

From Wilderness to Environmental Crisis: An Ecocritical Study of Human–Nature Relationships in Canadian Fiction

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Abstract- The representation of nature has undergone significant transformation in Canadian fiction, moving from images of wilderness and geographical vastness towards complex representations of ecological crisis, environmental vulnerability, and human–nature interdependence. This paper examines this transformation through an ecocritical reading of selected Canadian fiction, focusing on Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song* (2014), Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), and Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* (2018). The study investigates how Canadian writers have moved beyond representing nature as a passive landscape or national symbol and increasingly portray it as an active component of human identity, cultural memory, survival, and ethical responsibility. The analysis considers wilderness, anthropocentrism, technological intervention, climate change, Indigenous ecological knowledge, environmental justice, and community resilience. Atwood's dystopian fiction demonstrates the consequences of technological domination and the commodification of biological life, whereas Maracle's work foregrounds relationality between humans, land, animals, and community. Dimaline connects ecological catastrophe with colonial histories and Indigenous displacement, while Rice explores energy dependence and the significance of local ecological knowledge during social disruption. The paper argues that contemporary Canadian fiction represents a movement from the idea of nature as wilderness towards an understanding of nature as an interconnected ecological system in which human survival is inseparable from environmental health. Through this transformation, Canadian fiction contributes to the development of ecological consciousness and challenges conventional anthropocentric understandings of the human–nature relationship.

Keywords- Canadian Fiction, Human–Nature Relationship, Indigenous Ecologies, Climate Change, Anthropocentrism, Environmental Consciousness.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nature has occupied a central position in Canadian literary imagination. Canada's extensive forests, lakes, rivers, mountains, Arctic territories, and coastal environments have provided writers with powerful geographical and symbolic resources. In earlier Canadian fiction, wilderness was frequently represented as an immense, unfamiliar, and sometimes threatening space against which human identity was constructed. The landscape could function as a symbol of national identity, isolation, survival, exploration, and cultural belonging. Such representations, however, often positioned human beings at the centre of the relationship and treated nature primarily as landscape, setting, or resource.

The emergence of ecocriticism has encouraged literary scholars to reconsider these assumptions. Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) define ecocriticism through the relationship between literature and the physical environment, encouraging an earth-centred approach to literary studies. Buell (1995) similarly emphasizes the importance of environmental imagination and ethical relationships between human and non-human worlds.

Contemporary Canadian fiction reflects this changing perspective. Environmental degradation, climate change, biodiversity loss, resource extraction, technological intervention, and Indigenous struggles over land have transformed literary representations of nature. The environment is no longer simply a backdrop against which human stories

unfold. It increasingly becomes a force that determines human survival and shapes cultural and political experience.

This transformation can be observed particularly clearly in contemporary Canadian fiction. Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* presents a technologically transformed world in which ecological destruction is inseparable from biotechnology and consumer capitalism. Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song* emphasizes relationality between humans, animals, land, memory, and community. Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* connects environmental catastrophe with colonial violence and Indigenous survival, while Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* explores energy dependence, community resilience, and local ecological knowledge.

The present study therefore examines the movement from wilderness to environmental crisis and investigates how Canadian fiction reimagines the human–nature relationship.

II. FROM WILDERNESS TO ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The concept of wilderness has historically played an important role in Canadian literature. Wilderness could represent geographical immensity, isolation, danger, beauty, freedom, or the challenge of establishing human communities. Such representations contributed to the construction of Canadian literary identity.

However, contemporary ecological criticism questions the assumption that wilderness exists as a completely separate space outside human culture. Human activities have increasingly altered forests, oceans, rivers, climate systems, and animal habitats. Consequently, the distinction between "human space" and "natural space" has become increasingly difficult to maintain.

Contemporary Canadian fiction reflects this shift by representing environments that are already affected by human intervention. Nature appears not as untouched wilderness but as a world shaped by industrialization, technological development, colonial histories, climate change, and resource consumption.

