

Ecocriticism and the Changing Human–Nature Relationship in Contemporary Canadian Literature

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Abstract- Contemporary Canadian literature increasingly represents the relationship between human beings and the natural world as complex, interdependent, and historically shaped by colonialism, industrialization, technology, and environmental change. Ecocriticism provides an important framework for examining these changing relationships because it shifts literary analysis from an exclusively human-centred perspective towards an understanding of the interconnectedness of human, non-human, and material worlds. This paper examines the changing human–nature relationship in contemporary Canadian literature through an ecocritical reading of selected works, with particular attention to Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), Waubgeshig Rice’s *Moon of the Crusted Snow* (2018), and Lee Maracle’s *Celia’s Song* (2014). These texts represent different literary responses to ecological crisis, including climate change, technological domination, resource extraction, colonial displacement, loss of biodiversity, and Indigenous relationships with land. The study argues that contemporary Canadian literature has moved beyond the conventional representation of nature as wilderness or passive background. Instead, nature is increasingly presented as an active presence within human history, culture, memory, survival, and identity. The selected Indigenous texts further complicate conventional Anthropocene narratives by connecting environmental destruction with colonial histories and emphasizing relationality, community, traditional knowledge, and land-based responsibility. The paper concludes that contemporary Canadian literature contributes significantly to ecological thought by challenging anthropocentrism and encouraging a more reciprocal understanding of human–nature relationships.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Canadian Literature, Human–Nature Relationship, Environmental Humanities, Indigenous Literature, Anthropocene, Climate Change, Ecological Crisis.

I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between human beings and the natural environment has become one of the central concerns of contemporary literary and cultural studies. Rapid climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, deforestation, resource extraction, technological expansion, and environmental displacement have demonstrated that environmental problems cannot be separated from social, political, economic, and cultural structures. Literature responds to these transformations by representing not only environmental damage but also the ways in which human beings imagine, remember, use, inhabit, and depend upon the more-than-human world. Ecocriticism has therefore emerged as an important interdisciplinary approach for studying the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Cheryll Glotfelty's

influential formulation defines ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment and emphasizes an earth-centred approach to literary studies (Glotfelty, 1996). Canadian literature offers particularly rich material for ecocritical investigation because landscape, wilderness, climate, animals, forests, oceans, Arctic environments, and Indigenous relationships with land have long been significant components of Canadian cultural imagination. Contemporary Canadian ecocriticism, however, does not simply reproduce the older image of Canada as an untouched wilderness. Scholars have increasingly examined environmental literature through the interconnected perspectives of regionalism, Indigenous studies, postcolonialism, animal studies, materiality, bioregionalism, and petroculture.

This changing critical perspective is visible in contemporary Canadian fiction. Margaret Atwood's

speculative fiction, for example, explores the consequences of biotechnology, consumerism, corporate power, and ecological destruction. In *Oryx and Crake*, scientific manipulation and technological control become closely associated with environmental and social catastrophe. Studies of the novel have consequently examined its ecological ethics, sustainability, biotechnology, and critique of instrumental attitudes towards nature.

Indigenous Canadian literature introduces another essential dimension to the discussion. Works such as Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* and Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* connect ecological crisis with Indigenous survival, colonial histories, land dispossession, community, and traditional knowledge. Dimaline's novel, in particular, challenges the idea that climate catastrophe affects all humans equally by connecting environmental destruction with colonial violence and Indigenous dispossession.

Thus, this study investigates how contemporary Canadian literature represents the transition from a predominantly anthropocentric understanding of nature towards a more relational and ecological model of human existence.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ecocritical scholarship has developed considerably since the publication of *The Ecocriticism Reader* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm in 1996. Glotfelty's definition established the relationship between literature and the physical environment as the central concern of ecocritical inquiry. Lawrence Buell subsequently expanded ecological literary criticism by emphasizing environmental imagination, ethical responsibility, and the ways literary texts encourage readers to reconsider human relationships with the non-human world. Ecocriticism has since developed beyond traditional nature writing to include climate fiction, animal studies, environmental justice, Indigenous studies, energy humanities, and material ecocriticism.

Canadian ecocriticism has its own distinctive trajectory. The *Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature* identifies the country's literature as particularly suitable for ecological analysis because environmental concerns extend from Indigenous oral traditions and early explorations to contemporary environmental literature. The scholarship also identifies connections between Canadian ecocriticism and bioregionalism, postcolonialism, Indigenous studies, animal studies, and petrocultural studies. Similarly, Soper and Bradley's *Greening the Maple* documents the development of ecocriticism within Canadian literary studies and emphasizes the interrelationship between culture and environment.

