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Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song* as a Climate Fiction (Cli-fi)

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Abstract: Climate change, a brimming issue that can no longer be evaded has found its way into the literary arena in the recent times. The paper aims to analyse Lee Maracle's novel *Celia's Song* as a Climate Fiction (Cli-fi). The research paper attempts to trace the origin of climate fiction and throw light upon its characteristic features which make it unique. It also focusses on how the writer uses climate fiction to highlight the existing social and cultural problems and also to provide solutions to these problems.

Keywords: Climate fiction (Cli-fi), environmental degradation, apocalypse, fantasy, mythology, exploitation, rage.

INTRODUCTION

The interdependent relationship between nature and human beings prevails from the initial existence of human race. Environmental prosperity is an integral part of the life and survival of the human beings. As the human civilisation advanced into the era of technology, human activities started taking place away from the natural environment. The advancements in science and technology have eased the life of human beings but at the cost of nature: "Each revolutionary intervention of science in the evolutionary functioning of the planet to better the conditions, results in catastrophic events" (Ekler, 2). The strong bond between humans and nature has shrunk to a gossamer-like thread that is falling apart gradually. In fact, human beings' insatiable thirst to exploit nature have resulted in the degradation of the natural world that encompasses all living things and has led to the environmental imbalance.

The equilibrium of the natural world has been altered due to natural causes as well as human activities. The alterations caused by natural phenomena like asteroid strikes, volcanic eruptions and solar variations occur at large time intervals of once in million years. However, scientific studies show that human activities have affected the balance to a greater extent in the past two centuries. The beginning of these disruptive human activities could be traced back to 1800 A.D. when industries came into existence. Since then, burning of fossil fuels and emission of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide and methane have sharply increased causing the temperature of the earth to shoot up. This global warming has paved for the drastic changes in the weather patterns and climatic conditions of the earth.

Climate change is a global phenomenon that is often interrelated to global warming. Climate

change also includes other components like floods, droughts, wildfires, storms and even extinction of species apart from global warming. The late twentieth century was marked by the rapid growth of urban population, increased number of industries, the resultant industrial cities, automobile production and the invention of nuclear weapons. While expanding the realm of human beings and their intelligence, these factors paved way for environmental degradation and disrupted its natural balance. As Julia Rosen remarks, "But it is a good remainder that Earth's climate is complex and chaotic, so the effects of human-caused changes will play out differently in different places" (14).

The environmental disorder caused by the careless attitude of man is slowly turning the earth into an uninhabitable place. The people who are always in a hurry often tend to forget that they are a small part in the cosmos and that there are also other beings that co-exist. This thought is affirmed by many writers and critics. Nevertheless, historian Dipesh Chakrabarty points out, "The planetary crisis of climate change or global warming elicits a variety of responses in individuals, groups and governments ranging from the denial, disconnect and indifference to a spirit of engagement and activism of various kinds and degrees" (23). The better understanding of the natural world and awareness about the climate variation can sort out the mixed responses and facilitate the required action.

The immediate need to pay attention to the worsening climate crisis is addressed by many from the 1950s. However, the issue was identified and addressed as early as in 1896 by the Swedish physicist Svante Arrhenius who proposed the first model of climate change. Following that the

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) which has its headquarters in Geneva was formed in 1988 by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP). It was one of the earliest organisations that highlighted the need to act upon crises. Apart from such organisations and summits, environmental activists like Greta Thunberg continue to assert the need for change till the present day.

The urge to enlighten people with this pressing issue is reflected in the field of art and literature. Writers with ecological concerns like J. G. Ballard, Margaret Atwood, Ian McEwan, Kim Stanley Robinson and Barbara Kingsolver have written about the ill effects of climate change. One among them is the Canadian novelist Lee Maracle who expresses her concern for a better earth through her depiction of native Canadians. Maracle, a member of Sto:lo Nation has actively voiced out for the rights and identity of the Indigenous people and women of the postcolonial Canada. In response to the urban society's accusations levied on the indigenous community and culture, she projects the threats of the urbanised world through her fiction, non-fiction and memoirs.

Maracle's unique style of writing is a fusion of poetry, history, facts, myths and fantasy that reflect the rich culture and heritage of the indigenous people. She opines that the indigeneity of people is itself a manifestation of the natural world. Maracle in her *I Am Woman: A Native Perspective on Sociology and Feminism* states, "...to destroy natural life needlessly was to court disaster" (41). Through the problems of these indigenous people, she depicts the environmental crisis which affects people throughout the world. Her *Ravensong*, (1993) shows the healing power of nature and its generosity. In *Daughters are Forever*, (2002), she presents the self-discovery of a woman through her cultural history and nature. *Will's Garden*, (2002) is a bildungsroman that insists on the preservation of environment and its resources. Her novel *Celia's Song*, (2014) explores the horrid decline of human values that adversely affect nature causing turmoil.

