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A Study of the Marginalization of Environment and Women in Climate Fiction (Cli-fi) Genre

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ABSTRACT

Climate change fictions set a narrative that assimilates the issues which raise the consciousness about the marginalization of the environment as well as women and thus creates a discourse on the condition of subalternity. Technology, Capitalism, and Patriarchy exploit both environment and women in the cultural domain and hence, the paper explores the interwoven structure of the exploitation that create climate change crisis at the global level and psychological crisis at an individual level. The paper discusses the climate fiction genre and its engagement with the environment and women as a unit of the anthropogenic world amidst the challenges: social, political, and economic, that formulates the contemporary literary discourse.

Keywords: Environment, Capitalism, Patriarchy, Marginality

Climate change fictions examine the ethical, moral, and political dilemmas that humans face today in an age of climate emergency. Climate fiction (cli-fi) helps us to identify the reality of climate change and its repercussions on the marginalized sections especially women who suffer the same uprootedness that our nature bears in this Anthropocene age. Climate fiction deals with the apocalyptic visions of the future and in the apocalyptic world, the fate of both women and environment is dismal and bleak that we can analyse when we evaluate climate fiction.

The Canadian author Margaret Atwood calls climate change “the everything change” in an interview to The Huffington Post. In Atwood’s works, the change in every aspect of life is evident and the worst sufferers are women and the environment. Women characters suffer due to commodification of nature and women both. In Atwood’s Maddaddam trilogy,

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women are controlled, objectified, and exploited. There is the reference of Snake women in the novel *Maddaddam*:

The Snake Women sometimes bit people, but they didn't bite Zeb...They were kind. Because that is how Oryx made them. (*Maddaddam*, p.313)

Here, the human intervention is apparent in remodelling nature and its components. Crake, the scientist who has the mission to create a new human species, forms the snake, bird and flower women who can seduce, kill and protect men according to their genetic function attributed to them and hence women become the puppets in the world of men who use them for the debasement. Similarly, the environment suffers the derangement and it can be observed when for drinking purpose the Crakers, the new type of human species uses hand pump and at the same time, Toby, the female guardian of the Crakers thinks:

It's groundwater, and every toxic spill for miles around may have leaked into it...far away fires and maybe nuclear meltdowns sending dirty particulate into the stratosphere, God knows what's in that as well. (*Maddaddam*, p.55)

Between nature and culture, the structuralist binary opposition refers to nature as feminine and weak whereas culture as masculine and strong. The deconstruction of the climate crisis provides a major glimpse upon the effects that climate change creates on the marginalized section of the society and among which women are the most vulnerable community. Climate change leads to fatal accidents that dismantle the family as an economic and social unit and women as the soul of the family suffers the most in it. Patriarchy does not provide much scope for the intellectual development of women, and the climate crisis at the same time creates the condition in which women become crippled, paralytic, and unproductive: sexually and economically both. In Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*, change in climate has led to an adverse impact on the fertility of women and men but women as the marginalized one suffer the most. Offred, the woman protagonist states:

Sterile. There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law. (Atwood 71)

Reproduction, according to the Essentialist, is the process in which women are the productive forces and the nature shares this trait of being a creator with women but the human interventions have disturbed the natural system; both nature and women are becoming infertile and the infertility of women is treated as a sin on the part of women and there is no repentance for this sin also. Similarly, the land is losing its fertility due to the excessive use of chemicals such as fertilizers and pesticides which Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring*, mentions in minute details when she underlines:

The most alarming of all man's assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials... Strontium 90 released through nuclear explosions into the air, comes to earth in rain and enters into the grass or corn or wheat grown there, and in time it takes up its abode in the bones of a human being, there to remain until his death. (Carson, 2000, p. 23)

Man-made alteration of nature has disturbed the biological metabolism of creatures. This anthropocentrism marginalizes the socially weak creatures. As the ideology reinforces the rights of the powerful over the weak, women in the age of Holocene suffers the most. They are suppressed by society and are considered as outclass, bereft of their biological and economic productivity; they remain nonentity in the anthropocentric world. Drenched out of

emotions and feelings, women are treated as mechanical beings for slavery, and amidst adverse impact on sexual lives due to climate change, some women, by chance or fate, retain their biological power of sexual fertility, they are used as sexually productive machines. The condition of women who are indulged in surrogacy is the testimony of the reckless and insensitive attitude that is shown towards the poor women. A writeup in the opinion column of *The Guardian* by Kishwar Desai puts forward the condition:

Most mothers sign contracts agreeing that even if they are seriously injured during the later stages of pregnancy, or suffers any life-threatening illness, they will be sustained with life-support equipment to protect the fetus. Further, they usually agree to assume all medical and psychological risks. (Desai, June 5, 2012)

The future is bleak no matters how scientifically developed we become. The treatment of women characters in climate fiction novels depicts the apathy and insincerity of the dominant classes. Women even if they are educated, are not taken seriously when they raise their concern about climate change.

