



ANTHROPOCENTRIC ‘AFFECT’ ON CLIMATE CHANGE: RESILIENCE, REORIENTATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL NARRATIVES

Kanmani C.S. Arumugam¹ and Marie Josephine Aruna²

¹Kanchi Mamunivar Govt. Institute for PG Studies and Research (Autonomous),
Puducherry – 605008 (India)

²Kanchi Mamunivar Govt. Institute for PG Studies and Research (Autonomous),
Puducherry – 605008 (India)

Email: kanmaniphdkmcpgs@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

The primary aim of this paper is to inject the idea that environmentally informed literary texts play an important role in bringing resilience to the burning issues of climate change. Environmental enthusiasts and literary exponents for the past few decades, dedicate responsible contributions in portraying serious social issues like global warming, climate change, demographic diffusions and so on to add ethnic, intrinsic and extrinsic values to the protocols, at least in their narrative imagination. Through literary works of art, they propose solutions to save and secure the planet and its vulnerability. Interdisciplinary conversations of Environmental Humanities and Affect Studies on anthropocentric depredation of planetary multispecies existence and extinctions, deal predominantly, with the subjects like climate change that affect our culture and society. Since, individual mutation is sought to resolve this burning issue, this paper urges the necessity of ecocritical, feminist and post-colonial literary produce, subsidised with environmental literacy and connect them with the backup of history, philosophy, science and technology, natural sciences and other such academia. Hence, the study infuses the ethno-philosophical turn of ‘Collective Affect’ with the activist resolutions of policy-making. “Collective Affect”, excludes the philosophical and psychological theories that are limited only to the nine primary human emotions proposed by Silvan Tomkins and heuristically involves stimulation of intensive emotional responses (of both literary producers and consumers), to the natural and environmental devastations. Also, the focus is to show how these narrative trajectories arouse awareness in individual’s minds – intuitive morality and conscience – and urges them to take initiatives in changing their mindset and collectively as human race responding to the crises and save the planet from anthropocentric apocalypse. The analysis apparently traces the narratives that are not only limited to cli-fi genre, but also the texts with multispecies environmental themes and appraise them with interdisciplinary comprehension of literary Affect.

Keywords: Affect Studies, Environmental Humanities, Climate Change, Environment, Multispecies, Resilience.

INTRODUCTION:

Environmental Humanities as an umbrella term gives scope to the holistic interdisciplinary theoretical forms of Arts and Humanities fused with natural and environmental science. In particular, literature and literary criticism pave way to environmentally responding activism and policymaking, thereby producing texts dealing with environmental crises with resilience and

environmental justice underpinned. The crucial and most urgent crisis that Environmental Humanities views, is the anthropocentric effect on climate change since it alters the very sustained survival of holistic organic species and the planet’s entire human/non-human demography. Environmental Humanities is an emerging discipline that is “too diverse in terms of method, subject, and geographical focus to

make broad generalizations that hold true across all of them, environmentally focused subfields within different humanities disciplines have been shaped by some similar intellectual turns since the 1970s” (web source). Anthropocene, a term coined by Paul J Crutzen and diatom researcher Eugene F Stoermer, substantiates that human activity, active or passive, and humanistic dominance affect and influence climate and the environment. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s “Climate of History: Four Theses” affirms the “paradox that inhabits contemporary moods of anxiety and concern about the finitude of humanity”. Environmental humanities, putting forth Anthropocene and other critical studies on Animals, Food, Culture etc., views environmental narratives separately from Climate Fictions. M.Ryle debates against ‘Cli-fi’ narrative genre, as they evocate threat, but at a distance because it “separates actual present from the imagined future” (145) and they don’t prompt the real vulnerability of the environment. Understanding and supporting this idea, the study takes up a literary text, rich with environmental and marginalisation themes and argues that, in order to fabricate a “univocal message”, an initiation of provocative emotions, that is, narrations with eventual episodes to induce a collective response should be attributed to the texts. So, the analysis brings in the concept of theorised ‘affect’ to the environmental text subsequently dealing with traumatic dislocation because of climate change, *The New Wilderness*, by Diane Cook.