A significant strand of scholarship has focused on Margaret Atwood. Dunlap (2012) interprets *Oryx and Crake* as an eco-dystopian text that questions both capitalist science and simplified visions of ecological utopia. Bergthaller (2010) connects *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* with sustainability and argues that the novels challenge humanity to reconsider its relationship with planetary systems. Cooke (2006) similarly examines biotechnology, technological power, and the changing boundaries between the human and non-human.

More recent scholarship has expanded attention towards Indigenous environmental narratives. Xausa (2020), examining *The Marrow Thieves*, argues that environmental catastrophe cannot be separated from colonial violence and dispossession. Tillett (2025) further interprets the novel through Indigenous futurism, climate emergency, survivance, and hopeful ecological futures. Martens (2020), studying Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, links energy dependence, settler colonialism, and environmental crisis.

Table 1. Selected Literature Relevant to the Study

Author	Text/Study	Major Environmental Concern	Critical Perspective
Glotfelty (1996)	<i>The Ecocriticism Reader</i>	Literature and physical environment	Ecocriticism

Buell (1995)	The Environmental Imagination	Environmental imagination	Environmental ethics
Soper & Bradley (2013)	Greening the Maple	Canadian environment and literature	Canadian ecocriticism
Dunlap (2012)	Oryx and Crake	Ecological destruction	Eco-dystopia
Bergthaller (2010)	Atwood's novels	Sustainability	Ecocriticism
Xausa (2020)	The Marrow Thieves	Climate crisis and colonialism	Decolonial ecocriticism
Martens (2020)	Moon of the Crusted Snow	Energy and settler colonialism	Energy humanities
Tillett (2025)	The Marrow Thieves	Climate emergency and Indigenous futures	Indigenous futurism

III. ECOCRITICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The present study employs an interdisciplinary ecocritical framework to examine how contemporary Canadian writers represent the relationship between humans and the natural world. The approach combines traditional ecocriticism with concepts drawn from environmental justice, Indigenous ecocriticism, Anthropocene studies, and postcolonial ecological criticism. Rather than treating nature simply as scenery, the study considers the environment as an active component of narrative meaning. This approach asks how landscapes, animals, water, forests, climate, energy systems, and ecological disruption influence characters, communities, identities, and narrative structures.

The study uses qualitative textual analysis and close reading of four representative contemporary Canadian novels: 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). These texts were selected because they represent different stages and forms of the changing human-nature relationship. Atwood foregrounds

technological domination and ecological catastrophe, Maracle emphasizes relationality and Indigenous ways of understanding human and non-human beings, Dimaline connects climate crisis with colonial violence, and Rice explores community survival and dependence upon land and energy.

The analysis focuses on five interconnected dimensions: representation of nature, anthropocentrism, ecological crisis, Indigenous ecological knowledge, and human survival. The study also considers the role of narrative form because contemporary ecological literature frequently uses dystopian, speculative, Indigenous, and post-apocalyptic forms to imagine possible environmental futures.

Table 2. Analytical Framework

Analytical category	Major question
Nature representation	How is the natural world represented?
Anthropocentrism	Does the text privilege human interests over ecological systems?
Ecological crisis	What environmental disruptions are represented?
Human-nonhuman relationship	How are humans connected to animals, plants, land and climate?
Indigenous knowledge	How does traditional ecological knowledge challenge dominant systems?
Technology	Does technology protect, control or damage nature?
Survival	What ecological relationships support human survival?
Future imagination	What alternative ecological futures are imagined?

IV. NATURE, TECHNOLOGY AND ANTHROPOCENTRISM IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S ORYX AND CRAKE

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* provides a powerful representation of the consequences of separating technological development from ecological responsibility. The novel presents a future in which biotechnology, genetic engineering, consumer capitalism, corporate science, and

ecological degradation have transformed both human society and the natural world. Rather than portraying environmental destruction as an isolated problem, Atwood connects ecological crisis with human desires for control, efficiency, commercial profit, and technological perfection.

The novel's genetically engineered organisms demonstrate the extent to which human beings attempt to redesign nature according to human requirements. The creation of new species and the manipulation of biological systems suggest an instrumental relationship in which nature becomes raw material for scientific and commercial purposes. Cooke (2006) observes that the novel connects biotechnology and technological power with changing definitions of human life.

Atwood's ecological imagination is particularly significant because the novel does not simply oppose technology and nature. Instead, it reveals the complexity of technological intervention. Scientific knowledge has the potential to improve human life, but when it becomes disconnected from ethical responsibility, it can contribute to ecological catastrophe. Bergthaller (2010) argues that Atwood's novels raise fundamental questions about sustainability and the need to align human behaviour with planetary ecological requirements.

The novel therefore challenges anthropocentrism by demonstrating that environmental systems cannot be treated as infinitely controllable. Human beings are biological organisms within larger ecological systems rather than independent masters of nature. The destruction of ecosystems ultimately returns as a crisis affecting human survival.

