

The Role of Climate Change Fiction in the Anthropocene Era

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Abstract

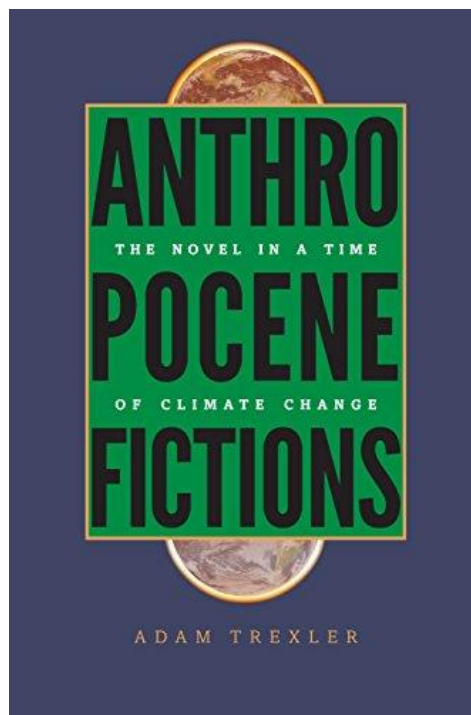
It is an undeniable fact that human beings have made an unalterable impact on earth in this era and hence the present era has come to be called as the Anthropocene era. The expectation is that literature which reflects life should also project man's negative impact on the environment. Environmental literature and by extension ecocriticism have dealt with man's relationship with ecological systems. However, ecocriticism has not managed to occupy the top rungs of the literary canon. The first part of this paper analyses the possible reasons for the relegation of ecocriticism and also gives an overview of the seminal texts published by eminent critics with an aim to bring ecocriticism to the forefront. The second part of the paper throws light on climate change fiction, the role it could play in spreading awareness about global warming. The advantages and disadvantages with which climate change fiction claims its place in mainstream fiction genre are pointed out. The fact that the climate change novelist travels the extra mile to make the story believable and real is underscored. The final part of the paper gives an outline of Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Flight Behaviour* as an illustration of how the author creates awareness about extinction of butterflies due to climate change by superimposing her story on a realist and mundane backdrop.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Climate Change Fiction, Ecocriticism, Environmental literature, Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behaviour*

When *The Ecocriticism Reader* was published in 1995, Cheryll Glotfelty felt the need to emphasize the role of ecocriticism and by extension environmental literature in creating awareness about environmental degradation. In her introductory essay titled, "Literary

Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis” Glotfelty laments about the state of academic scholarship that had remained “scholarly to the point of being unaware of the outside world”(xv) and justifies the collection which she and her co-editor Harold Fromm have put together with an aim to expand the notion of “world” in such a way that it includes the entire ecosphere. As a result, nature and its non- human components ceased to be looked upon as mere backdrops but as actors with equal importance in the human drama.

The Environmental Justice Reader published in 2002 aims to expand the umbrella of ecocriticism by adding the dimension of social justice. R. V. Reed in his seminal essay, “Toward an Environmental Justice Ecocriticism” argues that issues of race and class which are important in any history or future of environmental thought and action have to be dealt with in ecocritical discourse. The essays in this anthology serve to address the question of marginalization of the colored, poor whites and people of the Third world and how they are made targets of environmental injustice. Thus, *The Ecocriticism Reader* had presented its case demanding justice for the non- human other and *The Environmental Justice Reader* widened the scope of the canon with its polemic in favour of the colored and poor people who directly face the consequences of environmental degradation and hazards.



Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/Anthropocene-Fictions-Climate-Change-Nature-ebook/dp/B00P0161OI/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=Anthropocene+Fictions%3A+The+Novel+in+a+Time+of+Climate+Change&qid=1578811758&s=books&sr=1-1

The third landmark text in the area of ecocritical scholarship is Adam Trexler’s *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*, published in 2015. In his introduction Trexler points out that “Ecocriticism was slow to engage with climate change, but it has recently become a central preoccupation of the field” (17). The inference that one can derive is that from 1995-- the year of publication of *The Ecocriticism Reader*-- to 2015

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when *Anthropocene Fictions* came out, critics and theorists have had to justify the cause of ecocriticism and have tried hard to bring it to the forefront. This paper tries to find reasons for the relegation of ecocriticism to the lower rungs of literary scholarship and also to show what climate change fiction can do to re-orient the perceptions of the literary as well as the common reader towards climate change.

