

## Exploring Forests and Fantasies: Woods and Wilderness in Cli-Fi novel *The Swan Book*

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**Abstract:** The awareness of unforeseen and fast-escalating climate change has created climate fiction. Over the last ten years, issues related to climate change have erupted. It has been suggested in the past that climate fiction might help us deal with the unpredictable nature of climate change. Alexis Wright's novel *The Swan Book* is intricately woven into themes of life, death, and the complex relationships between humans and their environments. This paper explores the eco-critical dimensions of Wright's work within the context of indigenous studies, focusing on how she portrays the interconnectedness of ecological and cultural systems. Through examining narrative strategies, symbolism, and thematic elements, this research illuminates how Wright challenges conventional Western perspectives on ecology and foregrounds Indigenous knowledge systems.

**Keywords:** Ecology, Global warming, Aboriginal, Climate, Indigenous

### Introduction

Climate fiction is a type of literature that deals with environmental issues such as climate change, global warming, deforestation, etc. Climate change is a long-term concept in the average weather condition of a region and depicts that region's rainfall, temperature, etc. Climate fiction is a form of speculative fiction that features a changed or changing climate as a major plot device. Many writers have been writing climate fiction stories and novels for several years. A 2013 article from Scientific American (<https://www.scientificamerican.com>) credits journalist Dan Bloom with the crowning of the term cli-fi. In recent years, climate fiction has been achieving a lot of demand. Climate change is so horrible. It won't help anyone to only focus on the negative effects. It is good to be aware of the

urgency of the climate crisis. However, only seeing climate change as a threat can make us feel afraid and hopeless. We have to recreate the climate problem as a chance to create a better future. Bloom defines climate fiction simply as “novels are movies about climate change themes” (Thorpe 2021). Climate fiction intensifies the present and future risks of climate change in a way that reporting simply cannot match. Climate fiction teaches us not only about the world but also about the human soul. Researchers have shown that reading climate fiction changes readers' attitudes to climate change, at least for a time. Climate fiction is the study of the relationship between literature and climate or environment. Climate fiction is a literature that deals with climate change and global warming. University courses on literature and environmental issues may include climate change fiction in their syllabus. Readers of climate fiction are more concerned about climate change as compared to non-readers. They are concerned about the dangers of climate change and the adverse effects of nature.

Numerous cli-fi novels, short stories, and films have been produced as a result of the genre's growing popularity. Cli-fi is a genre that writers and filmmakers are utilizing to engage viewers in important discussions about global warming and environmental sustainability. Additionally, because environmental destruction and climate-related catastrophes are commonly interwoven into these plots, cli-fi has impacted other genres, including dystopian fiction and post-apocalyptic narratives. Knowing readers' fantasies about a future where there has been a shift in the climate in conjunction with climate fiction is crucial in the context of the growing popularity of climate fiction and the scientific interest in its effects (Trexler 185).

### **Early Influences**

The field of Indigenous studies has increasingly recognized the importance of ecological perspectives in understanding Indigenous cultures and identities. Scholars such as Kim Anderson (2016) and Deborah Bird Rose (2004) emphasize the inseparable connections between land, culture, and spirituality in Indigenous worldviews. Wright's *The Swan Book* contributes significantly to this discourse by portraying ecological relationships as integral to Indigenous survival and resilience. This research paper employs a close textual analysis of *The Swan Book*, focusing on key themes and

narrative techniques that highlight the ecologies of life and death. Drawing on ecocritical and Indigenous theoretical frameworks, the analysis explores how Wright challenges dominant Western environmental ideologies and reclaims Indigenous knowledge systems. By examining the representation of swans, landscapes, and climate change in the novel, this study aims to elucidate the complex ecological consciousness embedded in Wright's narrative.

### **Cli-fi and Eco-criticism**

Climate fiction talks bring up several issues that have sparked the more untamed branch of literary and social criticism known as 'Eco-criticism.' The significance of nature in literary culture from antiquity to the present, as well as in numerous linguistic traditions and genres, is assessed in this topic. Questions about the future depicted in the genre have also been sparked by discussions of sci-fi. Critics questioned if the genre always depicts the cataclysmic annihilation of the carbon-based living forms, such as humans or the entire planet. The key question for climate fiction is why and whether it is simpler to conceive the end of the world through climate-related flooding than it is to consider life after capitalism, building on a long-running discussion in science fiction studies. The critics are drawn to these perennially relevant themes and search the genre for instances in which it might appear to look beyond crises. In other words, the movement of ecocriticism implores readers to recognize cli-fi's explicit allegiance to utopian invention and its most immediately apparent dedication to catastrophic dread. Although these two gestures appear in varied ways in various climate change fiction works, they both frequently appear and are crucial elements of the genre.