1. Affect Theory and Affect Studies

Affect theory, as proposed by Sylvan Tomkins, basically deals with the philosophical crossovers of human psychology and emotions,

reading the capacity of human state of mind. Though Affect theory was first adopted by the art forms like music to refer the emergence of new compositions, literary critics brought the theory to fuse it with the emotional subjectivity. Eventually it was hybridised into ‘Affect Studies’ during mid 1990s primarily by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank to explore the emotional dimensions of human subjectivity as portrayed in literary works of art. Affect Studies is a promising field in the ethnic arena of humanities including History, Culture and Gender Studies and many more to mention. The literary practitioners insinuated “Collective Affect”, which excludes the philosophical and psychological theories that are limited only to the nine primary human emotions anticipated by Tomkins and heuristically involves stimulation of intensive emotional responses (of both literary producers and consumers), to the natural and environmental devastations. Affect Studies diverges itself from the mimetic cognitive science and is conceived as “socially constructed” expressions of emotions that entail political and theoretical formulations (Gibbs, 2010 p.188) thereby standing aloof from the “cli-fi propaganda” (see Ryle. M, 2017).

Ben Anderson while arguing the modulatory diminutions of the excess of Affect in literary art forms, propagates those multiple forms of knowledge that are to be invested (see Anderson, 2010. p. 165). Out of his two “points of view” of Affect as “expressive and differential”, this study takes the turn of “differential”, since the attempt formulates “unforeseeable newness in the ways that affects are actualised” (p. 166). Anderson

insists on the notion of “morale” to modulate the superfluous affect, in literary texts and continues that “the promotion and maintenance of Morale...calls forth forms of action to prevent or prepare for it” (p.171-172). Patricia T. Clough argues that affect subtracts individuality when one treats “body-as-organisms” that are subjected to massified biopolitics. It is viewed as “collective” as individual body is “bio-mediated”. Also, Artificial intelligence and techno-security alliance, treat mass population as informatic-data, ranging from biometrics to DNA testing to monitor the level of threats. She explains that Affect is “Empirically realized and in terms of the philosophical conception of the virtual ... Affect is potential and emergent” (See Clough, 2010. p. 208-209). Through these hypotheses it is understood that affect raises itself outside the “bodily capacities” and limitations and becomes collective and pluralistic arousing societal responses in the reading population. Thus, Collective affect becomes a solution to “a problem of understanding the emergences, changes, and shifts in modes of power” (Anderson, 2010 p.183). Correspondingly, the aforesaid point is heuristically applied to the field of environmental science with literary crosscuts. This suffices the argument that, an affective alteration in the conceptual frameworks of socio-political communitarianism and blunders of science and technology that affect the holistic livelihood, pose a great threat to the co-habitants of the earth and the environment in which they have co-evolved and co-existed. The discussion takes up, the novel, *The New Wilderness* and dissects the affective climatic trauma through the

characters of Bea and Agnes, mother and daughter, respectively, who are forcefully dislocated (or at least made up their mind to move) to a new prospective state called, The Wilderness, since Agnes, like all other “Children” could not withstand the apocalyptic smog covered city.

The New Wilderness as Environmental Narrative

The New Wilderness, can be studied as a text of nature-centric with humanistic affect. Lisa Ottum proposes a rise of genre-bending literary produce, as Affect Studies shifts the “human-centric” storytelling to “nature-centric”. Therefore, human-experiences can be labelled as “affect” turned outside. He substantiates a new thinking of environmentalism by instigating contradictory sensations to the plotline of a narrative to erase the divides of nature writing. He is of the view that, studying nature and environment with affect “actively shape” human conscience. Also, a “Critical” and “emotional reading” advocating affect to the rightful decision making, she writes, “an uncritical, embodied response to fiction is actually required for the text’s ethical propositions to make sense” (Ottum, 2019. P. 241). The statement of problem is how affect is textualized and aroused by *The New Wilderness*. Answer is derived from Elliott that, according to him, Science questions the conditionality of human survival in the wild nature and the techno-scientific advancements’ alteration of human civilization (Elliott & Culis, 2017, p. 21). But the present day witnesses the Techno-scientific blunders that reterritorialize the human and animal demography. The following segments show how an environmental text

could stand voicing for the injustice done to the nature and environment and the whole organic existence.

