

**The Language of the Wild – Exploring Ecocritical thought in Kiran Millwood
Hargrave's *The Way Past Winter***

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Abstract

Environmental degradation has been posing a serious threat to human society and the Earth from the day of its existence. In the ecosystem, everything is interconnected to one another and interdependent on the other. When one section of the ecosystem is damaged, it eventually results in affecting the other too. The depletion of natural resources, decreasing level of fossil fuels, the rainforests being cut down, and climate change have resulted in ecological disaster in the planet. Using ecocritical approach, this paper seeks to explore the theme of environment and non-human in the fantasy novel *The Way Past Winter* (2018) by Kiran Millwood Hargrave. The development of Ecocriticism has initially been through analysing the texts of non-fiction and literary fiction, wherein ignoring the genre of fantasy. This paper argues that fantasy fiction has the ability to raise environmental consciousness because it makes the reader open up to a less anthropocentric view of the world.

Keywords: nature, ecocriticism, ecological disaster, fantasy fiction, anthropocentrism.

Kiran Millwood Hargrave is a prominent writer in British literature, known for her poetry and novels. She has secured a place for herself in the literary world, as a writer who blends fantasy, history and environmental themes. In her novels, nature is not just a backdrop, but a central character with its own entity. Her works reflect a deep concern for environmental issues. She explores the themes of climate change, resource depletion and human impact on ecosystems. In *The Way Past Winter*, Kiran Millwood Hargrave creates a vivid imagery of the natural world and weaves elements of folklore into the narrative, thereby connecting the human race to nature through stories and traditions.

The environmental crisis has emerged as a significant challenge in the 21st century. The effects of global warming, frequent climatic changes and the melting of glaciers are some of the factors which have been threatening the globe. To address the environmental crisis, ecocritics work to foster eco-consciousness among humans. They critique the dominant worldview that places humans at the centre of the universe, which leads to

exploitation and destruction of nature. They emphasize on the interconnectedness of the humans and the environment, advocating for a more holistic relationship. They also examine how language shapes the perception of the reader. They critique the dominant discourses that often portray nature as a resource or object that is to be controlled, rather than a complex and interconnected system. While the eco critics acknowledge the severity of the environmental crisis, they also explore the narratives of hope, resilience and ecological restoration. They seek to inspire and motivate action through literature and other cultural forms.

Environmental discourse, in literary theory emerged as a form of literary criticism called Ecocriticism. It has been defined by Cheryll Glotfelty in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (18). Ecocritical theory aims at analysing literary texts through an Earth-centred perspective. It explores how the human and nonhuman are interconnected with each other. The underlying principle of ecological criticism as stated by Glotfelty is that human culture is in connection with the physical world, both affecting it and also being affected by it.

Nature is not just about the existence of plants and animals, but refers to the whole of the physical environment, which consists of both the human and the non-human world. Ecocriticism’s basis lies upon the bond created by both these worlds when they are interconnected. A healthy ecosystem will exist when there is balance and harmony between the human and the non-human world.

Literature has always been concerned with Nature and fantasy’s connection with the environment is not given much importance. Fantasy uses magic and supernatural beings to bring attention to the connection between humanity and the environment. In *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Harold Fromm says that the overall popularity of ecocriticism rose more gradually with the increasing environmental awareness of the 1990s. Given this, it should come as no surprise that ecocriticism’s application to fantasy is even further in an undeveloped state.

Using fantasy literature as a medium to unfold the ecocritical notions is not something new in literature, but it has not received due attention. Ursula K. Le Guin in her work *The Critics, the Monsters and the Fantasists* says that the most defining characteristic of the fantastic is that it fundamentally concerns the non-anthropocentric: “What fantasy often does that the realistic novel generally cannot do is include the non-human as essential” (87). In her novel *The Way Past Winter*, Kiran Millwood Hargrave suggests Ecocriticism as being the fantasy genre’s primary space in the literary landscape. She promotes environmental awareness through fantasy and the use of characters which are almost exclusively anthropomorphised animals.