While most climate fiction is speculative, it is supported by science. The events depicted in cli-fi novels could occur today or in the not-too-distant future. This kind of genre frequently depicts science-fictional or utopian futures based on how humanity reacts to the effects of climate change. The rapid speed of climate fiction is broken up by crises. In this kind of fiction, the feeling of dread and anxiety is evident. Dramatic changes are made to the cli-fi setting. In climate fiction, the focus is on the characters' emotional journeys. A depressing future for humanity is portrayed in the majority

of these stories, which encourages readers to address the elements influencing climate change that are driven by human activity.

### **Exploring Forests and Fantasies**

Alexis Wright, an acclaimed Indigenous Australian author, brings forth a powerful narrative in *The Swan Book* that delves deep into the intertwined ecologies of life and death. Through her protagonist, Oblivia, and the haunting presence of swans, Wright constructs a narrative that transcends mere storytelling, offering profound insights into Indigenous relationships with land, water, and non-human entities. This paper aims to analyse how Wright's novel enriches the discourse on ecologies in Indigenous studies, highlighting the significance of her ecological worldview and its implications for contemporary environmental thought. This paper synthesizes *The Swan Book* with critical perspectives from Indigenous studies and ecocriticism, exploring how the novel challenges conventional environmental and cultural narratives. It underscores the importance of Indigenous ecological knowledge and its potential to reshape contemporary discourses on sustainability and justice (Anderson 97). Similarly, the novel examines the nuanced interactions between people and nature. It explores the negative effects of utilizing and modifying ecosystems as well as the opportunity for restoration, reconnection, and peaceful coexistence with nature. This work emphasizes optimism, resilience, and the possibility of positive change despite the frequently grim situations described. Stories of adaptation, community development, and environmental stewardship are featured as they examine the transformational potential of both individual and group action. This idea can be best elaborated in the following way:

The sun departs, and the heat deceives

The darkness falls, and the colour leaves

As the son's in its final struggle to hold sway

With the purple gold rate and dark blue display... (Warren 61)

Wright's portrayal of swans as both symbolic and literal entities in *The Swan Book* underscores Indigenous perspectives on environmental stewardship and cultural continuity. The novel critiques

colonial exploitation of natural resources while affirming Indigenous practices of custodianship and reciprocity with the land. Furthermore, through Oblivia's journey and encounters with the spirits of the dead, Wright illustrates the interconnectedness of human existence with broader ecological systems, challenging anthropocentric views of nature prevalent in Western thought.

The novel *The Swan Book* is set in futuristic Australia and the world is in a terrible state because of sudden climate change. Oblivia is the central character of this novel. She is an Aboriginal girl who is saved by a woman called Bella Donna. Oblivia was abandoned by her family and community. She was gang-raped and faced many other atrocities.

Bella Donna is a refugee from Europe and a survivor of a disaster that affected and took thousands of lives. Both of them are Bella Donna and Oblivia towards a Swamp where Bella Donna tells Oblivia stories of white swans from Europe. On the contrary side, Oblivia grew up with black swans. As Oblivia grows up, Bella Donna dies. Oblivia gets abducted by an Aboriginal man called Warren. Warren became the first Aboriginal president of Australia. He clasps Oblivia to keep her in captivity. After the swans visit her in her confinement and sensing that they might be in danger, Oblivia finds the strength to escape. She killed her husband and decided to become a refugee and go North in search of the safety of the Black swans. It revolves around the theme of the loss of Indigenous traditions, loss of habitats, bad conditions of the detention camps, and the hardship of maintaining Aboriginal people's rights and freedom. The main idea behind writing this novel, Alexis Wright, mentioned in an interview that when she was working in central Australia in 2003, people were telling her about swans that they had seen in the desert, sometimes on very shallow stretches of water. Many of them were astonished to see them in these places, so far away from the coastal and wetter regions of Australia. Because of changes in weather patterns and adverse climate conditions, the swans had moved far away from their original habitats. The swans migrated for suitable climate conditions. Not only human beings but also non-human beings are also affected by this adverse climate condition. By taking inspiration from this thing, Alexis Wright decided to write a story for the Anthropocene. In this way, *The Swan Book* can be noticed as the first climate change novel.