Table 1. Transformation of Nature Representation

Earlier literary representation	Contemporary ecological representation
Wilderness	Ecological system
Nature as landscape	Nature as active presence
Nature as national symbol	Nature as environmental concern
Human exploration	Human ecological dependence
Nature as resource	Nature as interconnected life
Human domination	Human–nature interdependence
Individual survival	Collective ecological survival
Landscape description	Environmental consciousness

This transformation does not mean that the concept of wilderness disappears completely. Instead, contemporary fiction asks what happens when wilderness itself becomes threatened by human activity.

The movement can therefore be understood as:

Wilderness → Human Intervention → Ecological Disruption
→ Environmental Crisis → Ecological Consciousness

This progression provides the central conceptual framework for understanding the selected Canadian novels.

III. ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND THE CRISIS OF HUMAN CONTROL

One of the central concerns of ecocriticism is anthropocentrism—the tendency to position human interests above those of other living beings and ecological systems. Contemporary Canadian fiction frequently exposes the limitations of this human-centred worldview.

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* offers a particularly powerful example. The novel presents a future in which biotechnology has become deeply integrated into commercial and social life. Genetic engineering allows humans to manipulate organisms and redesign biological characteristics. However, the attempt to control nature produces unpredictable consequences.

The novel therefore questions the assumption that scientific and technological advancement necessarily represents progress. Human beings possess extraordinary technological power, but they remain dependent upon biological systems that cannot be completely controlled.

Atwood's representation of ecological catastrophe is closely associated with consumer capitalism and corporate power. Human beings are encouraged to treat living organisms as commodities, products, and objects of experimentation. The resulting environmental crisis demonstrates the consequences of separating technological development from ecological ethics.

Bergthaller (2010) connects Atwood's fiction with questions of sustainability and the difficulty of maintaining human civilization within ecological limits.

The novel consequently reverses the traditional relationship between humans and wilderness. Instead of humans confronting an external wilderness, human beings create ecological instability within their own technological civilization.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS AND HUMAN SURVIVAL

Environmental crisis becomes particularly significant in contemporary Canadian fiction because it reveals the fragility of human civilization. Climate change, energy disruption, ecological destruction, and resource scarcity transform environmental problems into questions of survival.

In *The Marrow Thieves*, Cherie Dimaline imagines a future in which environmental destruction has fundamentally transformed society. The novel connects climate catastrophe with Indigenous displacement and colonial violence. Environmental crisis therefore cannot be understood separately from questions of history, power, and identity.

Xausa (2020) argues that the novel challenges universalizing approaches to the Anthropocene by demonstrating the relationship between environmental catastrophe and colonial violence.

Similarly, *Moon of the Crusted Snow* presents an isolated northern community experiencing the collapse of electricity and communication systems. The disappearance of modern infrastructure exposes the community's dependence upon energy and external systems.

Table 2. Environmental Crisis and Survival

Novel	Environmental condition	Impact on humans
<i>Oryx and Crake</i>	Ecological and biological collapse	Civilization destabilization
<i>Celia's Song</i>	Ecological and cultural disruption	Loss and recovery of relationships
<i>The Marrow Thieves</i>	Climate catastrophe	Displacement and survival
<i>Moon of the Crusted Snow</i>	Energy/infrastructure collapse	Community vulnerability

These narratives demonstrate that environmental crisis is not simply a problem "outside" human society. It affects food, health, identity, migration, culture, political structures, and community relationships.

The literature therefore transforms environmental crisis into a question of human vulnerability within ecological systems.

V. INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES AND RELATIONAL ECOLOGY

A major development in contemporary Canadian fiction is the increasing significance of Indigenous ecological perspectives. Indigenous literature frequently challenges the Western separation between humans and nature by emphasizing relationships among people, land, animals, ancestors, community, and place.

Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song* is particularly important in this context. The novel presents a relational understanding of existence in which humans cannot be completely separated from the more-than-human world. Land and animals participate in the cultural and spiritual life of the community.

Rather than treating land primarily as property or economic resource, this perspective emphasizes responsibility and relationship.

Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* similarly connects ecological survival with cultural memory and Indigenous knowledge. Storytelling, community relationships, traditional practices, and connection to place become essential elements of survival.

Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* also demonstrates the importance of local and Indigenous knowledge when modern technological systems fail.

Table 3. Indigenous Ecological Perspectives

Concept	Anthropocentric model	Relational model
Land	Resource	Relationship
Animals	Objects	Co-inhabitants
Survival	Individual	Collective
Knowledge	Technical	Multiple knowledge systems
Identity	Individual-centred	Place-based
Responsibility	Human control	Reciprocity

These perspectives broaden Canadian ecocriticism by demonstrating that ecological consciousness involves not only environmental protection but also cultural memory, land relationships, and community responsibility.

VI. TECHNOLOGY, RESOURCE EXPLOITATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

Technology is another major factor in the transformation of human–nature relationships. Contemporary Canadian fiction frequently examines the contradiction between technological progress and ecological sustainability.

In *Oryx and Crake*, biotechnology represents the possibility of transforming life itself. Scientific knowledge becomes a means through which humans attempt to control biological processes. Yet the novel demonstrates that technological power can become dangerous when separated from ethical and ecological responsibility.

Resource exploitation also influences Canadian environmental narratives. Canada's history of forestry, mining, oil extraction, hydroelectric development, and other resource industries has shaped both its economy and its literature. Contemporary ecological fiction increasingly asks what happens when landscapes are treated primarily as sources of economic value. The environmental consequences of extraction are not limited to physical damage. They can also affect Indigenous communities, cultural identity, migration, and relationships with place.

Canadian fiction therefore encourages readers to consider the ecological consequences behind apparently ordinary forms of technological and economic progress.

Table 4. Human Intervention and Ecological Consequences

Human activity	Immediate purpose	Possible ecological consequence
Biotechnology	Scientific innovation	Biological disruption
Resource extraction	Economic development	Habitat degradation
Fossil-fuel dependence	Energy production	Climate change
Industrial expansion	Economic growth	Pollution
Intensive consumption	Convenience/profit	Resource depletion
Technological dependence	Efficiency	Systemic vulnerability

VII. LAND, MEMORY AND HUMAN IDENTITY

The relationship between land and identity is another major theme in Canadian fiction. Human identity is often shaped by place, landscape, memory, and belonging.

In Indigenous Canadian writing, this connection becomes particularly powerful because colonial displacement has frequently involved the removal of communities from their traditional territories. Consequently, environmental destruction can become simultaneously a cultural and psychological disruption.

In *The Marrow Thieves*, movement through landscapes is connected with survival and cultural continuity. The land is not simply a geographical location but part of the characters' collective memory.

In *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, the northern landscape becomes increasingly important as the community's dependence on external systems disappears. Local knowledge of food, weather, animals, and seasonal changes becomes a survival resource.

Maracle's *Celia's Song* similarly demonstrates that relationships with land and non-human beings contribute to cultural identity.

The relationship can be represented as:

Place → Memory → Culture → Identity → Belonging → Responsibility

This suggests that ecological consciousness is deeply connected with the question of who people are and where they belong. Environmental destruction therefore threatens more than physical ecosystems; it can threaten cultural continuity and collective identity.

VIII. COMPARATIVE ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SELECTED CANADIAN FICTION

Table 5. Comparative Analysis

Ecocritical dimension	Oryx and Crake	Celia's Song	The Marrow Thieves	Moon of the Crusted Snow
Nature	Manipulated	Relational	Homeland	Life-support system
Major concern	Biotechnology	Coexistence	Climate + colonialism	Energy crisis
Human position	Controller	Participant	Survivor	Community member
Knowledge	Scientific	Indigenous/relational	Traditional/communal	Local/Indigenous
Main ecological idea	Limits of control	Reciprocity	Environmental justice	Resilience
Narrative direction	Warning	Reconnection	Resistance	Adaptation

The comparison demonstrates that contemporary Canadian fiction does not provide a single definition of nature. Instead, it produces a multidimensional ecological imagination.