The Way Past Winter is an adventurous novel about magic, an eternal winter and one girl’s unbreakable determination to reunite her family, against all odds. The setting of the novel is in a Scandinavian wood during an everlasting winter. The protagonist of the novel is Mila, a twelve year old girl, who lives with her sisters Sanna and Pipa and her brother Oskar in a small forest cabin, following the death of their mother and disappearance of their father. With the arrival of a mysterious man in the forest, Oskar and several other boys in the village have gone missing. The elder sister, Sanna assumes that maybe Oskar could have left on his own freewill, as he wouldn’t have wanted to take care of his sisters after the disappearance of

their father. But, Mila is sure that her brother would have never left willingly, and embarks on a journey to find him. Determined to save her brother, Mila and her sisters along with a mage named Rune, set out on a mission to rescue him from the mysterious man, who Mila doubts could be the bear Bjorn. She had heard of the mesmerizing legend of the bear Eldbjorn from her Papa. Bjorn was the bear spirit who protects the forest. “She thought of the bear stitched on the man’s pennant. Papa had told stories about Bjorn, the bear spirit who protects trees, and Eld, the lonely bear who fell in love with the sun” (20).

Hargrave’s *The Way Past Winter* seamlessly intertwines the realms of fantasy and ecology. The novel offers a poignant critique of human’s relationship with the natural world. By employing the genre of fantasy, Hargrave creates a unique space to explore environmental concerns. She delves deeply into complex ecological issues which might be constrained in a realistic narrative. The novel’s setting is a world which is at the brink of ecological collapse, which serves as a reminder of the uncertain balance that there is between humanity and nature. Hargrave’s use of fantasy allows her to go beyond the limitations of realism, thereby presenting a world which is an exaggerated version of the current environmental crisis.

Nature features prominently in fantasy fiction, an aspect of a genre that is often overlooked. Though nature and fantasy may diverge in opposite directions, but they are both bound together. Nature is rooted into fantasy genre because they let humans create and explore environments that Earth doesn’t have. By making nature as a fantastical element, humans are more related to the natural world and can better communicate stories about them. Though fantasy authors acknowledge the variations between the human and non-human world, they blur the differences between the two and they challenge human perception of nature. Reading fantasy could extend our perception of ecology, the environment and makes one question of humans’ place in the world towards something that is beyond anthropocentric. When reading fantasy, the reader allows themselves to be immersed in the story without questioning its fantastic premise.

Chris Brawley in his work *Nature and the Numinous in Mythopoeic Fantasy Literature* says that Ecocriticism in fantasy often touches on three main areas – a heightened bond between the protagonist and various animals, fantasy species that exist in an area between human and animal, the use of magic to both control and unite with nature. Brawley states that “By making tress walk or animals talk, mythopoeic fantasy is perhaps the most subversive art form there is. In a similar manner, environmental critics have noted that this subversion is necessary for regaining right relations with nature” (23). In *The Way Past Winter* there is a loving bond between Mila and her dogs Dusha and Danya. She cares for them extensively that she gets herself in trouble many times in order to protect her dogs from danger. She relies on the dogs for survival in the harsh winter environment, using them for transportation and companionship. The use of magic is prevalent throughout the novel. From fairy tales and fables to myths and legends, the element of fantasy occupies a major part of the novel. Nature in itself is a fantastical element in the novel. The root cords and magic seeds that Rune gives to Mila hold magical powers that help her fight against Bjorn, the Bear. The confrontation between both the parties in the novel takes place mostly with magic as the dominant force, both of them sending magical forces against each other. Those magical

forces are natural, wherein the Bear hexes other organisms like eagles and wolves to defeat Mila. On the other hand, Mila with the help of Rune uses magic spells to vanquish the Bear.

Brawley refers to fantasy authors as being mythopoeic. The term 'mythopoeic' is derived from the Greek term 'mythos' which means "story" and 'poiein' meaning "to create." Fantasy writers are mythopoeic authors who use fantasy as "a subversive mode of literature to revise our perceptions of the natural world" (9). These writers employ fantastic elements subversively, in order to change the way in how the world is looked at. Mythopoeic writers have the desire to communicate a different view of existence. The major aim of these authors is to provide the readers with redefined, new perspectives which involves the readers' emotions. Mythopoeic authors, through their writings, offer an escape from the complexities of the natural world to that of a make-belief world freeing the readers from responsibility and disengaging them from reality and providing a feeling of comfort.

