

Narrating the Non-Human: Strategic Representations of Climate Change in Barbara Kingsolver and Margaret Atwood

Dr. Silpa Anand S.

Associate Professor & Head, Department of English, Little Flower College(Autonomous)
Guruvayur, India.
silpa@littleflowercollege.edu.in

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Abstract: Authors have attempted various narrative and representational strategies to depict climate change in literature in such a way that the works create an impact and spur socio-political and cultural transformations. However, the representation and the expected transformations pose formidable challenges for the author, given the complex background and the evasive scalar dimensions of the climate change phenomenon. Most fictional narratives in climate fiction are set in an anthropocentric framework depicting the consequences of the change for human beings. However, as the scale and dynamics of the crisis are massive and situated in a chaotic socio-cultural scene, it becomes imperative that authors resort to innovative perspectives and take novel narrative dimensions to properly grasp the theme. Moreover, diverging from the anthropocentric framework is also essential to bring to focus the ubiquitous nature of the issue. This article explores how authors Barbara Kingsolver and Margaret Atwood represent climate change as affecting non-human life forms, thus using a strategic narrative technique to overcome the representational challenges. The novels considered for the study are *Prodigal Summer*, *Flight Behavior* and *Unsheltered* by Barbara Kingsolver and the *Maddaddam* Trilogy by Margaret Atwood. Moving beyond anthropocentric frameworks, both authors foreground ecological interdependence by giving narrative space to animals, plants, and ecosystems, thereby expanding the scope of climate discourse in fiction. Through a close reading of selected texts, this study investigates how their narrative techniques function not merely to depict environmental degradation, but to evoke a multispecies consciousness essential to grasping the magnitude of the climate crisis. The article argues that such representations are not only ethically significant but also rhetorically powerful in unsettling human exceptionalism and reimagining the ecological stakes of climate change. By positioning non-human entities as narrative agents or symbols of vulnerability and resilience, Atwood and Kingsolver offer a strategic reframing of perceptions on climate change – one that calls for expanded empathy and redefined notions of coexistence.

Keywords: Climate change fiction, interspecies respect, climate narratives, strategic narration

Introduction

Bertrand Russell, in his essay "Man versus Insects", speaks about how insect species, with their sheer numbers and minuscule size, are capable of destroying the larger inhabitants on Earth. Russell's observation that dangers to the existence of humanity can come not just from wars and violence but also from insects and microorganisms attains bearing in respect to climate change. He also mentions the perils of transporting flora and fauna from one part of the world to another and the boomerang effects of the use of pesticides. Russell even predicts the possible misuse of microorganisms for evoking biological warfare. All these predictions have unfortunately become true in one or another manner. In his 1932 essay "In Praise of Idleness," he says, "If human beings, in their rage against each other, invoke the aid of insects and microorganisms, as they certainly will do if there is another big war, it is by no means unlikely that the insects will remain the sole ultimate victors" (Russell 234). Russell's thoughts on insect kind and their often-ignored part in the organic system of the earth gel with the narrative of flora and fauna in the climate change discourse.

Viewing climate change from the side of the insects and the plants can be seen as a strategic and definitive approach to representing climate change. As climate change can affect any aspect of human and nonhuman life on Earth, looking at the climate change of plants and animals would be a creative and productive form of narration, as it will aid in underlining the immensity of climate change and its ability to affect life from all angles. Among the selected authors, Barbara Kingsolver mainly focuses on depicting climate change, especially anthropogenic climate change, as affecting plant and animal life. Kingsolver's narrative proves how human actions like excessive poaching, cutting trees for timber, game hunting, use of pesticides and unscientific methods of farming and irrigation and the consequences such as species extinction, blights, and scarcity or excess of particular plant and animal species at any locality are either directly or indirectly connected to the climate change phenomenon, either as a cause or as a consequence of it.

Kingsolver's novels present a deep concern about a largely disregarded aspect of the environment. The socio-political systems, while waxing eloquent about the rising temperatures, melting ice caps, floods and other established effects of human exploitation of nature, ignore the legions of insect species facing loss of habitat, lack of food, disrupted migratory patterns and species extinction. Another and entirely contrary effect of human intervention on the ecosystem upon insect kind is that some of them tend to overbreed and become unnaturally antagonistic due to the effect of chemical fertilizers. The transportation of host plants from their natural habitats for economic gains also tends to bring about disruptions in the life pattern of insects, which in turn disrupts the entire symbiotic system of the earth. Kingsolver, unlike most other eco-critical writers who deal with the visible indices of environmental degradation and climate change, confronts the issue of how the small inhabitants of the earth, like insects, butterflies and small predators, affect and are affected by human manipulation of nature, which indirectly, though definitely, contributes to the climate change phenomenon.