Maracle's text reflect her anthropogenic concerns combined with her environmental affinity. She focusses on the unadulterated earth of the past and expresses her contempt for the erratic changes that affect the primordial serenity of it. The paper highlights the blend of fact and fiction followed by the depiction of apocalypse which forms the

foundation of the novel, *Celia's Song*. Along with these factors it also analyses fantastical and mythological elements which are used to point out the exploitation of resources and the consequent rage of nature. Taking into account all these factors, this paper attempts to explore Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song* as a climate fiction.

The concern for climate and environmental degradation has been found in literature even before the coinage of a specific term to address them. The term 'cli-fi' was coined by a journalist called Dan Bloom in the year 2011. According to him, cli-fi is an 'urgent genre' that wakes people up through storytelling. This separate genre encouraged the writers to turn their attention towards the changing climatic conditions. The genre can be seen as the result of random weather patterns, melting of glaciers, sudden bushfires, floods and annihilation of species. These factors have paved way for the emergence of cli-fi in literature. By giving the horrid portrayal of destruction, climate fictions aim at positive change: "...paints dire pictures of a world on the brink of destruction as a means of calling for social and political reforms that might avert such ruination" (Heise, 141). As an avant-garde and dynamic genre, the definition of climate fiction is also continuously evolving.

Cli-fi can be thematically classified by its inclination towards climate change and the political, social, psychological and ethical dilemma associated with it. It can be further defined as 'cultural phenomena' which reflects the human-nature relationship. Gregers Andersen brings out this cultural influence as, "The phenomenon of anthropogenic global warming is also present in different cultures, where its meaning is processed cognitively and shaped imaginatively" (1). It is considered to have originated from the popular genre of science fiction. It is no longer considered as a subgenre of sci-fi as it has evolved into an independent genre. Recent probe into climate fiction has led to the discovery of Anthropocene which indicates human impact on geophysical and biological systems of the earth. It is versatile and has been further classified into different categories based on thematic functions. The classification includes psycho-geographical, geological, biopunk, political, crime and satirical climate fictions.

Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song* written in 2014 is a sequel to her 1993 novel *Ravensong* and is set several years later. It narrates the struggles of the

people of Nuu'chalth territory. While **Ravensong** depicts the childhood of Celia and her sister Stacey, this novel focuses on Celia and her family during social and environmental turmoil. The happenings are narrated by Celia and Mink who also bear witness to it. Celia, a seer who often contemplates about past and future, has disturbing visions which foretell and warn about an impending disaster. Mink is a shape shifter that observes the rage of the sea serpent and traces its anger to man's negligence of nature. The atmosphere of the novel is set by the inclusion of harsh and never-ending storms causing destruction.

The novel equates environmental degradation to the disintegration of the human society. Celia's Momma and Stacey's son Jacob often contemplate about the colonial changes. Steve and Judy present the alternate side of colonialism as they try to understand the culture of these people though they fail to identify with it. Through the abuse of the little girl Shelley and the condition of her mother Stella, Maracle reflects the crimes against women. She relates these inhuman activities with the collapse of environmental stability. Through these characters, the novel throws light upon the colonial discrimination and the prevalent injustice in Canada. **Celia's Song** suggests solution to most of the existing ecological problems that can be found by re-establishing the bond with natural environment.

As Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra state, "Cli-fi is therefore characterized by a mix of factual research and speculative imagination" (9). This unification of reality and imagination is the first pointer of climate fiction. Maracle in **Celia's Song** traces the causes that have disrupted the natural habitat. Celia strongly opposes the rules and ideals of the new settlers which is a depiction of the frustrations of First Nations people. Other characters like Momma, Jacob and Mink also portray how they feel suffocated by the norms of White society. The lines, "No singing, the newcomers had said. This seems comic to me and I want to laugh; I mean, how bad can singing be?" (2) is a reflection of the colonial power. They dismiss the practices that glorified and celebrated nature as superstitious and tried to estrange the natives from their own roots.