The first question then to be addressed is: why is environmental literature not taken as seriously as, say, feminist or postcolonial literatures? The first reason may be that man has always been praised and celebrated as the epitome of all life forms: “What a piece of work is a man / how noble in reason/ how infinite in faculty . . . how like a god, the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals”(Shakespeare 2.2 303-10). Man has thus been glorified down the ages. Hence, suddenly when an eco-poet like W.S. Merwin takes an indignant dig at man with the ironic lines:

“Well they’d made up their minds to be everywhere because why not
Everywhere was theirs because they thought so.
.....
Well they cut everything because why not” (1-6)

The truth in the lines strikes hard and is a bitter pill to digest.

Secondly, when environmental disasters and hazards like the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami or the 1984 Bhopal tragedy hit the headlines, the impact caused by these events get discussed and deliberated for a few days and is later forgotten except by those who directly bear the brunt. And hence when such events are represented in literary texts as in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* and Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*, they are doubly removed from reality and get dismissed with minimum fuss except by the minority of literary critics whose preoccupations lay with environmental literature.

When such is the case about the happenings of the past, headlines as this “Sea levels Rising Faster, Indian Cities at High Flood Risk” (*Times of India*) which predict the future are perceived as pieces of fantasy or shrugged off with the thought, ‘it is not going to happen in my watch’. No wonder, the literary counterparts of these headlines-- climate change novels are shoved off to the genre of science fiction. Amitav Ghosh laments thus: “Fiction that deals with climate change is almost by definition not of the kind that is taken seriously by serious literary journals; the mere mention of the subject is often enough to relegate a novel or a short story to the genre of science fiction” (9). Hence Ghosh opines that if novelists want to write about climate change, they choose forms like documentary or non-fiction. He may have been contemplating on the difficulties and apprehensions he had overcome when he wrote *The Hungry Tide* with its re-enactment of the tsunami. It is also noteworthy that Ghosh’s latest novel *Gun Island* deals with climate change and the creator’s dilemma-- whether to present it as real or fantasy-- is palpably seen in the narrative.

On the other hand, Adam Trexler, in his self- assigned role as a critic, does not express such doubts. In his critical work *Antropocene Fictions* he diligently goes about defining, classifying, chronologically arranging and critiquing climate change fiction. Trexler expresses his surprise at the extent and quantity of climate change novels that presented themselves before him for analysis: “As I went on, my original assumption that there simply wasn’t enough climate change fiction was slowly eroded. Simply, more climate change novels kept presenting themselves” (7). With his trust in the genre of climate change fiction thus established, Trexler goes on to consolidate the positive outcomes that climate change fiction could advocate. First, he emphasizes the novel’s capacity “to interrogate the emotional, aesthetic and living experience of the Anthropocene” (6). Second, Anthropocene novels have the capacity to assemble “heterogeneous characters and things into a narrative sequence” (14). From scientists to bureaucrats a wide variety of characters on a broad spectrum of contexts populate the pages which render complexity to climate change fiction.

Third, since climate change is directly connected to science, climate change fiction can act as a medium to develop interdisciplinary relationship between science studies and environmental criticism, “Anthropocene fiction will contribute to a bi-directional exchange of ideas between literary and science studies” (Trexler 23).

Fourth, Trexler points out how the concept of ‘agency’ allows the environmental critic to describe non- human things as actors in ecosystems endowed with the capacity to make things.