Kingsolver proves the significant yet unnoticed part of the flora and fauna in keeping the environmental balance in her works. Most of the works focus on a particular species or, more broadly, on flora and fauna and depict how human intervention in nature's system disrupts the life patterns of the species and how it becomes a threat to humans. The author has made extensive and recurring use of animal and plant imagery to depict climate change and anthropogenic environmental



damage. The presence and the significant role of non-human beings are common in all her novels. If *Flight Behaviour* focuses on waylaid butterflies, *Prodigal Summer* has coyotes, chestnut trees, moths and several other birds and insects. Spiders, moths and carnivorous plants form a substantial part of the narrative of *Unsheltered*.

Prodigal Summer is set in the Zebulon Valley of southern Appalachia and focuses on the disrupted habitat and near extinction of coyotes. In another plot line, the focus is on chestnut trees that are on the verge of extinction due to a blight. The chestnut blight is a fungal infection that caused all the American chestnuts to decline over the period from 1904 to 1940. The infection was caused by a fungus which was brought to the United States from Japanese nursery stock in the 1900's. Even though the introduction of the fungus is not mentioned in the novel, the untold backstory is always present. The disastrous intervention of humans in the natural ecosystem definitely brought about the extinction of the American chestnut. American chestnuts, unlike the Asian variety, were not immune to the fungi, which naturally occurred only in Southeast Asia. Accidental introduction of the fungi to America and Europe led eventually to one of the most massive losses of forests the world has ever seen. By presenting the chestnut blight as a crucial phenomenon leading to drastic changes in the life of the people in and around the Appalachians, Kingsolver gives a subtle but very evocative representation of anthropogenic change in the ecosystem. In the 'Moth Love' plotline in *Prodigal Summer*, Lusa's contemplations delineate how the insects are being slaughtered by the millions by pesticide use and how it indirectly contributes to the climate change phenomenon.

Yet another significant and connected idea that Kingsolver brings forth in *Prodigal Summer*, through focusing on the flora and fauna, is the worthlessness of human beings getting into the trouble of eliminating the insects and animals. At one point, Cole's brother-in-law pronounces his disbelief about how they managed to get a surplus harvest of cherries even though he skipped shooting the jaybirds this year to prevent them from finishing off the cherries by themselves. I'm surprised you got cherries off them trees this year...As many durn jaybirds as we have had. Last spring I came over here and shot the birds all out of there for Cole, but I never got around to it this year. So, you got you enough for a pie or two anyways, did you? (Kingsolver 111)

In another instance, Deanna asks Eddie Bondo, who is hell-bent on eliminating coyotes, how many times he has actually witnessed a coyote attacking the cattle; for this, Eddie does not have a ready answer, signalling that he has not actually seen a coyote attack, suggesting that coyotes, who feed upon anything available, very rarely attack cattle. Logging, poaching and uncontrolled use of pesticides form the major human-induced troubles in the novel. These activities in turn lead to unexpected consequences such as loss of habitat and extinction of certain species of animals and plants, which in turn lead to irremediable imbalance in the ecosystem. Deanna Wolf's words about predators, "They're the top of the food chain that's the reason...If they are good, then their prey is good, and *its* food is good. If not, then something's missing from the chain" (13), underline the basic concern of the text that as everything in nature is connected to everything else and the slightest of imbalances in the equation (like uncontrolled logging and poaching) can disrupt the whole system. The usually unnoticed presence of small creatures like worms and beetles is also given due importance in the narrative. "Beetles, worms. I guess to hunters these woods seem like a zoo, but who feeds the animals and cleans up the cage, do you think without worms and termites you'd be up to your hat brim in dead tree branches looking for a clean shot" (13).

In *Flight Behaviour*, butterflies form the central symbol. The novel celebrates the beauty and astonishing instincts of the Monarch butterflies. The slow revelation of fact after fact about the extraordinary migratory pattern and how it takes three generations of butterflies to make one trip over thousands of miles between Mexico and Canada strengthens the comprehension of the precise construction of the ecosystem and also the immense significance of insects. The individual butterflies die on average after six weeks. Still, they procreate and leave eggs before they die, and their descendants, inexplicably, know how to complete the journey begun by their parents and grandparents. Others again return south and gather at their winter retreat, the Mexican Angangueo. The mystery of such fragile creatures, taking up a journey of thousands of miles across landscapes, symbolises the immense strength and resilience nature has devoted to its creatures. At the same time, the fact that the change in flight behaviour of the butterflies is an indication of their near extinction due to human-induced climate change shocks Dellarobia and the readers into awareness.

