

The Pre-Traumatic Eco-Feminist Cli-Fi

with Reference to

***The End We Start From* by Megan Hunter**

by

Dr Ayman Ibrahim Elhalafawy

An Associate Professor of English Literature, Faculty of Arts, Kafrelsheikh
University

Abstract

This paper is an ecocritical approach to psychological applications of the threats of climate change. The paper begins by approaching ecocriticism from a general perspective; moving to a more specific approach. The introduction elaborates on the importance of ecocritical studies and how vital is the role of ecocritics in saving the physical world. The analysis is mainly concerned with discussing the British poet and writer Megan Hunter's climate fiction *The End We Start From* (2017) with an ecocritical psychological point of view. The research adapts E. Ann Kaplan's concept of "pretrauma" and the effect of climate warming threats on both the author and his characters. The analysis covers crucial moments of the novel and how it represents Hunter's fear of the future. The paper takes the approach of eco-feminism concerning that the main character is a new mother in the midst of

environmental catastrophe. The ecocritical studies of dystopian climate futures can help spread awareness amongst ecocritics and fiction readers. Hopefully, the denial halts.

Keywords: Climate Change, Climate Fiction, Ecocriticism, Eco-Feminism, Megan Hunter, Pretrauma, *The End We Start From*.

المستخلص:

تقدم هذه الورقة البحثية دراسة بيئية نقدية للآثار النفسية الناتجة عن مخاوف التغير المناخي، يبدأ البحث بنظرة عامة عن النقد البيئي ثم يتطرق الي نقاط أكثر تحديداً، ومنها اهمية الدراسات البيئية النقدية ودورها الحيوي في محاولة إنقاذ العالم المادي الذي نعيش فيه، وأهم نقاط هذا البحث هي تحليل بيئي نفسي نقدي لرواية الكاتبة الانجليزية "ماجن هانتير" وهي "النهاية حيث نبدأ"، ويقوم التحليل بناء علي نظرية الصدمة *الما قبل مستقبلية* للكاتبة الامريكية "اليزابث آن كابلن" والتي تبنتها نتيجة للأعمال التي تحتوي علي نظرة بانسة للمستقبل المناخي، وأخيراً وليس آخراً، تقدم الورقة البحثية نظرة علي علاقة الأم بالبيئة والخيال المناخي البائس.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التغير المناخي، *الصدمة الما قبل مستقبلية*، "ماجن هانتير"، النقد البيئي، "النهاية حيث نبدأ"

Human actions against the eco-system are disastrous. However, when these violations are ceaseless, a great attention must be paid to the crisis. Through ecocritical studies of literature, scholars can find the connection between man and nature through different perspectives and through countless doors. Ecocritics can analyse different literary theories within the scope of the environment. Having said that, the current paper attempts to explain, initially, the term ecocriticism, the different approaches to eco-studies and all with reference to a climate concerned piece of fiction.

William Rueckert is possibly the first to coin the term *ecocriticism*, by which he meant “The application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature.” Rueckert’s definition is restricted to the science of ecology and misses out all possible relations between literature and the physical world (qtd Glotfelty xviii).

Cheryll Glotfelty, the first American professor of Literature and Environment, defines ecocriticism in her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”. She expounds that this study takes “an earth-centered” approach to literature. Furthermore, she lists questions which hover the minds of eco-critics and theorists e.g., “how is nature represented in literary works? ... What cross-fertilization is possible between

literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, art, history, and ethics?" (xviii-xix).