The introduction of Indigenous Federal vote in Canada is criticised by Maracle in the novel. Celia's sister Stacey contemplates on how the system of voting was introduced to them:

It is true, Stacey thinks, we ran out of wood to build homes and fires. The chief went to the government, the government came back with a plan, and then the government demanded a vote. "We ran out of wood and they gave us a vote" ...Wasn't that some powerful piece of nothing. (64)

The natives also feared that the vote would deprive them of their historic rights and exemption from tax. After many suffrage movements, some parts of the 'Canada Elections Act' were repealed in 1960 and the government ensured that they could vote without losing their Indian rights.

During the 1950s Canada was struck by a series of diseases like Polio and Influenza that infected mass population throughout the world and also resulted in casualties. Maracle highlights the effects of this epidemic by portraying the struggles of the indigenous people amidst it and their involvement in nursing the sick. When Momma was young, the whole of Canada was hit by illness: "It kept coming for the villagers like some vengeful beast, forcing person after person to vomit, cough and burn away their lives" (89-90).

The twentieth century is marked by the increased number of industries which required increased supply of timber. To regulate the felling of trees, the government passed laws like the Crown Timber Lands Act (1913) and the Forest Act (1930). According to the laws, a paid licence issued by the government was essential. Maracle captures the opinions of natives: "There are mountains of wood. It was the absence of access of to the wood in them mountains that was the problem, and now they are facing it" (65). These legislations controlled excessive deforestation caused by industries as it affected the indigenous community. The laws curbed their interaction with nature and distanced them from it resulting in the apocalypse that follows in the novel.

The idea of apocalypse including eerie and gloomy depictions is utilised by most writers of climate fiction and it depicts the earth as a desolate place. The emotions of the readers are kindled by the depiction of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic worlds and the incidents that have led to this altered world:

For these losses seemed not just significant but irreversible and absolute; they amounted to the utter destruction of nature and all its symbolic values- something that simultaneously meant the end of human life as well, as existence without

nature was felt to be impossible and even inconceivable. (Buell, 231)

Catastrophe plays an important role in expanding the depth of apocalyptic representation. The doom is not a pronouncement of an 'inevitable fate' but is a warning that calls for an immediate action so that the doom in the real world can be avoided.

Lee Maracle presents the never-ending storms which persistently hit the Nuu'chalnulth village. These storms and rains invaded and reinvaded the village making the place uninhabitable. While visiting the longhouse Mink exclaims, "It looks as though a single shingle had blown off the roof during a storm, beginning the process of destruction, precipitating the damage inside" (1). The eco-apocalypse refers to the collapse of the natural environment which is caused by the fluctuating climate change. This eco-apocalypse usually presented as the destruction of ecology can be prevented by modifying the existing practices.

Apart from the apocalypse that takes place in this natural space, the writer also presents the apocalyptic Canadian cities like Vancouver. This representation of cities reinstates the fact that climate change is not exclusive to a particular place and that it can affect the entire world. The people of Nuu'chalnulth were terrified to even mention the name of that Vancouver. It can be seen as the post-apocalyptic world in which there is neither life nor calmness. When Celia's Momma was a child, her grandfather narrated about Vancouver stating that it was located down the river and infested with evil. After hearing about it, Momma decided that she would never visit it. The writer stresses on this fear combined with discernment which Momma possessed.

The apocalyptic visions are also represented through humans. While affecting the humans externally, the climate decline also impacts their psyche and increases suicides. Jimmy's suicide shatters Celia's universe and creates a void in the lives of the characters. His suicide is sudden and no one suspects it. Ned fails to understand the puzzling nature of Jimmy's suicide and finds it 'too complex and too foreign.' Stella who led a meaningless vagrant life tries to shoot herself but fails in her attempt and it aggravates her existing trauma. The suicides are depictions of human apocalypse which are caused by climatic degradation. These apocalyptic visions are achieved by Maracle through the inclusion of fantasy that intensifies the effect.

Climate fictions make use of fictional elements to create interest and imprint ideas which stay in readers' minds: "Fictionalizing climate change is not about falsifying it, or making it imaginary, but rather about using narrative to heighten its reality" (Trexler, A, 75). Maracle merges fantastical elements into her writings making them more engaging. For instance, the cedar frond tries to talk to Jacob about the mountain song but he ignores it. The angry bones found in the abandoned and partially destroyed longhouse are depicted having a voice and rant among themselves. Maracle states the yearning of the bones and their contempt for humans: "The intensity of their rage grows with time. The bones wait; wait for burial, for ceremony, for their final resting place. They shift and rattle their discontent" (2). The bones and their ignored state imply human ignorance of nature in its degrading state which causes an altered state.

