

**Vision of the Future: Climate Change and the Dystopian Imagination in
Short Fiction of Margret Atwood and Seanan McGuire**

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Abstract:

Our nature and resources are in severe crisis due to overpopulation, pollution, waste, and carbon emissions, and we have done bare minimum to mitigate this disaster. The damage may have been undone at one point, but we are late. One possible explanation for this could be that while economic and technical advancements have received more emphasis, nature has been overlooked in the process. Climate activists are making every effort but it pales in comparison to the enormous mountain of issues that lie ahead. There exists a limited number of literary works that envision an optimistic future; however, a substantial body of literature illustrates a trajectory toward a dystopian reality—a world that deviates significantly from an ideal state. These narratives typically depict either a post-apocalyptic scenario or a society on the brink of catastrophe. In the core of these works are high tech cities where the nature only plays the role as an intruder. However, since these works are fictional, we still have opportunity to reflect and make wise choices. This essay aims to conduct a thorough analysis of the following fictional works: Seanan McGuire's "The Myth of Rain," and Margaret Atwood's "Time Capsule Found on the Dead Planet". These short stories are included in speculative and eco-centered anthology, *Loosed Upon the World* (2015) and delve into themes of loss, immoral advancement, and people's ignorant behaviour toward the dire situation. This study seeks to analyse: How do these stories portray environmental catastrophe? What implications do these portrayals have for understanding the resilience of Earth's ecosystems? How do they explore themes of loss, hope and optimism within environmentalism? How is the interconnectedness between humans and nature is depicted, and what philosophical or ethical implications does this have for understanding humanity's relationship with the environment?

Keywords: Anthology, Climate Fiction, Climate Crisis, Short Stories, Speculative Fiction

Introduction:

The twenty-first century has seen an upsurge in eco-dystopian narratives that highlight the tension of ecological collapse, climate crisis and the Anthropocene. In this regard, speculative fiction serves two major purposes: a warning of disaster that lies ahead, and a meditation on humanity's ethical responsibilities towards their ecosystem. In *Silent Spring* (1962) Rachel Carson writes, "man is a part of nature and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself" (8). Carson's quote highlights the relationship between human and nature which is chiefly anthropocentric that places humans on top; managing, misusing and neglecting nature. But Carson also highlights that humans too are part of nature, and it is foolish to think that ecological collapse will not affect the mankind.

Seanán McGuire's "The Myth of Rain" and Margaret Atwood's "Time Capsule Found on the Dead Planet" each of these short stories imagine a future shaped by environmental catastrophe. Both the short stories are part of *Loosed upon the World: The Saga Anthology of Climate Fiction* (2015). It is a collection of twenty-six short stories exploring the future of climate change, and its effects on life on Earth. Though each short story in this collection is focused on climate fiction, each story introduces a new perspective on the catastrophes induced by human activities. Each story incorporates a non-fiction element, connecting each plot in one way or another to the reality people live in.

Margaret Atwood is one of the well-known Canadian writers. She is a poet, novelist, essayist and environmental activist. Through her fiction and non-fiction writings, Atwood portrays the interconnectedness of human, environment and technology. Her writings "often [serve] warning against environmental degradation, unchecked scientific advancement, and the consequences of ignoring ecological balance" (Prabakaran and Alagan 1894). Atwood's short story "Time Capsule Found on the Dead Planet" (2009) is a warning about the dangers of climate change and the influence of greed on society. Divided into five sections, "Time Capsule" is not a conventional short story, it doesn't follow the traditional style and structure, rather it is a blend of a short story and poem.

In the first section, Atwood begins by explaining the first age in which humans created gods, "Crave them out of wood; there was still such a thing as wood, then" (556). She explains, during those days, when people worshipped gods; trees, rain, sunshine, winds, harvest, animals and fishes were in abundance. People "smelled the earth and rolled in it; its juices ran down [their] chins" (556). People tasted and enjoyed all the goodness of earth. In the second age, humans created money;

the money was small in size, and each of us would carry some of it with him every day, as close to the skin as possible. We could not eat this money, wear it, or burn it for warmth; but as if by magic, it could be changed into such things. (Atwood 556-57)

The description offers a rich allegorical reflection on the nature of money. Here, money is represented not merely as an economical tool, but as a deeply mystified and quasi-magical force capable of influencing and transforming human life. The phrase money was carried "as close to the skin as possible" adds another deeper meaning revealing the intimate attachment of humans to money.

With such intimacy and dependency, it is apparent that in the following age money became a god. The third session intensifies the earlier idea of money which is transformed into a personified omnipotent deity. And, unlike previous gods, this god was mainly responsible for all the destruction and dehumanising acts. It exposes the "all-powerful and out of control" nature of money that has acquired its own agency, becoming an independent force shaping day-to-day reality. In such a dystopian setting, money becomes a symbol of unchecked capitalism, imperial expansion and ecological destruction.