Women are usually portrayed as domestic workers mainly indulged in housekeeping works and their silence on any issue; big or small about climate change is considered as a norm. Their concerns usually remain like that of a Victorian woman and that is to preserve chastity and to maintain the codes of mannerism. If they speak it is perceived as immoral and as a psychotic disorder. Resistance in the case of women is taken as shameful and categorized as a neurotic disorder that needs proper social and medical treatment so that nobody else from the women community can resist again and also nobody can question it as it is scientifically treated under the framed laws. It is evident in Liz Jensen's *The Rapture* in which the protagonist is a neurotic patient who protects the future calamities accurately. First, she is disbelieved and rejected, later her predictions are miss-represented, and ultimately, she has been tried under the law and restricted within the apocalyptic atmosphere:

The world is full of people like Bethany Krall. Our job is to free them of their fantasies, not collude in them...The government has dismissed the alert as wholly unfounded, insisting that the evidence is not credible. (Jensen, 2009, pp. 127, 301)

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are treated as handmaids, the sex workers by law who produce babies for the upper class- sexually infertile women. The Republic of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* is like George Orwell's 1984. Women in the Republic of Gilead, are not allowed to do any work except as the sex workers who are not allowed to move or even see freely. Their sense organs are captivated so that their mind cannot work efficiently. In a completely tyrannical atmosphere, they are treated as machines whose pain and pleasure during sexual intercourse become neutral at such a level that their life becomes unproductive like the land on the earth which has also become barren due to excessive use of fertilizers.

Offered, the protagonist, explains her condition in *The Handmaid's Tale* when she becomes the part of the forceful sexual act which is framed as her profession:

It was like being on an operating table, in the full glare; like being on a stage...This act of copulation, fertilization perhaps which should have been no more to me than a bee is to a flower, had become for me indecorous, an embarrassing breach of propriety, which it hadn't been before. (The Handmaid's Tale, 1996, pp.169-170)

Women authors who write climate change fiction for example Margaret Atwood, Barbara Kingsolver, and Liz Jensen, in case the protagonist is woman, she will be depicted by these writers as more active and resistive to the male attitude of the society about climate crisis but with some common limitations. Unheard and unnoticed, their issues are considered

unqualified for serious considerations. They are treated as subalterns as they do not have their identity but are provided with an identity within the dominant structuralist regime.

Dellarobia Turnbow, the protagonist who has flame-colored hair, in *The Flight Behaviour* is unsatisfied with her family and personal life but is neglected by her family. She is 'reckless' but ultimately resists her desire to be free as to prevent 'the shame and loss' that could infect her children. The protagonist, Bethany Krall in *The Rapture* is treated as evil, instead of showing any sympathetic and respectable concern for her climate predictions she is outrightly rejected as a dangerous lunatic who is in the possession of an evil and who has killed her mother in a frenzy. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the protagonist Offred is captivated in a lodge, forcefully but legally permitted profession of sexual services. The treatment of all three women protagonists underlines the fact that women and their intellect are discarded at every level, their existence is exploited like that of the environment for the consumerist gratifications.

The climate change crisis dismantles the linear narrative of the world. The world is in a crisis of its own identity and in this sense, the environment as an integral part of nature has become marginalized. The marginalized women remain in a search of her identity, similarly, the environment also remains in flux, reflecting nonlinear and fragmented identity through frequently and randomly occurring natural catastrophes. The marginalized environment due to anthropogenic conditions under capitalist ideology and consumerist culture is the subject matter of climate fictions and women characters in the climate fictions reflect the grave and pathetic conditions of the environment. Both women and the environment are considered as a capitalist object for consumption; both environmental resources and women are used as a medium or tool for obtaining and cultivating human resources for further exploitation without giving any valuable sense to both. Environment as well as women are neglected and ignored after their use whether it is the mining sites or infertile land or women who have sterile gametes. Both are governed by laws made by male members: environment laws and family laws and Justice is denied to both as both are attributed as irrational beings.