The characters of Mink and Celia are tinted with fantastical elements. Mink, a semiaquatic carnivorous mammal serves as the narrator of her novel. Other than narrating the incidents, he also bears witness to them. As a shape-shifter Mink can transform into any animal. Mink explains his special ability by saying, "The thing about being a shape-shifter is I can alter my presence from one place to the next. One moment I am in Nuu'chalnulth territory, the next in Sto:lo territory" (7). Celia is a seer who can sense the impending danger and hear the complaints of the bones. Her reminiscence serves as the narratives of the past. These two characters criticise the ungrateful human society and their crimes against nature.

The inclusion of supernatural beings like ghosts create a sense of mystery and fear. It is used to educate the characters and the readers about the stable environmental state of the past. They forewarn the characters so that the future disaster can be averted. Momma's grandmother Alice appears before Jacob when he climbs to the top of the mountain. Mink captures his emotions: "He had witnessed the worst thing he could imagine happen to his small relative. He watched it shape itself into a movie. Now this dead woman is sitting next to him, sucking on his cigarette" (177). Grandma Alice appears after a devastating event and Maracle uses strong natural imagery to announce her arrival. Thus, she can be seen as the advocate of the natural system trying to help the people of the Nuu'chalnulth village. Apart from fantastical elements, mythology also aids in engaging the readers better.

The writers of cli-fi utilize the myths of the past to represent the present and preserve the future. "Every myth shows how a reality came into existence, whether it be the total reality, the cosmos, or only a fragment-an island, a species of plant, a human institution" (Eliade, M, 97). Myths can also be seen as part of indigenous culture which is one of the major concerns of the novel. Lee Maracle uses the 'sisiutl myth' as a driving force which determines the flow of the novel. The myth of sisiutl originates from the Pacific Northwest coast and has many variations. The most common representation is a double-headed serpent with features of aquatic animals. It is depicted as a symbol of power, protection and destruction. People of Canada, Australia and New Zealand widely employ sisiutl images, sculptures and soul catchers to guard their canoes and longhouses.

The two-headed serpent mentioned in the novel stands as a symbol for various elements. The writer gives each head of the serpent unique characteristics even though they are unified in a single body. One head is called Restless and the other is Loyal. While Restless is angry and wants to leave, Loyal feels that the agreement between them and humans should not be broken. However, with time Restless grows angry because people stopped singing praises and feeding them. Hence, he feels that they no longer need to protect the land. Contrarily, Loyal feels that it is their duty to protect the place. This leads to a quarrel between them. Mink observes the serpent and finds, "The two heads argue and as the day wears on the argument heats up until both heads are shouting and twisting to emphasize their points of view. The shared body writhes against the constraint of the house front it occupies" (21).

Loyal represents the benevolent side of the nature and Restless depicts the disruption of balance. Mink understands that both have their own reasons to support their ideas but also fears that if the dispute continues it will not be for the better. The quarrel turns into war and both slide into the sea. Loyal tries hard to find a person who can calm Restless and restore the contract but fails. As Restless cannot kill people after truce with sea, he poisons the minds of the people. The serpent with two heads can thus be viewed as nature's reaction to the dangers of environmental changes and climate breakdown which are primarily caused by the exploitation of human beings and nature.

Exploitation is found to be the major cause for climate crisis: "Ecological problems are seen to result from structures of hierarchy and elitism in human society, geared to exploit both other people and the natural world as a source of profit" (Clark, 2). It is clear that man's insatiable desire is the root cause of most environmental problems that exist today. From the beginning of human settlement, humans depended on nature for their survival. In fact, in the past two centuries they have been overutilizing the natural resources. The process of exploitation in most cases is irreversible and therefore it becomes inevitable to prevent it from occurring.

Celia's Song deals with the exploitation of the indigenous Canadians and women. The colonial crime of inflicting pain and suffering in the lives of natives and erasing their entire existence through violence is a precursor of the climate crisis. Maracle uses Celia as her mouthpiece to address the abuse of her community, women and children. The prevention of the Natives from fetching trees from the mountains had pushed them to poverty. There are no nets, hooks, bowls and clothing and after generations they have lost their heritage. The degradation of human values disrupts the harmony between humans: "The people have no idea who they are anymore. They are sad, hurt, angry, and disconnected; some of them have gone crazy and are busy tormenting each other, not all of them, but enough of them" (44).