The most important common feature is the rejection of complete human independence from nature. Whether through technological catastrophe, cultural memory, climate displacement, or energy collapse, the novels demonstrate that human life remains embedded within ecological systems.

IX. DISCUSSION

The transition from wilderness representation to environmental crisis represents a significant development in Canadian fiction. Earlier narratives frequently positioned human beings against an external wilderness, whereas contemporary narratives increasingly reveal that humans themselves are part of ecological systems.

This shift produces three important changes.

First, nature gains agency. Environmental conditions influence the development of characters, communities, and societies. Nature is no longer simply descriptive scenery. Second, human identity becomes ecologically embedded. Land, animals, climate, food, memory, and community contribute to how characters understand themselves.

The four selected novels provide different approaches to the human–nature relationship.

Atwood focuses on technological domination and ecological catastrophe. Maracle emphasizes relationality and coexistence. Dimaline connects environmental crisis with colonial history and Indigenous resistance. Rice emphasizes energy dependence, community, and adaptation.

Third, environmental crisis becomes a question of justice and responsibility. The selected Indigenous texts demonstrate that ecological destruction cannot be separated from colonial histories and unequal relationships to land.

The literature also reveals two contrasting responses to environmental crisis:

Technological control

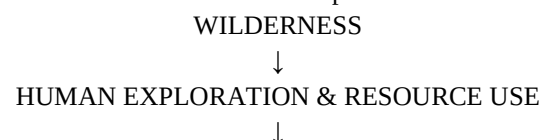
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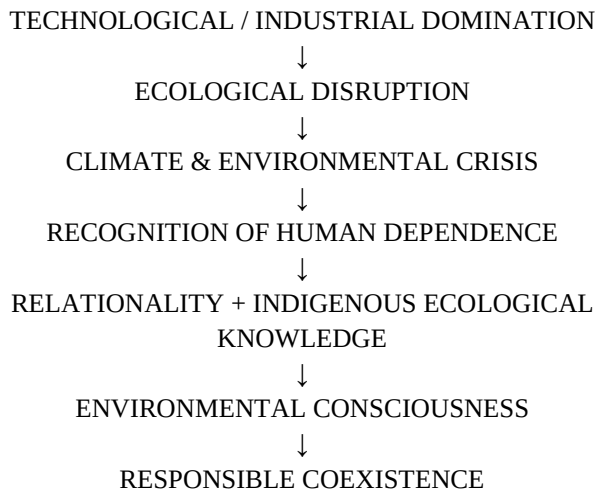
Relational adaptation

Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* illustrates the dangers of excessive technological control, while *Maracle*, *Dimaline*, and *Rice* emphasize relationships, community, cultural memory, and adaptation.

This distinction is particularly important because it demonstrates that ecological consciousness is not simply about knowing that environmental problems exist. It involves changing the conceptual relationship between humans and the environment.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Changing Human–Nature Relationship





X. CONCLUSION

From the representation of wilderness to the contemporary depiction of ecological crisis, Canadian fiction demonstrates a profound transformation in the understanding of the human–nature relationship. Nature is increasingly represented not as an external landscape but as an interconnected system within which human beings live and upon which they depend.

The selected works demonstrate different dimensions of this transformation. *Oryx and Crake* exposes the ecological consequences of technological domination and uncontrolled scientific intervention. *Celia's Song* emphasizes relationality and the interconnectedness of humans, animals, land, and community. *The Marrow Thieves* connects climate catastrophe with colonial history, Indigenous displacement, and cultural survival. *Moon of the Crusted Snow* demonstrates the vulnerability of technologically dependent societies and the importance of community-based ecological knowledge.

The movement from wilderness to environmental crisis therefore represents more than a change in literary subject matter. It signals a transformation in ecological consciousness. Contemporary Canadian fiction increasingly recognizes that environmental destruction is simultaneously a crisis of identity, culture, community, justice, and survival.

The central insight emerging from these texts is that human beings cannot be understood separately from the environments they inhabit. By challenging anthropocentrism and foregrounding ecological interdependence, Canadian fiction

creates a literary space for reconsidering human responsibility towards the more-than-human world.

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