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### Review of *Once There Were Wolves*

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[Charlotte McConaghy. *Once There Were Wolves*. Flatiron Books, 2021. 258 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$27.99.]

Following the trend set earlier by the climate fiction novel *Migrations*, Charlotte McConaghy's latest novel, *Once There Were Wolves*, extends her concern about climate change and human intervention in it. The protagonist-cum-narrator, Inti Flynn, narrates her experiences from early childhood till her attainment of motherhood. This novel is a complex tale, touching upon so many important issues, including sexual assault, women's physical and verbal abuse, poisonous relationships, and sisterhood. It talks about climatic changes and how humans are messing with the process of life and ecosystems of Earth. It is a homage to nature, and readers can sense an immediate urgency to save nature. McConaghy's luscious portrayals of landscapes and fauna are mesmerizing. In an interview, while discussing the book, the author blurted out her objective behind this project. She analysed the ill-effect of killing wolves and its consequences on the natural habitat:

Killing the wolves was a massive blunder on our part. Ecosystems need apex predators because they elicit dynamic ecological changes that ripple down the food chain, and these are known as 'trophic cascades.' With their return the landscape will change for the better – more habitats for wildlife will be created, soil health increased, flood waters reduced, carbon emissions captured. Animals of all shape and size will return to these lands.

The novel chronicles the story of a young biologist and environmentalist, Inti Flynn, and her arduous yet ambitious project of reintroducing three packs of grey wolves (Abernethy pack, Tanar pack, and Glenshee pack) into the Cairngorms National Park in the Scottish Highlands. Along with her entire team, she aims to bring about a balance in the ecosystem of Scotland, which the interference of the

Anthropocene has completely eroded. Inti faces resistance from the local farmers and the people living nearby, who fear that the resettlement of wolves will have a damaging effect on their lives. However, Inti never bows down; instead, she proceeds with her plan with full force and sets the wolves free from their container. Subsequently, there are many murders and killings of cattle and humans in the novel, and as expected, all the charges fall upon the wolves. In the end, we come to know that the murderer is not any of the wolves but the hysterical elder sister of Inti, whose name is Aggie Flynn.

The narrator and protagonist, Inti Flynn's characterisation, is the fascinating part of the novel. She has acquired an immense love for nature and wild animals from her father, a wood logger. The novel is filled with instances in which Inti expresses her most profound love for nature while also mourning the disruptions and destructions caused by humans to the ecosystem. McConaghy personifies the forest as, "The forest has a beating heart we can't see . . . They're like us, a family. Stronger together" (15). Another queer aspect of her is that she suffers from a syndrome known as "mirror-touch synaesthesia," a condition that makes a person feel the same sensations of touch as the person they are looking at, or the person feels everything she sees happening to other people. This rare neuro-psychological disorder manifests in the first line of the novel when Inti sees her father killing and cutting a rabbit for food. She comments, "When we were eight, Dad cut me open from throat to stomach" (1). The story also unfolds the intensity of the emotional relationship shared by Inti and her sister Aggie, who has a speech impediment.

The novel can be studied from an ecofeminist perspective. Throughout the novel, the readers encounter events where both nature and women are exploited to their core. The characters, such as Lainey and Aggie, get trapped in toxic marital relationships where they completely lose their individuality and get severely tortured by their male counterparts, Stuart and Gus, respectively. The condition of Aggie is much worse, as she, throughout the novel, is being treated as a sexual object to satiate the carnal desires of not only her husband, Gus, but also his cousin. Her sexual exploitation is so brutal that she nearly goes insane, traumatically admitted to the hospital. Like these women, the exploitation of nature and wildlife is also glaringly visible in the novel. Charlotte talks about the human

intervention in the ecosystem that led to the destruction of a vast forest patch and the near extinction of wolves and other wild animals in Scotland. Charlotte's description of humanity's detachment from nature holds much significance here, as she claims, ". . . the world turned wrong when we started separating ourselves from the wild, when we stopped being one with the rest of nature, and sat apart."

As Charlotte McConaghy's detailed and evocative writing weaves these strands together, we are forced to ponder how we communicate, connect, and trust each other. Inti's empathic nature allows us to comprehend that the wolves have their personalities and a sense of belonging to the pack. There are times when it is difficult to tell if wolves are more predatory creatures than humans. Aggie's trauma also allows us to see the consequences of speech impediment and the limitations of human verbal communication, as Inti struggles to convey the advantages of her initiative. We are perplexed as to how the groups can dispute whether the plundering of our environment is genuine when we are constantly confronted with factual data. In the end, we are troubled by these dilemmas as we consider how to chart a sustainable course ahead soon.

The novel's narrative is gripping and compels the readers to finish it in one go. If the author could have taken some more liberty in giving out more descriptions of the environmental degradation and climate change crisis behind the near extinction of wolves from Scotland, the novel could have been more aptly suited to the title. At some points in the novel, primarily when the author describes the subplot, a murder mystery, the reader might feel alienated from the main plot, the wolf, and the environmental crisis. While McConaghy offers insightful viewpoints on the appropriateness of rewilding, the work delves further into epistemological issues. Knowing how we know what we know is under severe strain in a society beset by changing climate and the need to adjust to formerly unimaginable situations. Despite mounting evidence that we are leaving our earth uninhabitable for human existence, we continue to argue over fundamental reality. Every day, we are presented with the limitations of language. Moreover, as McConaghy demonstrates in this magnificent book, the limitations of language inevitably lead to the limitations of compassion.