's quite ironical that even stories that claim to be climate fiction doesn't give adequate importance to nature. In certain narratives such as "The Netherlands Lives with Water", "Hot Sky" etc. nature is portrayed as an enemy from which humanity has to be saved. Dry, hot winds, dying forests, deserts, breaking of polar icebergs, water crisis etc. are shown as making the lives of people miserable. "Eighth Wonder" by Chris Bachelder also deals with a similar situation. The miseries that people face due to flood are highlighted. The anthology also contains selected portions from the novels *Forty Years of Rain* (2004), *Fifty Degrees Below* (2005) and *From Sixty Days* (2007) by Kim Stanley Robinson under the title "Truth and Consequences". The powerful force of nature is depicted by highlighting its destructive power and natural forces are shown as affecting the routine life of the individual. Here the writer seems to assert Vandana Shiva's statement that "In the late twentieth century it is becoming clear that our scientific systems are totally inadequate to counteract or eliminate the hazards". (Mies 82) "The Smog Society" by Chen Quifan shows the troubles faced by people due to smog. It is so thick that the vision beyond a short distance is not clear. Even in this situation, people are not ready to come out of their comfort zone made possible by technology and industries. Although nature as such doesn't figure in the story, it points to the life styles of people which seem entirely against nature. People do not give importance to nature which is being destroyed by their own activities. The smog is the product of industrial pollution combined with the uncontrolled activities of humans.

"Racing the Tide" by Crag Delancey depicts the consequences of rising sea level. The water has spread all over the region and the story moves ahead with a company's plan to build an island by stretching a bridge. Here it seems like people are trying to overpower nature again by using man-made infrastructures to offer a solution to the natural calamities. Multinational companies are not paying heed to the warnings that nature have sent but instead believe in technology and their own capability of escaping the miseries. These techno-optimists tend to believe that they can solve all the environmental related issues with the help of technology. The narrative narrows its scope to the ways in which humans try to overcome an ecological crisis. The story "Outliers" by Feldringer revolves around a climate change game. The scientists have devised the game to popularize the issue of climate change so that the government will pay attention to the problem and understand its seriousness. The protagonist who is so obsessed with the game at first fails to realise the real purpose of the game. The narrative points to the tendency among people to marginalize issues related to environment. In "Time Capsule Found on the Dead Planet" by Margaret Atwood, she describes different stages of man's development. During the first age, people were bestowed upon with favourable climate, good rain, sunshine, harvests etc. Then the people lived in harmony with nature and the gods they worshipped had horns, beaks etc. which metaphorically represents the worship of nature by man. In the second age, money gained prominence and in the third age money replaced Gods. Gradually this led to the destruction of forests and other

natural resources “It ate forests, croplands, and the lives of children. In the fourth age men created deserts. In order to gain more money, people exploited nature and misused natural resources. At last all wells were poisoned, all rivers ran with filth, all seas were dead; there was no land left to grow food” (557). The narrative clearly shows man’s limitless greed for money and wealth leading to the destruction of nature

According to RamezNaam, this collection of stories “brings to life real possibilities of future” (564). In order to bring about a change, we have to blow-away climate change denialism at first. These climate fiction narratives present the possibility of a natural catastrophe and beat down the arguments which dismiss climate change. However, many of these narratives seem limited in its scope as they neglect the non-human world.

II. CONCLUSION

The environmental problems that we see around us can be regarded as earth’s intervention to revise those habits of thought that are based on the Cartesian dualism that attributes all intelligence and agency to humans while denying them to every other being. The climate change challenges show that non-human forces are capable of directly entering into human thought. All these stirrings have forced us to accept that humans have never been free of non-human constraints. Fiction is a powerful tool for conceptualizing the world around us and these stories make us think us about the ecological problems though several of these are exaggerated. These stories portray the kind of things that we can expect if climate change goes unchecked. The root cause of all these environmental issues that we are facing is man’s unnatural behavior towards nature. It’s very important that we need to change our ways and attitude towards nature and different depictions have a powerful role in establishing this. Narratives which prompt us to reconsider our attitude towards nature and our use of natural resources are to come out during the time when advancements and progresses are the clashing jingles of global conglomerates which exploit nature for acquiring more profits. So it’s equally important that we re-read or analyse literature, art etc. from a green perspective. .

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