Glotfelty characterizes ecocriticism at a greater distance by telling the difference between it and other approaches:

Literary theory, in general, examines the relation between writers, texts, and the world. In most literary theory 'the world' is synonymous with society – the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of 'the world' to include the entire ecosphere. If we agree with Barry Commoner's first law of ecology, 'Everything is connected to everything else,' we must conclude that literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and idea interact. (xix)

Ecocriticism is a unique study which seems to project a natural science and a discipline based on humanistic approach. Glotfelty sheds light on the connection between ecocriticism and humanities. She explains that eco-critics propound various concepts under which they classify the ecological elements in literary works. Hopefully, they can contribute to saving the environment which has been long damaged by human actions. They trace connections between environmental conditions and humanities. In Anthropology, critics search the connection between

people's cultures and geography. Furthermore, a great number of contemporary psychologists explore what links environmental conditions with psychological ills. In philosophy, a lot of subfields have emerged in hope to provide a foundation for sane relations with earth e.g., ethics, deep ecology, social ecology, and, ecofeminism (Glottfelty xxi).

The consequences of human actions have destroyed the beauty and exterminated countless fellow species. The ecocritical work is an awareness that we have come to environmental limits and fears. From different environmental fears, climate change stands unclear and debatable. Many authors take it upon their responsibility to give some kind of awareness of the global warming crisis. The topic of climate disaster is so vital that a new genre has emerged; called climate fiction. This shall be illustrated later on in this paper. However, it's important to draw more details on how important and necessary this environmental threat.

Although scientists have been warning governments and people for decades, it seems as if no action has been taken. Much of the carbon dioxide that humans pressurize into the atmosphere stays there for hundred, or even thousands, of years. Hence, the present warming from carbon and other greenhouse gases launches a chain of enduring consequences which will have disastrous effects in the future.

According to the 2016 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), our planet is suffering catastrophic damage from human activities. In his summary

of the IPCC, Richard S. J. Tol argues that "... the uncertainty is large and right-skewed. Undesirable surprises are more likely than desirable surprises of equal size" (6). His concern is due to the nature of the problem. Though climate warming is controlled by the laws of physics, it is hard to predict the highest of its value. Tol stresses the uncertainty as he continues: "... while it is relatively easy to paint disastrous pictures of the impact of climate change... it is difficult to imagine that climate change would make the world prosperous and peaceful" (6-7).

In *Trauma and the Discourse of Climate Change*, Lee Zimmerman offers a much-needed analysis of what we should be really concerned with when talking about climate change. Zimmerman strongly argues that the denial of the climate catastrophe is a mere reaction to the trauma of the knowledge the threats it postulates to the planet. Zimmerman hopes that "approaching the climate crisis in relation to that term [trauma] might help us think about why it is that... our knowledge of that crisis hasn't yet seemed to sufficiently matter" (12).

As discussed earlier, the disastrous effects of the greenhouse gas emitted in the present will be witnessed in the future, just as the climate warming occurring in the present is a result of emissions in the past. Therefore, climate change is defined by the "inherent latency" by Cathy Caruth, in her *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, defines the experience of trauma. As with Caruth's account of traumatic

history, human-caused climate change “... is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time (17).

Katharina Donne’s contribution to the *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology* offers an ecocritical modernist approach to trauma theory; “in order to define the role of nature in modernist trauma literature.” As an introduction to her ecocritical research on Virginia Woolf, Donne argues that ecocritics have remarked a trend “among (mainly female) modernist writers to “reposition themselves and their traumatic experiences through images of nature.” She states that an ecocritical perspective shows a new side of trauma. It pledges the indifference of trauma theory, “because it sees the human mind in a continuum with an active non-human world.” While an automatically “anthropocentric, psychoanalytical” concept of trauma focuses on shock, “ecocritical approaches show how literary texts subvert this alleged unspeakability” (551).

Another ecocritical approach to trauma is offered by E. Ann Kaplan in her book: *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian film and Fiction*. She believes that current studies need to balance by “exploring the trauma of the future,” which she calls “*pretrauma*” (28). Suggesting that while trauma is usually defined in relation to the effects of something in the past, as in PTSD, she examines trauma as a matter of “pre”, and not only “post”, as in her concept of “Pretraumatic Stress Syndrome.” This concept can be found in “fears about the total collapse of natural

and social environments.” In her account, this “offers a new lens for an expanded trauma theory” (1). She shares her urge to bring the concept of trauma to the climate crisis, which its catastrophic future is in the act of the present. Kaplan hopes that her focus might serve as an “invitation ... to viewers” to start “dealing with the crisis” (150).

