



Ecological Grief and Revive in Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations*

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Abstract

Charlotte McConaghy's Migrations (2020) explores the connection of personal sorrow and ecological decline through the protagonist Franny's journey. The loss of nature and a variety of creatures mirrors the protagonist's grief over familial loss and shattered relationships along with the emerging extinction of species, especially the Arctic terns. This paper uses Howard Clinebell's ecotherapy framework to analyse how mourning can transform into care and reconnection with the nature. The analysis highlights the novel's emphasis on ecological mutuality, the therapeutic potential of interspecies relationships and the capacity of ecofiction to guide readers in navigating ecological grief and cultivating determination to overcome grief in the face of environmental loss.

Keywords: Charlotte McConaghy, arctic terns, ecotherapy, ecological grief, ecofiction, anthropocene, multispecies kinship, solastalgia

Introduction

The Anthropocene, shaped by mortal impact on earth, brings not only ecological disruption but also intense emotional cost. Climate change is being experienced by people through various ways, one among them is either the species is reduced in number or extinct. This happens only because of the change in seasons which shifted from its period of time as it was earlier and so the species lost their landscape and habitat leading to the pathetic situation of their extinction. The term solastalgia rightly fits here as it deals with emotional misery. This term is further elaborated

into a deeper concern denoting the destruction of the blue planet or Earth.

Literature as commonly said as the mirror of life showing both happiness and sorrow in equal proportions as a human experience. This paper concerned about ecofiction and climate fiction in literature reveals one such literary work, Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations*. The title *Migrations* itself means moving from one place to another in search of food and habitat. This fiction portrays the extinction of the bird Arctic terns which were in a huge number at one period of time but suddenly they were not seen



and so the protagonist Franny Stone travels in search of their existence.

This paper illuminates Migrations through the lens of Howard Clinebell's framework of ecotherapy, stated in the seminal work *Ecotherapy: Healing ourselves, Healing the Earth* (1996). Clinebell emphasizes that human healing and ecological healing are inseparable, grounded in three principles: nature as co-therapist, ecological mutuality and spiritual-ecological wholeness. This theoretical lens allows the novel to be understood not simply as a narrative of loss, but as an exploration of mourning transformed into care.

Literature Review: Ecological Grief and Ecofiction Ecological Grief

The Anthropocene has expanded the emotional stress of environmental decline, giving rise to concepts such as ecological grief and solastalgia. Glenn Albrecht (2007) coined solastalgia to express the distress experienced when known landscapes are ruined or destroyed. This phenomenon captures the emotional dimension of environmental change, linking place, identity and psychological well-being. Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville Ellis (2018) frame ecological grief as a legal psychological response to the loss of species, habitats and ecosystems. Such grief, while deeply personal, resonates collectively, influencing geographical, cultural and political consciousness. The initial line of the novel *Migrations*, "The animals are dying. Soon we will be alone here." (McConaghy 3) sets the entire tone of extinction and loneliness happening around the world and the immediate need to revive both the environment and the human psyche. Franny's human psyche reminds her shattered childhood when she mourns for the Arctic terns which depicts environment as a reason to bring change in human nature. People who feel pain physically or mentally find peace in nature.

Literature and Environment: Climate Fiction and Ecofiction

Both climate fiction and ecofiction have emerged as separate literary genres in the past few years, showing the damage human has caused to nature and in turn nature destroying species and finally extinction of

them and human. Critics like Clinebell, Albrecht, Heise, Cunsolo, Ellis and Becktold have framed theories related to environmental change and psychological well-being. All their theories explain how ecofiction and climate fiction play a major role in connecting nature and human psyche. The human misery and ecological collapse explained in *Migrations* seeks attention of critics who deal with climate fiction and ecofiction.

Ecotherapy in Literature

The term ecotherapy establishes that nature is a healer. Ecotherapy also explains that emotional, psychological and spiritual connections are more than the materialistic world. There are three main principles in the concept of ecotherapy. The characters in ecofictions act as an ecotherapist to the reader as the character himself experiences the therapy. When the character mourns for the change in ecology causing either loss or extinction of species the reader also mourns for it. When the character finds a way to retain a healthy ecology and finds happiness in it, the reader also feels the same. Thus literature acts as an ecotherapist to the reader through ecofiction and climate fiction.

