

Navigating Loss in the Anthropocene: Self, Species and Environment in Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations*

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Abstract

Migrations by Charlotte McConaghy is a climate fiction that is situated shortly after the prolonged consequences of existing climate criminality. Through the depiction of the endangerment of the Arctic Terns, who are on their final migration pathway it also sheds light on the compromises of livelihood and stability: physical and psychological, that all species will undergo. Situated in an ever-changing environment, consistently altered by climate change, it portrays the life of characters who are wanderers: seeking life-improving mobility or embarking on life-sustaining mobility. The mobility or displacement of the characters and the displacement of the environment as a reaction to climate change-related consequences will be analysed as an agential right that is caused due to severe traces of ecological grief. The paper will further analyse how agential pluralism and conjunctions of the grief-stricken life trajectories of the human and the non-human produce interconnectedness. The common ground of climatic criminality experienced by the community of birds as well as by the human characters and its production of grief in the communities will be explicated.

Keywords: ecological grief, species loss, environmental mourning, solastalgia, displacement, climate migration, eco-nostalgia, climate change, species extinction

Introduction

The novel, *Migrations* brings to the forefront the repressed trauma, neglected issues, negated climatic concerns and the issues that are denied, repressed and dispersed across space and time. The protagonist of the novel, Franny undergoes a journey of unlayering her repressed trauma, unhealed memories and ravages of a difficult past. The novelist parallels Franny's journey of loss with the climatic

crises. The novel is based on the character's navigation in a world of personal grief, ecological grief, personal abandonment, solastalgia, death, extinction and ecological devastation. The fictional work contains elements of more than the human coexisting and growing into the human. The journey of Franny paralleled with the plight of the terns and the changing world of the Anthropocene has evoked emotions of ecological grief. The research paper aims to explore the transition of the world towards the Anthropocene, the transformation of agency in humans and non-humans, and the universality of ecological grief and anthropocene anxiety that affect the multispecies communities.

Dan Bloom who coined the term 'cli-fi' argues that "the best of cli-fi does two things: it delivers a powerful and emotional story and it pushes the reader to wake up to the existential threat that man-made global warming poses to future generations" (qtd. in Murray 18). Most works of climate fiction depict the environmental crisis either as the backdrop of human actions or as the primary agent moving the pace of the plot but as Bloom has argued few works of climate fiction serve the twofold purpose. Charlotte McConaghy serves both purposes in her fictional work through the overlapping of the personal and the ecological, which produces emotions of grief and the need for urgent climate action.

Personal Collapse and Climate Crisis

McConaghy depicts Franny "on the cusp of collapse, consumed with a world that is every bit as broken as she is. *Migrations* offer a grim window into a future that doesn't feel very removed from our own, which makes Franny's voice all the more powerful. In understanding how nature can heal us, McConaghy underlines why it urgently needs to be protected" (Gutterman 99). The author shapes the lives of Franny and the environment to make the readers believe that there is still time for reconciliation, negotiations on coexistence, and healing with the help of each other. By putting across the thought of climatic reconciliation through coexistence, she establishes a space of security, hope and the possibility of utopian dreams in a dystopian setting.

The novel "tells the fascinating and perilous story of a woman named Franny and her desperate attempt to follow the world's last flock of Arctic terns from Greenland to Antarctica, on their very final

migration” (Murray 3). Throughout her journey, the plot slowly unravels the personal and climatic issues that have been engulfing her. It unravels Franny’s voyage to follow the Arctic Terns on their last migration route as the species is moving towards extinction due to global warming. She undertakes the responsibility of finding the arctic terns not only due to her love for the community of birds but also to fulfil the last wish of her dead husband. Her late husband was the only person who had comprehended the complexities of Franny’s personality and being an ardent lover of the Arctic terns, his last wish was the following:

If there are no terns left, I would like to be buried, so that my body can give its energy back to the earth from which it derived so much, so that it might feed something, give something, instead of only taking. If there are terns left ... I close my eyes for a long moment. Preparing myself. If there are terns left, and it’s possible, and not too difficult, I would like my ashes to be scattered where they fly. (245)

The fulfilment of the final wish of her husband leads to the progression of the plot brings out the complications of the climate crisis and resolves the personal complications of the protagonist.