In the fourth age, humans created deserts. Not one or two, but in various places and of several kinds. All the deserts had one thing in common; nothing grew there. Barren, infertile, and T. S. Eliot's wasteland is what people have created for themselves. And, as a result, "all wells were poisoned, all rivers ran with filth, all seas were dead; there was no land left to grow food" (557). The land which was previously a green and living land with abundance of flora and fauna and biodiversity was transmogrified to a grotesque barren land. Therefore, Atwood concludes her short story with her final words, "Pray for us, who once, too, thought we could fly" (557). Her concluding remark immediately invokes a religious anchor, suggesting guilt, suffering, and a need for redemption.

Seanán McGuire was born and raised in Northern California. Her short story "The Myth of Rain" (2015) is a climate fiction that deals with the themes of ecosystem degradation and deforestation. It is a story of a young woman named Julie who has a passion for owls and the wild spirit they embody. The story is set in the lush forest of the Pacific Northwest which has become the final refuge spot for the elite. This is the same place where Julie and her team of wildlife conservation workers are trying to save the remaining fauna before their natural habitat is entirely destroyed.

The story essentially deals with three themes: despair, anthropocentrism and rich versus rest. The story carries a sombre tone reflecting Julie's personal grief of witnessing environmental collapse, and her inability to stop it from happening further.

The tale highlights Julie's frustration of knowing how little people care about their ecosystem, and whether her own efforts towards conservation will be fruitful or not. "The Myth of Rain" critiques the human tendency of prioritising human need and greed over nature. In the story, politicians ask, "why did owls need entire forest for themselves?", suggesting that humans are willing to occupy forest land and transform it into a place that can benefit them. Julie points, "the rich fled farther, looking for some promised land that had managed to remain pristine while they were busy wrecking the world the rest of us had to live in" (27). This is one of the core issues that runs in most of environmental literature. Julie's declaration offers a shared critique of class privilege within a dystopian or climate-crisis framework. The elites are not merely escaping danger; they are avoiding their responsibility. The rich are not passive beneficiaries of the damaged earth—they are active agents of destruction. The term "busy" trivialises and normalises their harmful activities, as if environmental degradation were just another routine activity. Meanwhile, "the rest of us" introduces a collective voice of the marginalised average citizen, emphasising that those least responsible for the damage are the ones to endure its end result. Driven by ill intentions, and justified in the name of human development, wild habitats have been sacrificed.

McGuire's story exposes how people ignore the signs of crisis, persistently believing that despite the indication nothing bad will happen, and nature will recover on its own. But the damage is permanent, and whatever people do, they can never reverse the process. For this reason, Julie states,

The environmentalists had lost the fight against industry and fossil fuel and men who spoke in voices that dripped money. They had failed to stop climate change in its infancy, and failed again in its childhood, and now that it was an angry adult, slamming its fists into every country in the world, there was no stopping it. (McGuire 28-29)

Julie's statement reflects climate change as an unstoppable, human-made catastrophe. The metaphor of climate change from its infancy, to childhood and then to an "angry adult" presents climate change as a living entity. It suggests that there was a time when climate change was manageable, but humans' continuous neglect has now pushed it into a violent, uncontrollable, and irreversible stage. This is what Rob Nixon calls, *slow violence*, "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). The personification of crisis into an "angry adult" also conveys that the nature itself is striking back against human exploitation. The image of it "slamming its fists into every country" universalises the crisis, highlighting that the climate crisis is not confined to one place or nation, rather it is a global problem. The "voices that dripped money" echoes the

influence of people who shaped policy and public discourse, and how easily they prioritise personal interest, and silence environmental concerns. "And in the end, they [who] had more money and fewer morals, and they won. They won everything" (McGuire 29). The sharp contrast between "more money" and "fewer morals" echoes how wealth accumulation is tied to ethical compromise. The repetitive emphasis on "they won" suggests total domination by people with capital. Julie's assertion indicates that climate catastrophe is a result of capitalism.

At last, she states, "All we could do was save what little we could put our hands on, and remember the things we had to leave behind. We owed the world we had destroyed that, at least. We owed it so much more" (McGuire 38). In the final phase, the speaker's tone changes from critique to guilt and responsibility of the people towards nature. Just like an elegy, her tone is marked by loss and remorse. And since the lost cannot be undone, all they now have is memory; memory of the past. To conclude, the speaker introduces a sense of collective accountability about the loss, suggesting that we humans—the most systematic and intellectual of all creatures—are accountable for the existing damage and critical state of the ecosystem. In McGuire's short story, resilience is almost impossible. The mythologisation of rain implies that the ecosystem has collapsed to the point of erasure. Earth, in this condition is fragile and vulnerable, dependent on the mercy of humans that has failed miserably.

McGuire's "The Myth of Rain" and Atwood's "Time Capsule Found on the Dead Planet" collectively dramatizes humanity's complex relationship with the nature. Both the stories disagree on the resilience of earth's ecosystem, exposing its vulnerable future, vast damage and lack of human accountability. Both Atwood and McGuire, especially served warning against anthropocentrism; if humans continue to prioritise their selfish greed ignoring the warning signs, then it will be too late to turn back. Together, these texts suggest that in contemporary situation, environmental issues are alarming, and they must be grapple with seriousness and deeper philosophical queries of meaning, responsibility, and sustainability. Thus, climate fiction is marked with cautionary tales that debar humans from envisioning a bright future ahead, rather than hope, the future seems to be filled with pessimism of loss and suffering affecting both humanity and the earth.

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