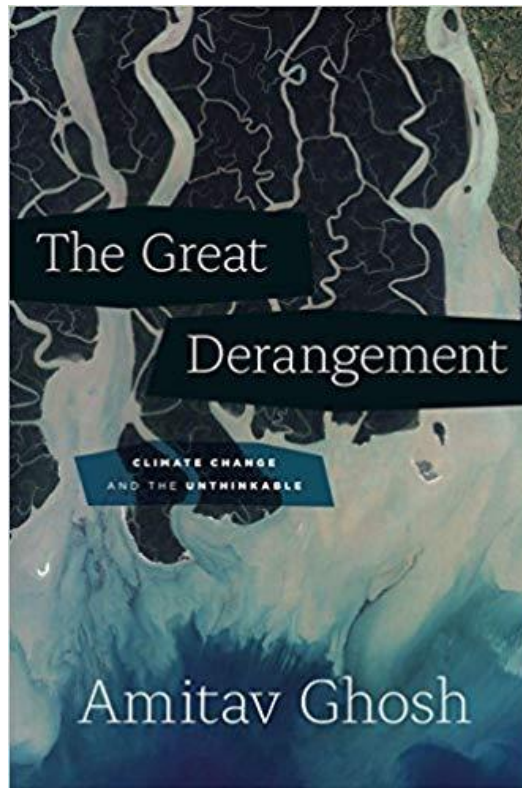
Fifth, climate change fiction brings in the cultural dimension to the narrative. Its canvas is wide enough to hold a multitude of things from men to machines, from places to weather systems. These traits make the novel a “privileged form to explore what it means to live in the anthropocene moment” (27).

While climate change fiction enjoys the above privileges it also faces a few pitfalls. The obvious one is that the novel, essentially a product of imagination has to present the truth of climate change. As Trexler puts it: “The novel must bring fact into dialogue with fiction” (29).

Hence the novelist either makes the novel futuristic where climate change has made deep inroads in the narrative’s fictional world. Or, the novelist uses characters like scientists, newsreaders or native elders in order to reiterate that “climate change is an unquestionable certainly for the reader” (Trexler 31). Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140* which is a portrayal of a flooded New York city, is an example of the first category. Getting categorised under science fiction, there is the danger of this type of novel being dismissed as mere fantasy.

Hence, the second category is more relatable as in Liz Jensen’s *The Rapture* when a physicist documents, researches and collaborates the predictions about climate change with

climate crises happening at different degrees in different parts of the world, the narrative stays within plausible realms. It becomes clear that the success of climate change fiction lies in making the phenomena of climate change as real as possible.



https://www.amazon.com/Great-Derangement-Climate-Unthinkable-Lectures/dp/022652681X/ref=sr_1_1?crid=D4ZRBTFAXGW&keywords=the+great+derangement+by+amitav+ghosh&qid=1578813512&s=books&sprefix=The+Great+Derangement%2Cstripbooks%2C1423&sr=1-1

Amitav Ghosh in the section titled “stories” in his book, *The Great Derangement* talks about the tactics adopted by the novelists to make the story sound real. He quotes Franco Moretti, the literary theorist, who underscored the role played by ‘Fillers’. ‘Fillers’ refer to the everyday details that spread through the story. Fillers help in concealing the exceptional moments that serve as the motor of the narrative. Hence the result is the “relocation of the unheard of toward the background . . . while the everyday moves into the foreground” (23). When bourgeois life gets narrated with such fillers, the readers could easily identify themselves with it. Amitav Ghosh enumerates the predicament of the novelist who faces the dilemma of narrating a climate crisis yet makes it real. The novelist has to strike a balance between the predictable processes and unlikely events. Otherwise, the novel suffers the risk of “banishment to the humbler dwellings that surround the manor house-- those generic outhouses that were once known by names such as ‘the gothic’, ‘the romance’ or ‘the melodrama’ and have now come to be called ‘fantasy’ ‘horror’ and ‘science fiction’ ”(32). Hence, when the climate change fiction writer writes with the mission of spreading awareness about global warming, he/she doesn’t mind making compromises with his poetics. The

following paragraphs throws a short insight into the way Barbara Kingsolver makes use of fillers in her benchmark climate change novel *Flight Behaviour*.