Mythology is the core tenet of mythopoeic fantasies, which tries to create new mythology by adopting the elements of the already existing mythology which is relevant to the present times. These writers attempt to reinforce the feelings of spirituality in order to "awaken a dormant numinous consciousness" (Brawley 22). In the novel, *The Way Past Winter*, Hargrave takes Norse mythology's concept and alters it into the myth of Bjorn, the Bear who protects the forest. The novel establishes a profound reverence for nature, which is depicted as a primal power that evokes a sense of awe. This engagement with nature encourages readers to recognize its intrinsic spiritual value. The novel's infusion of Norse mythology creates a sense of ancient wisdom and mystery.

In *The Way Past Winter*, Hargrave uses fantasy as a potent tool to challenge the perception of the natural world. Magic is not presented as a separate entity but as an intrinsic part of the world. It is a force that shapes the environment and influences the characters' lives. The characters face challenges that are relatable to readers, such as Mila and her sisters' surviving in the harsh climate, family bonds and the search for Oskar. All of these elements create a sense of realism. By interconnecting magical elements into a realistic setting, she invites the readers to reconsider their relationship with nature. She incorporates various magical elements, such as the root cords, heart-tree, the shapeshifting Bear and the mage into the fantasy narrative. In the novel, magical elements are introduced gradually, allowing readers to get used to the fantasy world.

In Katherine Hume's work *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (1984) she discusses the four approaches to reality used by literature. The first approach is that of the 'literature of illusion'. In this category, the literary works offer a detachment and escape from the complexities of real life, and aims at providing a feeling of comfort for the readers. Hume places fantasy literature under this category, wherein it aims to offer its readers an escape from reality. The second approach is that of the 'literature of vision' which aims at showing the limits of reality. It takes the readers to an unknown reality where they feel threatened and unsafe. The third approach is 'literature of revision' which shows a different reality that comforts and engages the readers in the new world, making them experience other cultural systems. The novel *The Way Past Winter* comes under this category of 'literature of revision' as Hargrave's fiction tells a tale of a new world, that

deviates from the traditional view of what reality means, while also offering readers other ways to engage themselves in the new world. The last approach is 'literature of disillusion' wherein the reader's idea of reality is disturbed without giving them a possible revision.

'Literature of illusion' which Hume refers to as being the category in which fantasy literature is placed at, by providing an escape from that of what the real world offers. It isn't just about creating an alternate world, but providing new and innovative ways to engage and deal with the reality. Hume categorizes 'literature of illusion' as the lowest form of fantasy, which is like 'roses without thorns', where it provides nothing useful to its readers. Meanwhile, 'literature of revision', according to Brawley, is where fantasy literature belongs. It doesn't offer an escape from reality but rather "urging a rediscovery of it" (8). The 'literature of revision' gives the reader "a sacramental vision of the world" (9).

The Way Past Winter deviates from the genre of the traditional portrayal of nature as a backdrop. The Eldbjorn forest, depicted in the novel is a sentient entity, which is capable of both punishing and nurturing the humans. In the forest there was "a winter that came, and never left" (1). Though many years passed, but there was no hint of the arrival of spring, as the Bear cursed the people to forever suffer in the frozen environment. The subversion of the human-nature hierarchy is evident when the forest withholds its resources from the community, thereby forcing humans to confront their dependence and their role in ecological balance.

Lawrence Buell, in his work, *The Environmental Imagination*, cites four crucial elements, in order for a work to be considered as being ecocentric. The narrative of the non-human world shouldn't be just as a backdrop rather should focus on highlighting its effect in human culture. It should aim at promoting the intrinsic value of the non-human world irrespective of its usefulness to the humans. The narrative should emphasize human accountability towards the non-human world, showcasing a world where humans are only a part of the many species. *The Way Past Winter* focuses on the fictional landscape of Thule, which is harsh and dominated by an unending winter. It is a place where nature is the supreme force, and human survival depends on its adaptation and understanding to the conditions of the non-human world. The setting of Thule is integral in the novel. Hargrave's portrayal of the island emphasizes a delicate balance between humans and the natural world. The island is a character in its own, a force which is to be reckoned with, and the survival of the characters depends on their ability to respect the other world.