Solastalgia and Eco-nostalgia in the Age of the Anthropocene

The novel revolves around a consistent search for one’s home, which has been degraded, reduced to its basal instincts, and slowly crumbling. The idea of home in the anthropocene has turned out to be a vulgar idea, wherein the feeling of belongingness or home has been littered in various periods, spaces and emotions. The impacts of globalization, carbon emissions and anthropogenic acts have enabled the transition from the Holocene to the Anthropocene, which has reconceptualised one’s idea of home. Home used to be an idea of family, a secure environment, peaceful coexistence with non-humans, and a source of fulfilment of one’s physical, mental and emotional needs. But with the advent of climatic crimes, the home has become an entity of the past or an emotion of grief that persists due to the present degraded state of the environment. The term solastalgia was “developed to give greater meaning and clarity to environmentally induced distress”. (Albrecht 95)

The age of the Anthropocene is characterized by ‘homesickness’ wherein the inhabitants of the ecology can no longer relate to their

home environment as it has been climatically altered and destroyed. The inhabitants of the particular location experience displacement without physical movement or relocation as the components of the environment have been radically altered in terms of resource availability, nature, non-human, and all aspects of livelihood. In “Solastalgia: the Distress Caused by Environmental Change”, the author elaborates on the lived experience of profound environmental change and on solastalgia “The people of concern are still ‘at home’, but experience a ‘homesickness’ similar to that caused by nostalgia.” (Albrecht 96)

In the novel, the loss of a sense of home in the environment is prevalent through the state of the ecology. The ocean is changing and is slowly becoming uninhabitable as the population of fish has reduced drastically. The fishermen who accompany Franny start the journey to fish but after they find the fish with the help of the terns, they refuse to fish. Instead one of the fishermen says, “I stopped wanting to catch them a long time ago. I’ve just needed to know they’re still out here somewhere, that the ocean is still alive” (250). This statement brings to light how the life of a human or more than the human relies on how it supports and aids other life forms. The oceans cease to be alive when they fail to support the survival of the fishes and when they find the fishes; the fisherman deems the ocean alive.

Solastalgia is employed to depict the environmental loss that is a part of the anthropogenic crisis and is equated with “the lived experience of the physical desolation of home” (Albrecht 96). The terms solastalgia, nostalgia, ecological grief and so on are used interchangeably to refer to the loss of environment and the feeling of homesickness. The term ‘eco-nostalgia’ is used to refer to situations wherein the inhabitants feel the loss of a home when they return to their former place of residence but realise that the place is no longer a home as it has been radically transformed due to the impact of climate change or anthropogenic development. The term differs from solastalgia because, in the former, there is no lived experience of the losses and transformation and the inhabitants witness the anthropogenic product or the result of the climate crime directly. Whereas in the case of eco-nostalgia, “their nostalgia for a past reality that they were once intimately connected to will produce serious

melancholia” (Albrecht 12). The Arctic terns suffer from eco-nostalgia as they come back to an anthropogenically altered environment and produce serious melancholia in comparison to human characters that are characterized by emotions of solastalgia.

Mobility and Displacement: Human and the More than Human

The novel also features a major intrinsic trait of birds: movement and parallels it with the human characters. Drawing such a semblance though it is far-fetched and strange, serves its purpose in interconnecting the human and the more than human. It also establishes a common ground for negotiation and comprehension. The trait of mobility is projected into humans not in an anthropocentric manner but as an extension of the trait of the birds, wherein certain life forms move, migrate, relocate and are mobile not due to certain reasons but simply because it is in their nature. The concept of mobility creates impediments in the continuance of the survival of the species in the birds and likewise isolates and reduces the quality of life of the human inhabitants. As Tuan puts forth, a sense of place is “a projection of the human psyche” (95) and humans can’t make sense of the ever-changing associations. To comprehend place is to accept Thrift’s notion of an “ecology of place” that explores how “places are ‘passings’ that ‘haunt us’” (qtd. in Cunsolo 95). The novel through its portrayal of characters who are wanderers explores the unstable associations with place as we are placed in consistently displacing planes of existence.

The protagonist’s mobility can be interpreted as an attempt to escape from various situations that try to cage her: domestic, psychological, emotional and criminal. Her first trace of wandering was after her mother’s demise, then she leaves the dysfunctional domestic life provided by her grandmother, wanders away from the psychological trauma of losing her parents, runs away from the grief of losing her child, breaks free from emotional attachment she holds with people and finally she escapes from prison. Franny was in prison for committing two murders but it was not her fault as it was an accident but she seeks redemption through punishment. Her tenure in prison was stacked with abuse, pain and above all the discomfort of being caged in. Her prison mate understands her nature of being a wanderer and says “Don’t die in here. Not in a cage.

Get free and die if you have to" (139) and Franny sets her mind to a plan of dying free. So, she escapes from prison, lies to the crewmen of being an ornithologist and a scientist, and embarks on the voyage to trace the final migration of the Arctic Terns.