Courtesy:

https://www.amazon.com/s?k=flight+behavior+by+barbara+kingsolver&i=stripbooks&crd=LFXJJOP5VHLR&srefix=Flight+Behaviour%2Cstripbooks%2C1119&ref=nb_sb_ss_sc_2_16

Flight Behaviour tells the story of the unprecedented presence of millions of monarch butterflies in the in Turnbows' farm in Tennessee. Their presence at the wrong place at the wrong time is a sign of global warming. The novelist aims at ringing the alarm bell about extinction of species owing to climate change. She faces the challenge of making it real and hence interweaves the climate crisis with many 'fillers'-- stories that relate to the mundane lives that people live.

Kingsolver has cleverly chosen Tennessee as the backdrop to enact the climate change drama. The rural, poor conservative population of Tennessee presents a local perspective to the global crisis of climate change. The religious beliefs of the local population add a religious dimension to the butterfly phenomenon. The church responds thus: "Heaven be praised, sister Turnbow has seen the wonders" (98). Dellarobia Turnbow's sight of the butterflies is interpreted as "the beautiful vision of our Lord's abundant garden" (99). The church's say the 'vision' powerful enough to make Bear postpone the idea of logging. Thus, religion with its correspondent faiths and practices becomes the first filler.

The characterisation of Dellarobia trapped in domesticity but aiming to raise above it to realise her potential, is the next filler that gives the realist colour to the novel. At the height

of weariness, Dellarobia plans a sexual tryst with a telephone wireman. She finds her husband dull and unenterprising, the Cub still tethered to the father, Bear. The duties that she has to perform as a mother of two children, catering to their needs with minimum means at her disposal, saps her energy. Dellarobia's secret longing for an adventurous life is evident from the way she laps up her friend Dovey's experiences conveyed through their telephone conversations. The game of one-upmanship that she plays with her mother-in-law Hester adds one more facet to her character. Her attraction to Ovid Byron the scientist, her willingness to learn from him and draw inspiration from him enables her to take the final decision of quitting her married life. By making her heroine Dellarobia a character who grows and evolves in the novel and by drawing a parallel between her and the butterfly phenomenon, Kingsolver gets closer to realist fiction.

The portrayal of poverty of the rural Tennessee folk, especially the Turnbows is yet another 'filler' used by Kingsolver. The Turnbows' struggle with sheep farming, their unpaid loans, Cub's inability to earn more and Bear's adamance in going ahead with the logging to pay up the loans, and his later attempts to earn money out of the butterfly phenomenon, and Dellarobia's visits to the thrift store and the compromises she makes there consume almost equal number of pages in the novel.

The incongruity inherent in the way the media represents the issue and how they sensationalize it is also brought out by the author in order to increase the realist quotient of the novel.

With the entry of Ovid Byron and the descriptions of his research about the butterflies the novel gets an empirical tone. Loads of information about the migratory pattern of the butterflies and investigation of the reason as to why they have left their Mexican roost combined with the precarious future of the state of Byron's research, all sound real.

Built on this framework is the climate change message. The Mexican deluge had driven the butterflies to Tennessee. The Tennessee winter will freeze them to death. The author drives home the point thus: "We are seeing a bizarre alteration of a previously stable pattern. A continental ecosystem breaking down. More likely, this is due to climate change. Climate change has disrupted this system. For the scientific record we want to get to the bottom of that as best we can before events of this winter destroy a beautiful species . . ." (315). The microcosmic butterfly event in Tennessee is an indicator of the macrocosmic extinction events happening elsewhere: "Along with the butterflies the elephants on drought-stricken Africa, the polar bears on the melting ice are as good as gone" (341).

Similarly, the deluge in Tennessee falls in line with the hurricanes, fires, droughts reported from different parts of the world. Ultimately this is what Barbara Kingsolver wants to convey: "It will take a few degrees of change, global average to knock our kind out of the running" (385). In order to do this, she has used many fillers and garbs so that the readers

accept her viewpoint. It is very likely that it is Barbara Kingsolver herself speaking through the voice of the character Pete, “The official view of a major demographic is that we aren’t sure about climate change. It’s too confusing. So, every environmental impact story has to be made into something else. Sex it up if possible . . . it’s what sells” (318). The fact remains that the climate change novelists are ready to do that because they have steadfast belief in the positive role that climate change novel can play in this era of the Anthropocene.

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