Climate Change and Human Apathy

Adam Trexler, in his article, “Climate change in Literature and Literary Criticism”, gives a statistical report, with Adeline Johns-Putra, that (Cli-fi) works with the impact of climate change occurred during 1970s (Trexler, p.186; Ryle, p. 144), but Elliott dates them back to 371 – 287 BC (see Elliott, p. 16). This study substantiates that throughout the time period humans’ apathy is fleshed out and universal reconciliation is appropriated. The Marxist reconstitution of nature of its tenets to “humans’ continued survival” simulates arguments and diminutions of the very “being” of planetary population in connection with fears of resources and their sustainability (see Elliott, p.22). A reconciliation is sought to both reorient and erase the divide between Humanities and Sciences academia. *The New Wilderness* fleshes out the apathetical droopiness in the human behaviour when it comes to climate change. The novel by parallelly depicting the wildness and “wilderness” puts forth human’s orientation with the wild habitat. It characterises collective nouns such as “Brothers”, “Sisters”, “Administration”, “Old Post”, “Manufacturing Zone”, etc to show that the intentional target is the whole world that suffer the climate change and Anthropocene and includes almost every wild species in every episode. The novel has a serious plot line and narrative style that it retains the inclusion of wild life throughout the progression of the story. A group of people, basically researchers, who start as a “Community” from an apocalyptic state, “The

city”, to a better world because the place where they dwelt, was roofed by smog. They felt the place to be inhabitable and decide to leave for the New Wilderness, where they had to obey “The Manual”, and proceed nomadically leaving their belongings, relationships, lives and identities behind. They left for a place to breathe “different air” (Cook,2020. p. 19). The below passage explains their uncertain future: It took almost a year...to place humans into what was essentially a refuge for wildlife, the last wilderness area left, to gather the funding needed... It was an extreme idea and an even more extreme reality. More extreme than suicide (18-19).

The above passage clearly informs Hegel’s diction of, “humans are a part of nature and yet separate from nature” (see Elliott, 2017. p. 24). Though the novel is set in the future, it trailers the present day global environmental catastrophes and it heralds the predicaments that what human apathy would lead to. It hints that human race would go in short of oxygen to breathe in. “No one was ever outside unless they were going from one building to another. ..there was one tree, gated so no one could touch it...it was one of ten trees left in the City” (113). The plotline resolves this conundrum, by urging human to return to and take refuge in the lap of the nature. Because the effect of climate change traumatized them and this is explained as,

They had wanted to flee the City, where the air was poison to children, the streets were crowded, filthy, where rows of high-rises sprawled to the horizon and beyond. And because all land that hadn’t been subsumed by the city was now being used to support the

City, it seemed everyone now lived in the City. Whether they wanted to or not (51).

The narrative centres on women characters more to support the socially constructed engendering of environment. It talks about how women in the “Community” struggle for the household resources like oil, clean water, climatic favours to perform laundry etc. It portrays that all world has almost become wasted and only the state of Wilderness is exempted to carry out research on “human interaction with nature, because, with all land now being used for resources – oil, gas, minerals, water, food, trash etc” (51). Throughout the narration – nature, wildlife, climatic conditions – are devised to show apathetical human activities, which fails to bring human consensus. Earlier, when they decide to leave for the “New World”, they carry all materialistic comfort like shoes, cooker etc with them but they eventually blend with the wilderness:

In the beginning, their skin colouring matched that of wood pulp...eyes are brown...they had all ten fingers and toes...the dangers of the City had never been from scrapes and cuts...over time they learned to hide by listening to birds. They learned to be cautious by watching deer. They thought ...they learned to know seasons...by the colour and sheen of an animal’s coat (50-52).

The “Community” lost all their belongings on their way to find a new livelihood that their physical parts are also categorised as possessions and asserts. They had no guarantee of their lives. Dying was as common as living in their “primitive lives”.