## Impact of Climate

An increasing number of environmental challenges, chief among them climate change, have become urgent in the twenty-first century. Literature has taken on the duty of bringing attention to these urgent issues as temperatures globally rise, weather patterns grow more unpredictable, and the effects of degradation of the environment become more evident. It is set in a world that has been destroyed by climate change. Using a combination of storytelling techniques and critical analysis, this book seeks to show how *The Swan Book* functions as a grave environmental warning.

The world of *The Swan Book* is post-apocalyptic, with the effects of climate change being visibly felt. Large areas of the land have been inundated by rising sea levels, which has caused ecosystems to be destroyed and people to be displaced. Strong commentary on the catastrophic effects of environmental degradation is offered by the novel's vivid and captivating depictions of this dystopian planet. It draws attention to the devastation of ecosystems, the disappearance of species, and the unfortunate situation of those who are uprooted by the shifting terrain. The novel's depiction of population displacement due to rising sea levels is a direct representation of current issues. Coastal areas are becoming more vulnerable as the planet's polar ice caps melt and temperatures in the ocean increase. The suffering of the communities compelled to leave their ancestral lands because of this environmental disaster is brought to light in *The Swan Book*. The story highlights the terrible effects of such relocation on the ties that Indigenous tribes have to their ancestral lands on a cultural and spiritual level. The discussion section contextualizes Wright's narrative within broader debates on environmental justice and Indigenous sovereignty. By centring Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, *The Swan Book* offers a counter-narrative to mainstream environmentalism, emphasizing holistic approaches to ecological sustainability rooted in cultural traditions. Moreover, the novel prompts readers to reconsider the implications of climate change and environmental degradation through an indigenous lens, urging solidarity and collective action.

The acute drought in the nation is connected to Oblivia's rape and her subsequent fall into the gut of a eucalyptus tree in the first chapter, "Dust Cycle,"; one's trauma affects the other as -

Some say that there was an accident before the drought. A little girl was lost. She had fallen into the deep underground bowl of a giant eucalyptus tree. In a silent world, the girl slept for a very long time among the tree's huge woven roots. Everyone had forgotten that she even existed—although that did not take long (Wright 16).

The majority of the concepts and imagery centre on the land's vitality and significance, which are connected to our continent's prehistoric past, *The Swan Book*. Similar to her previous two books, *The Swan Book* begins on the plains of the Gulf of Carpentaria, Wright's traditional Waanyi country. However, due to climate change and the Australian army's incursion into Aboriginal communities as a result of the 'Intervention' verdict, this land has been nearly completely transformed. *The Swan Book* parodies Western society in general while also focusing on the politics underlying the intervention. The nation and its species have undergone such a drastic transformation as a result of the West's rapacious exploration of the entire globe, its trespassing upon it, and its exploitation of its resources in the quest for cheap labour, that they no longer have any ancestral legends associated with particular landforms and locales. New narratives are required as an outcome of climate change since landscapes inevitably change and disappear.

Narratives about biota that depict the natural world as a living entity with agency, interconnected with human existence, rather than merely a breathtaking backdrop for human dramas, are called Country. One of these imaginative stories is *The Swan Book*. The opening scene is told in the first person by the broken child girl Oblivion Ethyl(ene), also referred to as Oblivia at times. Wright's explanation of the interplay between people, non-human animals, the land, and the stories that makeup the country is at its most intricate yet in this instalment: Oblivia's head is the novel's universe as well as her ancestral country; the country tells the story via Oblivia. The eutrophication of the swamp is due to both the brutal imposition of the Intervention and human-caused climate change, which has caused the weather systems of the continent to flip, resulting in an infestation of dust in the tropical north.

In *The Swan Book*, Alison Ravenscroft picked up on a theme that Wright's two earlier books did not address, and I think this is what makes the book fundamentally different: "If Carpentaria is a potent story about hope that never dies, *The Swan Book* surely puts the longevity of hope into doubt, seriously at risk" (Ravenscroft 194).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* emerges as a seminal work in Indigenous literature that reimagines ecologies of life and death through a uniquely Indigenous perspective. By foregrounding the interconnectedness of human, non-human, and spiritual realms, Wright challenges readers to confront their ethical responsibilities toward the environment and Indigenous communities.

In this way, such type of work helps to promote environmental awareness and engagement. Climate fiction is essential for increasing understanding of and participation in dialogues about climate change among audiences. Climate fiction addresses readers and viewers who might not be familiar with scientific studies or scholarly conversation on the subject by incorporating environmental themes into storytelling. People can better understand the urgency and scope of the environmental crisis thanks to the medium it provides for communication and education. Readers of climate fiction may be motivated to research scientific knowledge, learn more about climate change, and take part in environmental debates.

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