The wandering nature of Franny is just like the nature of the Arctic Terns, they migrate because it is in their nature too. The Arctic Terns migrate and keep searching for fish till they die out of starvation not because they cannot sense the climatic displacement but because it is in their nature to wander. The Arctic Terns are called the 'world's migration champion' by Wells W. Cooke, also known as the father of bird migration studies because they "have the longest migration of any animal in the world, from the Arctic to the Antarctic and back again within a year" (23). Their migration can be perceived as their response to seasonal or climate changes and they move in search of food, sunlight, moulting and suitable breeding grounds. The climate change altered migration pathway kindles the interest of Niall who wants to follow them on their last migration as it would lend information "not just about the birds themselves but about climate change, too." (168)

In the Yellow Stone National Park, the research team performs experimental procedures on various species of flora and fauna to promote the conservation and sustenance of wildlife. The conservation society has been "breeding more resistance into some of their creatures, trying to grow new habitats, rescuing wildlife" (209). The migration pathway would lead to the extinction of the species as it is already endangered and due to food scarcity and other unfavourable circumstances, the species would get wiped off from the planet. This is a prominent threat as the birds "are genetically engineered to go in search of food but when no food can be found the journey becomes fatal. The birds die of exhaustion." (212) To prevent such an outcome, the team has caged the terns during their migratory period and has been force-feeding them grass instead of fish.

Franny is grief-stricken by the plight of the tern which "flies around her cage, around and around, her wings brushing futilely against the metal, forever trying to reach the sky" (221) as it has been her nature since creation. The crisis of climate change itself is a product of anthropocentric, capitalist, and non-inclusive activities

and to counter the same by prioritising human-centric tendencies and expressing sheer neglect for biocentrism and the concerns of the multispecies communities do not offer any resolution. The caged Arctic Terns cannot reproduce in captivity and have been tortured as their wilderness is locked inside a cage.

The reaction of Franny towards the entrapment and captivity of the Arctic Terns evokes respect for non-human agency and empathy for their current plight. Through the comparison of the wandering of Franny and the migratory tendency of the Terns, the novelist constructs “instances where the human characters at least attempt respectful interactions with their nonhuman counterparts in ways that honour and affirm the value of their animal lives.” (Murray19)

Personal Grief and Mourning

Her difficult past and dysfunctional family patterns form the basis of her initial period of grief. As she progresses into adulthood, there are only two things that provide Franny with the contentment that she has longed for in life: her husband’s love and the bond that she has with birds. Whale and Ginn in “In the Absence of Sparrows” bring out the association between humans and non-humans, especially birds. They put forth how “In times of both abundance and scarcity, birds have been a source of inspiration and fascination for the human imagination” (92). She has been a bird lover and shares an intimacy with crows from the beginning of the novel wherein she feeds the crows regularly and they bring her gifts in return. It was the love for birds that led her to her husband as they bonded over conversations about birds. It is the loss of both that makes her undertake the voyage of following the Arctic terns on their last migration route to redeem her from emotions of personal and ecological grief.

Motherhood has been one of the major sources of personal grief in the novel: the presence or absence of one and the process of becoming one. Franny had never wanted to give birth to a child but the loss of the child that she never even wanted in the first place evokes intense emotions of grief and mourning. The moment she holds her daughter in her hands, she feels the weight of the traumatic absent presence of her mother dissolve but the loss of her child is unbearable to her as she describes “no matter how often I try to leave

it behind there will never be an end to this ache, this pain, the feel of her unbearable weightlessness in my hands.” (122)

Franny’s complicated personality is an outcome of her grief: the losses of her past, the death of her child followed by her husband’s demise. Niall identifies the complexities in her personality and responses invigorated due to instances of grief for which Franny says “My father strangled a man to death,” I tell him softly. “My mother hung herself with a rope about her neck. Edith drowned on the fluid in her lungs. And my body suffocated our daughter” (122). The death of every familial tie: physical or non-physical has transformed her personality and has functioned as a grief-producing repressed memory.