Rationality as the weapon of man is propagated since the Renaissance period. The analytical philosophy accounts for rationality and women who are being suppressed and confined within the four walls of a home are treated as irrational beings. Environment and women both are marginalized through technology. According to Plan International:

Without equal access to technology and the internet, girls and women are not able to equally participate in our ever more digital societies. Holding back girls and women in this area affects every aspect of their lives, including their ability to speak out and campaign on issues that affect them.

Climate fiction genre also highlights the democratic movement which focuses on the arrangement of collective experience of society for the climate change crisis. In the 'Ecocriticism and the Politics of Representation, Cheryl Lousley highlights the need of the transformation of subjects in dealing with the climate crisis and inclusion of different communities, gender, and stakeholders' contribution is needed.

Barbara Kingsolver in her novel, *The Flight Behaviour* raises the concern about the migrants Monarch Butterflies which are dying due to climate change. One of the reasons which she provides about the changed pattern in the migration of butterflies and the risk of their extinction, therefore, is:

The sole larval food for butterflies is "weed". Pesticides too, spraying on the increase, as warming temperatures bring in the West Nile mosquito.

New weather patterns affect everything in the migratory pathways.
(Kingsolver, 2012, p. 481)

Here, in the novel, Dellarobia is the female protagonist who works in the lab to identify the cause of the death of the butterflies with the majority of the male scientists. Hence, the fictional work subverts the static state where the thoughtfulness and the responsibility to save environment stays with in the hegemonic structure of the state institutions. In the novel we find how a common woman who is a neglected housewife becomes instrumental in the scientific research to protect the species of the monarch butterflies and hence subverts the power/knowledge hegemony by her active presence.

In a revealing report by BBC, every representation of women in national and global climate negotiating bodies is below 30%. After natural catastrophes women suffer the most as they don't know how to evacuate themselves, engaged in saving their children in households. Oxfam report finds that in 2004 tsunami surviving men outnumbered women by almost 3:1 in India, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia.

Nick Bostrom, an expert, and philosopher of Artificial Intelligence terms the word 'transhumanism' to reflect the possibility of 'a new state of being' due to technology that would be a major evolutionary event in the geological history of the world. It would create a technological rupture and would leave a large part of the world without access to technology and the most vulnerable would be the marginalized sections of the world including women and this concept we can approach in Margaret Atwood's *Maddaddam* trilogy in which Artificial Intelligence has destroyed the lives of the masses by overpowering the natural processes of reproduction which ultimately explodes into a failure and mass extinction.

Women have no property, no formal education, no economic freedom, no say in financial policies. According to a Report of International Union for Conservation of Nature IUCN, 'Extreme weather events such as droughts and floods have a greater impact on the poor and most vulnerable - 70% of the world's poor are women.'

The scientific and social facts are also assimilated and represented in literary forms in the climate fictions. Dellarobia in *The Flight Behaviour* and Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* have no economic freedom. Offred is formally a sexual slave whereas Dellarobia is an economic slave in patriarchy. They are the most sufferers of Climate Change as they have no power to resist in the manner the male counterparts can do, even then they try to resist, which is a positive sign.

Climate change causes a major impact on the psychology of women characters. Anthropogenic disasters cause scarcity of resources which decreases the already fewer opportunities and options for women to survive. It causes anxiety, depression, pain, and a sense of insecurity among women. Climate crisis subverts the structural setup of society and women at the margin become more vulnerable to the change. Dellarobia, the protagonist leaves her desire to be free and acts honestly to save her family from the impending disaster due to climate change.

Affluent countries and social groups can access technology to tackle climate change but the marginalized and weaker section cannot have the existing technologies. Water purifiers and air purifiers are still out of access to lower-income groups. Women who use *Chulahas* (fire stoves) for cooking are prone to indoor pollution, along with it, the use of incense sticks, cosmetics, and paints create indoor air pollution and women as neglected beings have not been taken care of these harmful air pollutants, at any point in their domestic lives.

Climate fiction discloses the truth that is sedimented and metamorphic due to the constructed reality of the capitalist and patriarchal world in which both the environment and

the women are treated as resources which are for exploitation in many cases both are equally treated as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are exploited sexually and the environment is degraded economically under capitalism. It can be deduced from the readings of climate fictions that a parallel narrative has become set by the climate fiction genre, to assimilate and focalize the physical conditions of the environment and the psychological conditions of women and both aspects raise serious issues and concerns which need further elaboration, discourse and analysis on the subalternity of environment and women as the question remains open that Can the Subalterns Speak?

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