From Kaplan’s notion of pretrauma, this research paper builds a focus on the pretraumatic effect of climate change threats on contemporary fiction writers. Kaplan’s concept of “Pretraumatic Stress Syndrome” is evidently present in climate fiction. Cli-fi as a term was first coined in 2007 by the activist and blogger journalist Dan Bloom. To simply defining climate fiction, one may say: it is a climate-change-related dystopian fiction. The contrast of cli-fi and other dystopian themes is that cli-fi is “almost always set in the very near future or even in the present,” thus, implying how real the threats of global warming are. Other recurrent aspects of cli-fi are that the narrative usually “remains on a local level,” although it treats climate change as a global threat, and the narrative focuses on the “nuclear family”; father, mother, and children. These aspects seem to “promote” values of family structure and gender roles “in the face of crisis” (Loock 7; Leyda 12).

All the previously discussed eco-related elements are vital component of Megan Hunter’s depute novel *The End We Start From*. Hunter is a British poet and

writer whose poetry was shortlisted for the Bridport Prize. Her thin novel was her first book which she published in 2017. *The End We Start From* tells the story of a woman in her thirties giving birth to her first child in the midst of a climate catastrophe. A dystopian London is flooded, people are refugees in their own city, and the meaning of home is lost in the dark deep water. The environmental catastrophe syncs the narrator's baby's first 12 months, and according to Hunter: "there's a very particular atmosphere around... the first year of a baby's life for most people, especially their first baby, which is quite surreal. It's quite disorientating. They have a sense of dislocation and a sense of being apart from the rest of the world" ("Chronicles").

Warren defines ecofeminism as "the position that there are important connections-historical, experiential, symbolic, theoretical-between the domination of women and the domination of nature" (125).

Motherhood appears to be central in Hunter's cli-fi. This is a story in which motherhood spurs environmental catastrophe. Niamh Moore states that many writers "have understood women's environmental activism through the lens of maternalism." Mothers are victims of environmental breakdown. Their biological vulnerability and their caring for children make them the first to be affected by natural crises. Moore writes that women as mothers are "victims" on a moral economy and "saviours of the planet". Women as primary carers for children often

come together to act “when they realize that they and/or the children in a community have become ill due to environmental toxicity” (152).

Megan Hunter wrote her poetic cli-fi in the midst of hearing news about the effects of climate change and its uncertain near future, and also about the refugee crisis in the world. All these crises are geographically far from her way of life. However, the “Pretrauma Stress Syndrome” adapted by Kaplan earlier is a great explanation of why Hunter imagined a dystopian climate catastrophe. Hunter explains:

... it definitely led from the thought process that was what would it be like if that happened here? What would it be like if there was an environmental crisis in the U.K., in London? And where would people go and what would it be like? So, it definitely came from what I was seeing and hearing around me, and that's perhaps why it continues to seem relevant in some way because unfortunately those things are ongoing. (“The Interview”)

The theme of climate change and the rising water is recurrent and decisive. The novel begins with the narrator giving birth to her first baby. Her description of her condition is a reflection of the world around here; “the pool of myself spreading slowly past my toes” (i).

Hunter chooses a massive flood to be the moving force of her novel. She says that is “obviously... due to the number of floods that happen across the planet but it also reflects the extent to which we think about water in relation to the beginning of life and the end of life” (“The Interview”).

Her cli-fi is not only a climate crisis. Ecocritical fiction is about the relation between nature and man; including his mythology and religion. *The End We Start From* is full of quotations from myth and religion. Though disconnected from the physical text, Hunter weaves threads of beliefs and myth tangling the narrator’s experience. Hunter’s flood is essential to her point of view. Commenting on the link between the narration with mythology and religion, she states that is “a sense that water has always been at the core of humanity’s imaginings of both its beginning and end. It was also important to me to link the waters of the earth to the waters of the pregnant woman’s body: to connect the primordial with the amniotic” (“Dystopian”).