Ecological Grief and Environmental Mourning

In the novel, personal grief and ecological grief are entwined with each other, wherein each functions as a metaphor for the other. The protagonist’s “self-destructive impulses echo humanity’s” (Becktold 52) as the climatic crisis is the outcome of prioritising selfish interests which means turning self-destructive in the distant future. She wants to end her life after fulfilling her husband’s last wish “but as the novel progresses, she also taps into positive life forces, like the desire to nurture, giving her the will to fight for her own and the planet’s future” (Becktold 52). Nancy Menning in “Environmental Mourning and the Religious Imagination” explores how emotions of grief, though largely passive, victims can cultivate “capacity for grief by practices that create, nurture, or draw our attention to connections”. (58)

Ecological grief stems from various causes: “grief over physical losses (like flood devastation or deforestation), grief associated with loss of identity, and grief over anticipated future ecological losses” (Zaraska 26). The loss experienced by Franny in the novel is manifold as she experiences physical losses as the environment has been climatically altered, she experiences identity loss as she transgresses through dysfunctional relationships and grief arising from the anticipation of species extinction. Clark resonates with the same idea in his definition: “ecological grief at the loss or destruction of a particular place is an emotion felt personal, as an affront to those who valued that place, creature or ecosystem: it has the source of a

personal assault” (Clark 65). The impact of ecological grief has its tremors felt across the social, personal and political as the Anthropocene has turned out to be a geological period of consistent disappearance and relocation.

Kinship and Interconnectedness: Call for Multispecies Justice

Ecological grief is an outcome of the revelation of ecological interconnectedness and ecocentrism. When Franny questions Niall about what the climatic crisis means to them, he replies “that we are incomprehensibly brief sparks, just as the animals are, that we are no more important than they are, no more worthy of life than any living creature. That in our self-importance, in our search for meaning, we have forgotten how to share the planet that gave us life” (197). The comprehension of coexistence and peaceful negotiations for shared livelihood is essential for the process of mourning and climate action.

Though the novel is considered to be a dystopian representation of the climatic crisis of the present, it also holds utopian instances that are “found in the instances where the human characters at least attempt respectful interactions with their nonhuman counterparts in ways that honour and affirm the value of their animal lives” (Murray19). The major utopian theme of the novel is its promotion of peaceful coexistence and emphasis on the interconnectedness of the human and the non-human.

Timothy Morton in *Ecology without Nature*, echoes the same as he equates the Anthropocene as “a time for grief to persist, to ring throughout the world” (185). Though the process of experiencing environmental loss causes grief, it is essential to channel the process of grief through mourning, understanding and climatic action. The comprehension of the gravity of the ecological collapse occurs when the human characters strip away anthropocentric pride and ideologies. There are many instances in the novel, wherein the human characters prioritise the lives of animals over humans as when Franny says “I wonder if this matters. I wonder if there is meaning in any death, ever. There has been meaning in the deaths of the animals, but I am no animal. If only I were.” (180)

The few climate coping measures and wildlife preservation actions undertaken revolve around the process of selecting a few

lives over the other not on the ecological requirements but based on anthropocentric favour. The novel is set in an era of mass extinctions and they have even “declared the crow extinct.” According to the Taxonomy of hierarchy in anthropocentric ideologies, humans are placed in at? the top and the other species are placed as per their use to humankind and not based on their function in the ecology. Niall and Franny in the novel dismantle the anthropocentric pyramid of classification by realising that “Saving specific animals purely based on what they offer humanity may be practical, but wasn’t this attitude the problem to begin with? Our overwhelming, annihilating selfishness? What of the animals that exist purely to exist, because millions of years of evolution have carved them into miraculous beings?” (211)

Though the novel decentres the significance assigned to the human species, it does not discount the accountability of humans as the primary geological force responsible for the climate crisis and climate-induced species extinction. The peak of her ecological grief-provoked responses is when Franny accommodates the crisis from the perspective of the terns. They have been fighting relentlessly to survive but their death is not due to their compromised function or inability to adapt but due to corruptive anthropocentric interventions. Overcome with grief and empathy for the terns Franny musters up the strength to finally say “So – for my sanity – I release the Arctic terns from the burden of surviving what they shouldn’t have to, and I bid them goodbye”. (223)

Conclusion

The novel broods in the undertone of doom and climatic crisis but ends with a glimmer of hope as the Arctic Terns have managed to survive. Though there is no promise of prolonged survival or futurity of the species, they have managed to withstand the climatic pressures in the migration route. The ending is a call for the urgency of collective climatic action and negotiation for multispecies justice. Franny changes her decision about committing suicide as she prioritises the ecological grief of the anthropogenic world over her grief and devotes her life towards performing meaningful climatic action: “We are not here alone, not yet. They haven’t all gone and so there isn’t time for me to drown. There are things yet to be done”

(254). These lines serve as a reminder to the readers that there is hope even amidst the anthropogenic crises if proper climatic action: political, social, economic and scientific are undertaken in a humane and species-inclusive manner.

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