Atwood's ecological vision consequently changes the human–nature relationship from domination to interdependence. Human technological power is shown to be limited because humans remain dependent upon biological processes that they cannot completely control.

V. INDIGENOUS ECOLOGICAL RELATIONALITY IN LEE MARACLE'S CELIA'S SONG

Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song* provides an important alternative to Western anthropocentric approaches to nature. The novel is situated within Indigenous cultural and geographical contexts and explores relationships among humans, land, memory, community, spirituality, and more-than-human beings. Rather than presenting nature as an external landscape that humans observe, Maracle's narrative foregrounds relationality and the ethical significance of relationships.

De Riso's study of *Celia's Song* emphasizes Maracle's exploration of coexistence among Indigenous peoples, settlers, and beings inhabiting the land. The study highlights the importance of respectful distance and warns against attempts to completely possess or comprehend another being.

This perspective is important for ecocriticism because conventional Western approaches have sometimes divided the world into human subject and natural object. Maracle's narrative complicates such a division. Human beings exist within networks of relationships rather than outside ecological systems. Land is therefore not merely property, and non-human beings are not merely resources.

The novel also demonstrates that ecological relationships are connected with questions of colonial history and cultural survival. Indigenous ecological knowledge cannot be separated from community, memory, language, and place. Consequently, environmental responsibility becomes a cultural and ethical responsibility.

Maracle's work therefore contributes to the changing human–nature relationship by shifting the emphasis from human control over nature to reciprocal relationships with place and other beings. This relational model also challenges the assumption that ecological knowledge must always be produced through scientific measurement alone. Storytelling, memory, cultural knowledge, and relationships with

place become alternative ways of understanding ecological life.

VI. CLIMATE CRISIS, COLONIALISM AND SURVIVAL IN CHERIE DIMALINE'S THE MARROW THIEVES

Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* represents one of the strongest contemporary Canadian examples of the intersection between climate crisis, colonialism, Indigenous identity, and environmental justice. Set in a future affected by ecological destruction, the novel depicts a world in which Indigenous communities are forced to survive environmental and political violence. Climate change is therefore not represented as a purely environmental phenomenon; it is connected with historical and continuing systems of dispossession. Xausa (2020) argues that the novel's environmental catastrophe should not be interpreted as an undifferentiated crisis affecting humanity equally. Instead, the ecological apocalypse reveals the historical processes of colonial violence and dispossession. This is particularly important to ecocriticism because it challenges the universalizing tendency of some Anthropocene narratives.

The novel also emphasizes traditional knowledge, storytelling, community, movement through landscapes, and relationships with land. Survival depends not simply on technological resources but on collective knowledge and cultural memory. This challenges dominant assumptions that technological advancement automatically represents progress.

Tillett (2025) further interprets the novel as an example of Indigenous futurism in which ecological survival is associated with Indigenous cultural knowledge, survivance, community, and the possibility of alternative futures.

The novel consequently transforms the human–nature relationship into a question of justice and responsibility. Environmental destruction affects bodies, cultures, communities, and territories simultaneously. The exploitation of land becomes connected with the exploitation of people.

Table 3. Ecological Themes in *The Marrow Thieves*

Theme	Representation	Ecocritical significance
Climate change	Environmental collapse	Ecological vulnerability
Colonialism	Dispossession and violence	Environmental injustice
Indigenous knowledge	Storytelling and cultural memory	Alternative ecological knowledge
Land	Homeland and identity	Relational ecology
Community	Collective survival	Ecological interdependence
Future	Indigenous futurism	Alternative ecological possibilities

VII. ENERGY, COMMUNITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEPENDENCE IN MOON OF THE CRUSTED SNOW

Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* examines the relationship between environmental disruption, energy dependence, community, and Indigenous identity. The novel describes an Anishinaabe community in northern Ontario that becomes isolated after electricity and communication systems fail. As winter approaches, the loss of modern infrastructure forces the community to reconsider its relationship with land, food, animals, traditional knowledge, and collective responsibility.

The ecological significance of the novel lies partly in its representation of dependence. Modern society often appears independent of nature because food, electricity, transportation, and communication are provided through complex technological networks. When these systems disappear, however, human dependence on local ecological systems becomes visible.

Martens (2020) interprets the novel through energy humanities and connects its representation of energy failure with settler colonialism and environmental crisis. The novel therefore encourages readers to reconsider the hidden ecological infrastructure supporting contemporary life.

Community becomes another major ecological principle. Survival is not represented as an individual achievement but as a collective process involving food sharing, knowledge, cooperation, cultural memory, and relationships with place. The novel also contrasts local ecological knowledge with excessive dependence on external systems.

The environmental crisis therefore produces an unexpected reversal: technological systems initially appear to provide security, but their disappearance makes local knowledge and ecological relationships increasingly important.