Climate fiction has been described as the “slow violence”. Scientists have been warning the world but somehow, with all our knowledge of the issue, there is this sort of denial. However, Hunter is one of the eco-concerned that the news and the numbers make something to her. She writes a near future of the climate catastrophe that comes with no warning. Her narrator expresses the terror as “the water is rising faster than they thought. It is creeping faster. A calculation error. A

badly plotted movie, sensors out at sea. We hide under the duvet with a torch like children” (*The End* i).

Numbers and news are not the only sources of Hunter’s pretrauma. As Kaplan suggests, the “Pretrauma Stress Syndrome” is noticed on readers of dystopian fiction or viewers of dystopian films. Speaking to *The Literary Hub*, Hunter suggests: “Even the briefest of glimpses at recent books published or movies made shows that these nightmares are part of our collective consciousness, a near universal sense that the world might, at any moment, be about to tip into oblivion” (“Seeing”).

Hunter’s ecological concerns keep the novel going on. She combines multiple fears altogether. We read through a mother’s journey with all of its concerns and disorientation. Hunter states:

I was just interested in how that atmosphere might be mirrored in a more sort of global situation in a - in really a catastrophe that takes place beyond the level of a single family. So, it was really putting those two ideas together, that - the atmosphere of new motherhood and a kind of dystopian restart of the whole of life that really gave the book is beginning. (‘Dystopian’)

Hunter’s pretrauma of climate disasters started with her from a young age. She explains that her “imagination has been shaped by the prospect of

environmental decline and disaster since childhood” (“Dystopian”). Hunter wrote on the subject of anthropogenic climate change for *The Times Literary Supplement*, in which she details the strength of fiction to be able to grasp the complexities of our ecological concerns, particularly during an age of climate-change denial: “Novels can encompass millennia”, Hunter states, “make imaginative leaps and conjure the impossible. They are, in many senses, the ideal form for a culture trying to get to grips with a new kind of change, and a new image of ourselves, which it may be easier, or more convenient, to ignore” (“Fiction”).

Hunter simply expresses the seriousness of the event through short sentences, sometimes only a word. She writes, “An unprecedented flood. London. Uninhabitable” (*The End* i). Hunter believes these short fragments are a realistic and natural way of narrating in the midst of a life-or-death situation. She wanted her book to be about the ordinary people who run away from the waves; not the typical dystopian hero who runs towards them. Nevertheless, this is an important aspect of cli-fi; the nuclear family is the centre of the events (“The Interview”).

Also, a very important aspect of Hunter’s poetic style of writing is that all her characters do not have full names; the narrator is left nameless while other characters interacting with her only have initials. Hunter felt that “it was necessary for the tone and the atmosphere of the book. There’s one dimension to it which is that it gives a feeling almost of note-taking, a sense that the narrator is jotting

down summaries of this experience.” It gives Hunter the sense of immediacy. Her unnamed narrator is an important aspect of the dystopian novel. She wants her readers to experience these traumatic events “being inside somebody’s head.” Hunter elaborates that this climate catastrophe does not have the time or the space for full names. She adds that “names have almost become irrelevant and everyone’s detached from their previous identities” (“The Interview”).

Hunter’s aim to write a realistic natural narration seems to more invested in what remains in the aftermath of the disaster than the cause of it. This is something that Hunter indicates in her explanation of dystopian fiction. She poses crucial questions: “how would we react in these scenarios – and what does that reaction tell us about ourselves? When the worst happens, what is left? How does life go on?” (“Fiction”).

The traumatic events of the climate disaster require a fight for survival. This book renders survival from a calm unproblematic view. The narrator and her husband R only care about the place to sleep and the food; which make sense to be the most valuable things in a disastrous situation. Hunter’s narrator explains: “We are growing our own vegetables, we are dig-for-victory, we are eco-sustainable heroes. We live on tinned food, and we wait.” But ease doesn’t last as the theme of dislocation and homelessness hover. Hunter explicitly shows that the dangers of climate change are not governmental. Nonetheless, they affect families and their

simplest requirements; home and food. The narrator explains: “The vegetables are still seeds. The cupboards reveal themselves more by the day: their wooden backs, the greying corners we never used to see” (*The End* iii).