Anthropomorphism is a common trope in children's fantasy literature. Juliet Markowsky in her work *Why Anthropomorphism in Children's Literature* states that one of the reasons that authors of children's stories use anthropomorphism is "to enable young readers to identify with the animals. The animals in themselves- stripped of all their human trappings of speech and clothing – may or may not be familiar to the child" (460). *The Way Past Winter* contains many anthropomorphic characters, and it doesn't just end with the talking animals. Using fantastical elements such as the Rune and the bear (Bjorn), it criticises deforestation practices and teaches humans about ecosystems and the interdependence of different organisms. Bjorn disguises as a human and shows at the doorstep of Mila's house, enquiring about her family. With his arrival in the forest, Oskar and many other boys in the

village have gone missing the next morning because of his hex upon them. The mage, Rune transforming himself into other forms and Bjorn, the Bear's ability to shapeshift are all cases of anthropomorphism in the novel.

Some ecocritics question the value of anthropomorphism as a literary device because they believe that anthropomorphism cannot help but be anthropocentric (human-centred) as opposed to being ecocentric (earth-centred). The basic objective of ecocritics is to replace anthropocentrism with ecocentrism. Stories that include anthropomorphism are anthropocentric in that they are written for human audience to sway human opinions, but the messages that they do deliver can still be in an eco centric point of view. Fantasy Fiction offers alternative, non-anthropocentric visions of the world. It portrays a world in which the non-human is essential. In *The Way Past Winter*, Hargrave's use of anthropomorphism avoids an anthropocentric focus. In this fantasy novel, nature takes control and reminds that humans only have a narrow view of the universe around them. The novel doesn't give privilege to human characters over animal forces. Both are presented as being an integral part of the ecosystem, each having their own struggles. Thus, fantasy fiction has a unique potential for creating and inspiring more environmental ways of life.

Literature that rejects anthropocentrism in order to favour ecocentrism is much important in fantasy fiction because it presents an alternate view of life. Don D. Elgin in his work *Literary Fantasy and Ecological Comedy* (1985) connects literature and in particular the fantasy genre as being eco centric. He says that "literature, in particular the fantasy novel, offers humanity a way to reintegrate itself into the natural world, and, in doing so, invites a new relationship between itself, its fellow creatures, and the science and literature that create and mirror the world. (269)

Fantasy fiction has powerful storytelling, which makes readers immerse themselves in the world of the fantastical narrative. In *The Way Past Winter*, Hargrave creates a world which is as real as the world where the reader dwells. Her establishment of the island of Thule and the Eldbjorn forest in the novel sets the tone for the unravelling of the novel's narrative. She describes a frozen environment that has been caused so by Bjorn, the Bear who never let spring enter the island of Thule. He does so because he wants to punish the humans for their part in hurting and attempting to destroy the non-human world. In the novel, though Bjorn's actions against humans are wrong, but when viewed from an eco centric point of view, with the humans depleting nature's resources his actions couldn't be totally seen as being unjust. Though his actions are brutal as they seem, they are part of a larger ecological balance. Bjorn's intention to protect nature was morally good, but his actions were wrong. "He'd only hurt people to protect the forest" (38).

Fantasy literature makes an attempt to concern itself about the real-world issues and offer new perspectives by placing those environmental issues in an unfamiliar (fantastical) context. It also teaches the young readers who haven't fully developed their overview of social and cultural norms to be more open to the possibility of having an environmentally conscious perspective when compared to people who have already accepted the presence of anthropocentrism. In *The Way Past Winter*, the issues of environmentalism and preservation are addressed. The major reason for Bjorn's revenge against humans is that they have

depleted the forest and have not cared for nature. When Oskar says that the forest gives only lesser resources as the day progresses, Bjorn, the Bear says that “perhaps it is only the forest that has given enough” (16). Bjorn’s anger could be seen as being just, because humans only tend to take resources from nature and never return anything back. When Mila accuses the Bear of taking spring away from them and having cursed them with eternal winter, the Bear says that “Eldbjorn was never your home. It was mine. Humans brought nothing, planted nothing and took everything” (203).