One important change is the movement from nature as scenery to nature as agency. In the selected novels, ecological systems influence human actions and determine possibilities for survival. Climate, forests, animals, land, food systems, and energy networks become narrative forces.

A second change is the movement from anthropocentrism to relationality. Humans are represented as biological and cultural beings embedded within larger ecological networks. This is especially visible in Indigenous texts, where land is associated with identity, cultural continuity, memory, and responsibility.

Table 4. Comparison of Selected Novels

Text	Main ecological concern	Human–nature relationship	Dominant response
Oryx and Crake	Biotechnology and ecological collapse	Control → dependence	Warning
Celia's Song	Relationality and land	Reciprocity	Cultural renewal
The Marrow Thieves	Climate crisis and colonialism	Survival and responsibility	Resistance
Moon of the Crusted Snow	Energy crisis	Community dependence	Adaptation

VIII. CHANGING HUMAN–NATURE RELATIONSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN LITERATURE

The selected texts reveal a clear transformation in the literary representation of nature. Earlier literary traditions often constructed nature through ideas of wilderness, landscape, frontier, sublimity, and national identity. Contemporary Canadian literature increasingly questions these representations. Nature is no longer merely a beautiful or threatening background against which human stories occur. It becomes an active component of history, identity, survival, politics, and ethics.

A third transformation involves the relationship between environmental crisis and colonial history. Contemporary Indigenous literature challenges the idea that environmental problems are simply the result of humanity as a whole. Dimaline's work, for example, demonstrates how environmental crisis can be connected to historical systems of colonial exploitation and dispossession.

A fourth transformation is the movement from environmental description to environmental ethics. The question is no longer simply what nature looks like, but how humans should live within ecological systems.

Table 5. Evolution of Human–Nature Representation

Earlier tendency	Contemporary tendency
Nature as wilderness	Nature as interconnected system
Nature as background	Nature as active presence
Human domination	Human dependence
Anthropocentrism	Relationality
Landscape as national symbol	Land as cultural and ecological relation
Nature as resource	Nature as living system
Environmental crisis as isolated	Environmental crisis linked to social justice
Scientific control	Ethical responsibility
Individual survival	Collective survival

IX. DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis demonstrates that contemporary Canadian literature provides multiple perspectives on ecological crisis rather than a single

environmental narrative. Atwood's dystopian fiction highlights the dangers of technological instrumentalism, while Maracle's work emphasizes relationality and respectful coexistence. Dimaline connects climate catastrophe with colonial histories, and Rice examines the vulnerability created by technological and energy dependence.

These differences are important because ecocriticism should not reduce environmental literature to a simple message about protecting nature. Contemporary Canadian texts reveal that ecological problems are inseparable from questions of power, identity, economics, colonialism, technology, and culture. The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature similarly identifies the interdisciplinary character of Canadian ecocriticism, including its connections with Indigenous studies, postcolonialism, bioregionalism, animal studies, and petrocultural studies.

Another significant finding is that contemporary literature increasingly questions the concept of the Anthropocene as a universal human condition. If all humans are described as equally responsible for ecological destruction, historical differences in power and resource consumption can disappear. Dimaline's novel challenges precisely this kind of universalization by placing environmental catastrophe within Indigenous histories of dispossession.

The texts also demonstrate the importance of storytelling in ecological thinking. Narrative can make environmental change emotionally and culturally meaningful. Recent scholarship on Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, for example, emphasizes storytelling as a means of imagining survival in a damaged world.

The changing human–nature relationship represented in these works can therefore be summarized as a movement from domination → disruption → recognition → relationality → ecological responsibility. This is not necessarily a linear historical progression, but it represents an important conceptual pattern across contemporary Canadian literature.

X. CONCLUSION

Contemporary Canadian literature provides a significant literary space for examining the changing relationship between human beings and the natural world. Through ecocritical analysis of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song*, Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*, and Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, this study demonstrates that nature is increasingly represented as an active, interconnected, and culturally significant dimension of human existence. The selected texts challenge anthropocentric assumptions by revealing human dependence upon ecological systems, while Indigenous narratives further emphasize reciprocity, community, land-based knowledge, and cultural continuity. Environmental crisis is also represented as inseparable from technological systems, colonial histories, resource extraction, and social inequality.

The study therefore identifies a significant shift in contemporary Canadian literary imagination: nature is no longer simply an external wilderness to be admired, conquered, or represented. Instead, human beings are increasingly understood as participants within ecological networks. The literature examined here demonstrates that environmental survival requires not only technological responses but also changes in cultural imagination, ethical responsibility, community relationships, and understandings of land.

Contemporary Canadian literature thus contributes to ecocritical thought by making ecological interdependence visible. Its most important contribution lies not merely in warning readers about environmental destruction, but in imagining different ways of living with the more-than-human world.

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