Hunter's image of 'flooded London' is a strong element in her cli-fi. She uses recurrent images of “the void, the nothing, the black lapping mouth of the sea and the black arching back of the sky” (*The End* vii). Hunter long believed that climate change is “neglected”. She points out the denial “to varying degrees, that man-made climate change exists”. She believes that the denial is not restricted to governments; however, it is a sort of self-denial or “disavowed”. Those who believe in climate change, in day-to-day life, think of it as a distant possibility (“Fiction”).

In *The End We Start From*, Hunter assures the climate crisis with powerful images of the dystopian London. The narrator describes her baby first experience with the city as it “swims out in front of him, darkly reflective” (ii). The character's sense of dislocation – which is Hunter's attempt to draw attention on the refugee crisis – is very evident in how she describes the city from different perspectives. When the character is away from the city all she sees is “miles and miles of it. The shimmering green-grey-blue terror” (vii). The new mother has a sense of “abandonment”. Nonetheless, she does not feel any satisfaction when she

is back to her once-been-home. She explains: “Our city is here, somewhere, but we are not” (x).

The “distant possibility” of a climate disaster, mentioned earlier by Hunter, is a certain and unexpected. Zimmerman argues that “our current climate system undergoing not merely a linear, gradual, reversible ‘change’ but a relatively swift, irreversible, radical transformation into a different system altogether” (1). Timothy Morton’s suggestion that discovering global warming “is like realizing for some time you had been conducting your business in the expanding sphere of a slow-motion nuclear bomb” (103). These researches openly express the extremity of our present problem.

Writers like Megan Hunter feel a certain responsibility to shed light on the climate change crisis. She is a woman concerned with the future of the environment and the future of her children beforehand. Hunter’s pretrauma explicitly expresses the awaiting horror through her novel. The narrator saying: “The waters are greyer than I was expecting” is an attempt from Hunter to show the readers her concerns and her fear of the future (xii).

Hunter’s fear is transformed through all her characters, including the new born baby. As the mother explains: “he seems to sense the shallowness beneath us, the threatened scrape” (xii). Also, she notices her husband’s depression as “the smiles have sunk down further than we can see” (iii).

The concept of “pretrauma” is transformed from the author to her narrator. Throughout the novel, the narrator expresses a sense of fear and alarm of what is coming. From the early chapters, she explains: “The moment of birth looms ahead of me like the loss of my virginity did, as death does. The inevitable, tucked and waiting out there somewhere” (*The End* i).

The fear of death, the “waiting”, looms in the mind of the narrator at many occasions. The narrator’s fear of the “inevitable” death, is recurrent and apparent. The unnamed expresses her fear of capturing one moment that would make the rest of her life seems like it never happened. As she has flashbacks of when she was eight and how all that is left in her memory is a “mind-photo” of a telegraph pole. She traumatizes herself that she “would do this at the moment of death, that I could trick my whole life away” (i). Another incident involves her child-self pretraumatized of somehow sleepwalking and killing herself. She writes: “I wondered if I would clamber for the knives, without knowing it. If I might do it in my sleep. I wondered if I might put one into myself, in the smother of night, in the huge dark space that followed bedtime” (vi).

Pretrauma is also apparent in the narrator’s childhood thoughts. She indicates that she has been chosen for that particular time; “the ending times. The creeping times” (i). Her fear of death moves from fear for her life to her child’s as she would look down the window to the dark terrifying water and imagine his death.

She says that “the scenarios for his death are the most vivid daydreams I have ever had” (xi).

Hunter provokes her narrator’s pretrauma with threads of others’ death. The new mother and R experience the loss of his parents respectively. Threads of death are tangled with the flood in every news and knowledge of the disaster.