Theoretical Framework: Ecotherapy in Migrations

The three core principles of ecotherapy depicted in Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations*

- Nature as co-therapist: Living in ecofriendly landscapes nourishes human perspectives which help in emotional healing. Many psychological therapists suggest their patients to follow this method of ecotherapy as they advise their patients to move to an ecofriendly landscape to recover from depression or other mental illnesses shows nature as a co-therapist.
- Ecological mutuality: Human well-being is dependent on a healthy environment, vice versa healthy environment depends on conservation and consideration of nature's well-being
- Spiritual-ecological wholeness: Integration of grief, responsibility and ethical engagement develops a sense of belonging within ecological networks.



Applied to ecofiction, ecotherapy provides a framework for understanding narrative as a form of cultural healing. Franny's journey embodies these principles: landscapes, oceans and birds serve as active companions; grief is ritualized and mourning evolves into ethical responsibility. Migrations thus models how literature acts as a healer for both ecological and psychological renewal, allowing the readers to experience the same.

Methods and Interpretation

Ecotherapy principles are analyzed through a qualitative textual analysis. This paper focuses on three dimensions of ecotherapy in McConaghy's novel:

- Nature as co-therapist: the role of the Arctic terns, oceans and landscapes in Franny's recovery
- Ecological mutuality: how human and other creatures well-being are interdependent.
- Spiritual-ecological wholeness: the integration of grief, care and responsibility in the protagonist's journey.

Close reading of the text highlights how ecotherapy plays a major role in the protagonist's journey, while the supporting articles contextualizes the analysis within broader discussions of ecofiction, solastalgia and ecological grief.

Interpretation

Ecological Alienation and Grief:

Franny's manifestation to bring her husband's dream of finding the presence of Arctic Terns into reality alienates her from both human and ecological stability. Her grief for the loss of her child, mother and husband mirrors the decline of ecosystems, dramatizing the intricacy of personal and planetary loss. "... the rhythms of the sea's tides are the only things we humans have not yet destroyed." (McConaghy 15) Suicidal impulses echo the self-destructive orbit of humanity in the Anthropocene. "The only person I'm intent on destroying is myself, with no more collateral damage along the way." (McConaghy 179)

Nature as Co-therapist

The nature around her serve as an active agent in Franny's healing. Crows offer fellowship through

small symbolic gifts, while the Arctic terns guide her through tolerance and purpose. The vastness of the ocean and the sheer polar landscapes challenge despair, yet they also offer both perspective and connection.

There is pleasure in the pathless woods. There is rapture on the lonely shore. There is society where none intrudes, by the deep sea and music in its roar. (McConaghy 37)

Ecological mutuality

Healing in Migrations is reciprocal. Franny's care for the terns gives her a sense of purpose, while she honours them through witness and protection. Similarly, the fishermen aboard the Saghani shift from exploitation to ethical restraint, "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." (McConaghy 250), reflecting Clinebell's principle of ecological mutuality.

Spiritual-ecological wholeness

Franny's journey is a mourning ritual, trying to discover Arctic terns' existence, only to fulfill her husband's last wish.

If there were 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... If there are terns left and it's possible and not too difficult, I would like my ashes to be scattered where they fly. (McConaghy 245)

Initially conceived as self-destruction, it transforms into affirmations: there are things yet to be done. Mourning becomes active, reshaping despair into ethical responsibility and care.

Discussion: Healing Through Narrative

Through ecotherapy, Migrations is more than a narrative of loss; it models ecological and psychological healing. The co-therapist role of birds, oceans and landscapes is central to Franny's recovery. Mourning is ritualized, despair is transformed into responsibility and ecological mutuality is dramatized through reciprocal care.

Ecofiction allows imaginative engagement with planetary crisis. Migrations enact this engagement therapeutically, inviting readers to witness grief



and regeneration simultaneously. Franny's journey portrays that the ecological care and human healing are mutually supported. The hazardous survival of the Arctic terns symbolizes hope and resilience, asserting the interdependence of life.

Conclusion

Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations* goes beyond a straightforward narrative of ecological collapse, depicting how grief can accelerate reconnection and care. By applying Clinebell's ecotherapy, the novel exemplifies that mourning can be transformative and that human healing is inseparable from ecological governance. The Arctic terns, oceans and icy landscapes emerge as co-therapists, guiding both character and reader toward ethical responsibility and fragile hope. In the Anthropocene, *Migrations* demonstrates the therapeutic potential of ecofiction, affirming that caring for the Earth and healing oneself are inseparable tasks and essential for the survival of all species.

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