The exhaustive use of natural resources which has led to depletion finds a prominent place in the novel. "Throughout recorded history, wilderness in many forms has served to symbolize elemental vastness and permanence" (McCannon, 7). Maracle refers to the pollution of sea in her novel as,

Celia sees the tide grab bits of dead wood tangled with detritus from some party. She cannot stop looking now. She is caught in the seaweed ropes. Beer bottles, chip bags, hamburger wrappers are braided into the ribbon of seaweed. A wisp of shame crawls through Celia's gut. (12)

Maracle also throws light upon the killing of animals on a large scale for commercial use that can lead to the extinction of species by narrating the skinning of Mink. Amos, Steve and a few men cutting trees and clearing the forest area are demonstrations of how men try to entirely wipe out the natural riches. Despite being a part of the group that fells trees, Steve regrets his actions. He empathises with the trees and feels that he can hear

them scream out of pain. He knows that cutting trees from the mountains may result in alternating floods and droughts. These exploitations caused by human activities are attacked by Maracle by her representation of nature's wrath.

Most climate fictions highlight the damage done to earth and explain the aftermath of these damaging acts through the eruption of natural entities. The critic Gregers Anderson says, "In several other climate fictions the violence of an animistic and monstrously proportioned non-human world means that humanity is forced into a reinterpretation of its role in the world" (47). The rage is a depiction of the dissatisfaction of nature and it is also a way of warning the humans. In *Celia's Song*, the anger of entities is expressed by Maracle when she discusses the exceeding crimes of men against each other. She explicitly presents the physical, emotional and sexual abuse of women that are infuriating. The men in their inebriated condition physically abuse women. Maracle talks of how Stella's five-year old daughter Shelley was brutally raped by two men bringing to the fore the turmoil in the environment.

The outburst of nature is presented by Maracle through the double-headed serpent and natural entities. By giving human attributes to non-human beings, she satirises the absence of humanity in humans. Restless's anger is due to the negligence of humans to the deteriorating condition of nature and he considers it as a kind of crime. He wreaks vengeance on human beings by stealing their souls and causing problems among themselves. Maracle uses the storm winds as a strong imagery to explain the fury: "It pecks at the soil, attacks every inch of shore, gouging loose the dirt, twirling it in small dusters, tossing it away in disgust" (4). Storm here is thus mentioned as a monster. Earth's wrath is revealed through the violent tides that try to encroach the land and usurp it entirely. This judgement of nature for the heinous acts of humans projects the ill effects of climate change.

Maracle's novel takes the readers through the ebbs and tides of Celia's family with climate background at its focal point. Her combination of the most pressing issue of the world with strong human emotions captures attention and paves way for contemplation. Maracle's correlation of climate change and injustice against indigenous people and women brings out her distinctiveness. The employment of memory as a technique is used by her to root out the cause of the existing affairs. She presents human activities as directly proportional

to the balance of ecology. Her portrayal does not end in despair rather she concludes on an optimistic note stating that even after all the destruction that takes place there is hope for the better. Her primary concern is to create awareness on climate change which is a potential threat to the earth and all lives dependent on it.

Maracle's depiction of climate deterioration is a warning of what might happen if the complication is ignored. The menacing threats have started surfacing in recent times: "But the truth, as is now widely acknowledged, is that we have entered a time when the wild has become the norm" (Ghosh, 12). Cities like Kolkata, Karachi and the Middle East and Persian Gulf have experienced temperatures ranging up to 163 degrees Fahrenheit. The increased temperatures caused the Australian bushfire which destroyed the natural vegetation and wildlife occurred between the years 2019 and 2020. Such high temperatures can result in food scarcity, melting of glaciers, flooding of coastal cities and variation in groundwater table. On the other hand, few cities of North America experience very low temperatures than they usually have in winters. These extreme conditions that occur in the world are the minor repercussions of climate degradation. If they are unmonitored, they have the potential to destroy the earth.

The initial step to prevent climate crisis can begin with the self-evaluation of humans and their realisation of the fact that earth's gifts are to be conserved and utilised in a balanced way. The 'bio-equation' which helps in calculating the carrying capacity of the earth and in checking human activities needs to be maintained. Maracle explores this equation and stresses its importance in her *Celia's Song*. Her characters provide retrospective view of exploitation that urges immediate action. The initial turmoil in the novel gradually subdues in the end when people realise their own responsibility in preserving and protecting the environment.

Similarly, representation of destruction and death is replaced in the end by the birth of a child which marks a new beginning. The new beginning is achieved through the combined efforts of all the people in the Nuuchalnuh territory. Maracle calls out for corrective measures like switching to renewable and eco-friendly resources that can help in regulating the damaged situation. Thus, she reinstates man's duty to take care of nature and preserve it, failing which it would collapse the natural system and result in global warming and

climate breakdown. It is the active involvement of humans in protecting and preserving the resources that can avert this phenomenon of climate crisis and establish a sustainable earth for generations to come.

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