Apart from butterflies, Kingsolver has invested several pages to speak about sheep, giving detailed descriptions about sheep rearing, shearing, lambing and taking care of the newborn calves. Sheep farming is the main source of income of the Turnbow family, and through Dellarobia's musings it is revealed how the creatures have become an unavoidable part of the family. The presence of the two border collies of the family, who seem to understand even the finest changes in the mood of the human beings in the household, also strengthens the narrative of man as just another part of nature. Of the border collies, Dellarobia once thinks, "They would watch, ears up, forepaws planted, patiently bearing with the mess made by undisciplined humans as the world fell around them" (Kingsolver 25).

Yet another significant non-human presence in the novel is the trees that thrive on the mountain behind Dellarobia's house, which face the looming threat of being logged by her father-in-law for debt payment. Information about how similar logging has created landslides and mass destruction in the neighbourhood and around the world is spread throughout the narrative. Dellarobia and Hester, her mother-in-law, form an unlikely union in resisting the logging, both of them showing their instinctive knowledge that logging a mountain of its centuries-old trees will only lead to certain disaster. Dellarobia recounts incidents from the neighbourhood to warn Cub, Oh, Cub. They will make it look like a war zone, like the Buchman place. Have you looked at the mountain since they finished logging it out? It's a trash pile... It looks like they blew up bombs all over it. Then all these rains started, and the whole mountain is sliding into the road. (40) The chapter presenting Hester's vast knowledge of plant species, even those that are now sighted rarely, directs the narrative to the pastoral mode, making the reader mourn for species lost due to climate change.

Unsheltered also features the presence of animals and plants which occupy a significant part in the lives of the characters. The novel has animal and plant characters that play significant roles in the plot. The dog in the 21st-century timeline and the spiders, moths and the Venus flytrap of the 19th-century timeline underpin the priority given to the representation of man-nature connection by the author. Margaret Atwood has also used animal imagery to depict the consequences of climate change. The significance of lives other than human beings is brought forth by the mere absence of all animals known to humanity. An important feature that marks the pre-apocalyptic world in the Trilogy is the absence of animal species. In Atwood's imagined future, almost all animals have gone extinct and occur only on CDs and video recordings from a past era. Species extinction has made 'real' animals a fairy tale for the young generation who watch virtual versions of the animals in violent games. The only animals

that Jimmy's generation knows are the 'splices', which are bioengineered organisms with genetically modified human cells. They are used to harvest human organs, which will keep the humans alive even when their own organs deteriorate or stop functioning. Here, Atwood depicts the implications of biotechnology utilized for human perfection, control, and to create a world that surpasses species interdependence. The notion of anthropocentrism can be seen to be taken to the level of aspiring to human immortality. The disappearance of most of the animal species has led man to upgrade to creating new species – "splices" of animals to cater to his diverse needs. By such representations, the reader is made to feel that the actual environmental apocalypse has already happened and the bioengineered pandemic is just a climax of the destruction already in motion.

The depiction of animals in the post-apocalyptic world is also significant. Herein, all the survivors are depicted as being in a constant war to save themselves from the spliced animals and to find food. Toby's beekeeping and the unique connection she shares with the bees can be understood as symbolising the inherent oneness of human beings with nature. Toby, being good at identifying and using medicinal herbs, is a natural healer. Significantly, it is Toby who actually connects meaningfully with the Crakers and subsequently with the pigeons, paving the way to survival. This also indicates how being one with nature, rather than taking a human-centric approach, is the best possible method of survival in a hostile environment. The absence of animals like the lion and the tiger seems eerie and foreboding, shaking the reader towards a sudden perception of the imminent dark future. The lack of any non-human species, apart from a few plant species and the artificial "spliced" animals, makes the children grow up to be damaged beings with unhealed psychological and physical trauma.

The God's Gardeners, a cult who predicts a "Waterless Flood" befalling the earth, prepares themselves for the event by adopting lifestyle shifts that will enable them to survive it. They focus upon mindful living, using recycled and regenerated clothes and other household items and, above all, an organic way of life that involves farming and tending to insects and animals. The cult teaches the ideology of interspecies respect and cooperation to their young generation, which in turn helps Ren, Amanda and Toby to survive the apocalypse. The study of the fiction of Kingsolver and Atwood with regard to their use of plants and animals in the representation of climate change proves that the strategy is effective and also can be put to use in varying angles. For instance, as Kingsolver focuses on the impact of climate change on plants and animals, Atwood uses plant and animal imagery to bring in the notion of the deconstruction of anthropocentrism. The aspect of species extinction has been dealt with in detail by both authors.

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