In the novel, Bjorn wanted to rectify the imbalance that was caused by human encroachment. In order to do so, he takes the boys including Mila’s brother Oskar and other boys to the Eldbjorn forest. Bjorn possessed the boys with root-binding magic and took them away to Thule, and captured them in the heart-tree. Rune tells Mila that the Bear “plants them, to feed his heart-tree” (191). Mila’s father, whom they had thought disappeared five years ago, was also captured in the heart-tree. Bjorn accused Mila’s father of having “tried to kill the heart tree.” (204) To take revenge on those who made the forest weak, Bjorn captured them and placed them into the heart-tree, with no chances of escaping from there. He had also taken spring away from them, leaving them to suffer in a forest of eternal winter. When Mila questions Bjorn for punishing the boys for a mistake that a man had committed, he answers, “because boys grow into men, because without men in the forest – a forest of eternal winter – in time there will be no more people” (205). At the end of the novel, a fight ensues between Mila and Bjorn. The Bear tries to capture her in the heart-tree too, by using the magical root cords. But Rune, the mage saves Mila by sacrificing himself and takes Bjorn down along with him.

In an essay about how Ecofeminism is represented in children’s literature, theorist Marion Copeland explores “the ‘wild’ as a place where non-humans might flourish free of human domination, places where humans and non-humans might benefit from the presence of the ‘other’” (80). The non-human doesn’t just refer to the plants and animals, but the mythical creatures as well. In the novel, Thule, the mystical island is the place where the Bear resides. He holds the whole authority over the place and even proves it by possessing all humans and captures them in the heart-tree, thereby showcasing his power over humans. The fight for freedom from domination is present in both the human and the non-human world.

Hargrave’s *The Way Past Winter* features a well-imagined world and atmosphere. The features of natural landscape like the wind in the trees, the river running between the hills and the shifting glaciers are beautifully expressed. She describes winter magic as “frost glittered like finery on the bare branches of the trees: the night air was crystalline and bright” (97). Mila’s quest to rescue Oskar, leads her through the frozen landscapes, from Eldbjorn forest to the magical island, Thule, where the Bear resides. She has to find a way past the eternal winter to reclaim spring and reunite her family. The first paragraph of the novel sets the scene of eternal winter: “It was a winter they would tell tales about. A winter that arrived so sudden and sharp it stuck birds to branches and caught the rivers in frost” (1).

Eucastrophe, which means, happy ending, is a major term in the world of fantasy literature. It means that good will triumph over evil and that after the ending, everyone will live happily ever after. In *The Way Past Winter*, Mila and her sisters defeat Bjorn and rescue

their brother and the other boys safely, with the help of Rune. In the end, they also reunite with their father whom they had thought went missing. There is a happy ending where “they soon would be home, bringing spring” (239). The eternal winter that was present in Eldbjorn forest vanishes and spring returns back to their home. Mila feels happy seeing the green shoots rising above the ground and the trees unfurling their leaves. “They would plant a new heart tree and grow the forest strong – stronger even than the Bear had done” (239).

Though there are critiques about fantasy’s inclusion in the ecocritical debate, but the fact that these works have a positive effect on the environmental consciousness of the readers, has to be accepted. Fantasy has an ecological potential, through which it portrays an alternate outlook of the world to connect the readers with the environment. It helps us become more aware of our own world. Fantasy is much intimately connected to ecology in *The Way Past Winter*. Hargrave takes typical fantasy elements, such as closer relationships with animals, mythical creatures, legend and magic and applies them to a wider range of environmental issues such as deforestation, climatic changes and environmental preservation. In examining these issues in such a manner, Hargrave tends to teach the readers environmental ethics by promoting the importance of nature through fantasy as a medium.

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