1.2 Bondage as Affect

Literary exponents dealing with Affect Studies overlook the philosophical basic emotions and give importance to the sensitive ones like disappointment, morality, sense of loss etc., that arouse Affect on the intended texts. In the similar line, the thesis brings in bondage as a trait of Affect. In this novel, three sorts of bondage are located, namely:

i. Familial Bondage

The main plot line is about the “affective” relationship between mother and daughter, Bea and Agnes, respectively. Bea was tendering an “approximation of affection, a studied version of it. It felt like what her mother had offered” (241). Bea takes a great step to leave smog filled “City” for the New Wilderness State just for Agnes, as she suffered from lung infection. The “City” that they live in is completely polluted; air is not fit for breathing. So, they “escape from the world as we know it now. To know the world as it once was” (393). This relationship is shown with every mother and daughter that are characterised in the novel.

I want to grab her in these moments, squeeze her too hard, growl into her hair, never let her go...I looked away, scared, disgusted, overcome with love, on the verge of crying and laughing, and finally, finally, finally I began to know my mother (394).

Also, the relationship between husband and wife and their emotional knot is shown by, “I know what she’s doing...she knows what she is doing. We’re a team” (309).

ii. Human/Animal Bondage

Another crucial thing is that the nexus between human and non-human world. Once the Community steps into the “primitive”

providence they become one with other species of the “New world”:

“Birds sombrely called to their friends in the sagebrush somewhere near her feet. A dark cloud lay across the sky like a dirt path...Agnes had known they were following animal trails for days before anyone else realized it. She’d seen them clearly branded into the sameness of the sage sea for a few sunsets. She saw the broken branches and, looking ahead, could see a phantom path made among their snapped-off ends. Trails like this beamed away from her in all directions. One trail crossed with another, and as she walked, they each funnelled into some kind of Wide Avenue where hundreds of creatures had tramped through (246-300).

They began live like wild creatures. They learnt from their animal behaviour:

“Dreams of all the messages she grew up hearing from the coyotes, the wolves, the elk, the magpies, the peepers, the crickets, and the snakes. Here, the message is untranslatable. It’s an ever-present hiss, gurgle, hum, and then a scream” (393).

iii. Human/Nature Bondage

Also, they learn to respect the calls of nature and relish with its bounty. They had built a strong connectivity with the nature, its weather, its landscape and its environment. “...all-natural things are known and understood somewhere inside a natural being” (389). They encountered treeless landscapes, climate-remade rivers and felt “*Wilderness – friend or foe*” (14).

Her mother stood before the tree with something in her hand, squinting at it...she stepped back from the tree, looked up into its branches as if contemplating climbing it...The

closer they got to the foothills, the greener and softer the world became. The weight of the air changed. There was water again in every breath, and soon they hoped they would find it running clean and easy from small springs and brooks” (298-303).

The environmental conditions like climatic changes alters their concept of the organic/inorganic divide. For them, “Colours would seem to have blurred their boundaries” (395). Throughout the quest, they encounter the influence of climate, an unexpected unseasonal “storm had altered the bank and submerged the patch of island” (12), that they were intended to settle. Climate interfered in the relationships that Bea brought Agnes to the New Wilderness State to heal her previous ailment of breathlessness. She would always check her breathing, “Breathing sounding like heavy drapes shuffling against the floor” (25) during rains, storms and tornados.

CONCLUSION:

The life-threatening list of environmental devastations like acid rain, smog, species extinction and so on are now a days drawing scholars towards sophisticated methodologies and work on human-environmental nexus (Emmett, 2017). Richard White, while discussing about “Decline and Finishing in Environmental Narratives”, promotes Rachel Carson’s emphasis of reorientation of the idea of environmentalism, by looking away and beyond already prevailing problems and appropriation of narrative skills in the texts of subversion (White, 2017. P. 241-242). In conclusion, the paper initiates the consensus through conditioned and revised narratives according to the emerging researches on

natural disasters and climate change. Also, resilience is proposed by the literary texts, with Environmental themes, in influencing the reorientation of the state policies and activist law-making on climate change.

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