It is clearly seen how traumatized the narrator feels whenever she comes across the news channel. The news is bad “as it always was, forever, but worse. More relevant. This is what you don’t want, we realize. What no one ever wanted: for the news to be relevant”. Hunter likens the unwanted, yet very true, news to shattered glass. The narrator changes the channel as if she sweeps it away before it cuts them. Hunter uses words such as “the quickness” and “the confusion”, which draws more details to her pretrauma. The narrator is shocked by “the way dead people’s feet stick up like that under sheets, as though giving a final salute” (iii).

Death in *The End We Start From* is rational in times of environmental catastrophes. For death is the most foreseeable outcome for the denial of climate change crisis. As Louise Squire explains in *Extending Ecocriticism*:

No matter the wider cost, humanity would overcome its mortal limitations. The outcome, however, of this refusal to die — this rejection of natural laws — turns out to be death itself, since the

abuses of planetary resources upon which death denial relies cause the promise of death to rebound upon humanity. (14)

Additionally, Kaplan turns mainly to “the always reliable Sigmund Freud” and his “theories about anxiety and the death drive as a way to understand why humans seem unable to move forward to mitigate their drastic negative impact on the planet” (6).

Hunter’s pretrauma is also represented in her description of the loss of time and place. Time is no longer felt or relevant in Hunter’s novel. The narrator thinks of the days as “thin now, stretched so much that time pours through them”. Also, she points out that quietness will no longer be a desire; instead, it is a fear; “the quiet in the house has matured from quiet as lack of noise to something else, a textured, grainy quiet, a thickness to stumble through” (iii).

Finally, pretrauma can be very crystal clear in motherhood. It is mother’s love and concern that exceeds all kinds of fear. No matter how horrible the environmental disaster is, it is the mother and her baby in their own parted world. *The End We Start From* examines how motherhood can be dystopian at some points. Hunter mirrors motherhood and a climate disaster. Her intent is that “the mother is made vulnerable by her new motherhood but is also strengthened by it... there is a sense that she has to survive, that she can keep going” (“Dystopian”).

Hunter's point can be seen thoroughly in her book. The narrator explains how her baby Z holding her to earth. Z has given her "a purpose". Her hope during these catastrophic times is Z. He is "feeding" her with a new beginning. The mother's pretrauma does not let her be at ease. She questions if her milk will last long enough for her baby (ii-iii).

In conclusion, the climate change is a very serious environmental crisis. Climate change is a frightening prospect; focusing solely on the negative consequences would not benefit anyone. It is important to be aware of the seriousness and urgency of the climate crisis, but seeing it solely as a challenge can make us feel fearful and helpless. Instead, we must reframe the climate crisis as an opportunity to build a sustainable future, agree that change is an inevitable fact of life, and work through our mixed emotions about climate change. According to the American Psychological Association, these are all ways to build emotional strength, and climate fiction will assist us in doing so. Climate change is also having a huge effect on human life because it affects all facets of the environment. Increased average global surface temperatures, increasing sea levels, thawing permafrost and melting ice sheets, desertification, ocean acidification, loss of biodiversity, and extreme weather events such as excessive precipitation or droughts, heatwaves, and the resulting wildfires are all events that scientists believe have either occurred or will occur in the future. A sustained rise in average temperatures could pose a

significant threat to life on Earth as we know it in the long run. There is no such thing as a magic bullet solution to an issue as large and complex as the climate crisis. But we will need all the support we can get to fight for a better future and adapt to our changing world. Climate fiction can be a valuable resource. Humans have a variety of effects on the physical world, including overpopulation, waste, fossil fuel combustion, and deforestation. Climate change, soil degradation, poor air quality, and undrinkable water have all been caused by changes like these. These negative consequences may affect human nature, resulting in mass migrations or wars for clean water.

The threats are rising as the world starts to witness present effects of climate warming. More than ever, climate fiction is a very important tool to shed the light on the denial of the crisis. Megan Hunter's fear of a climate disaster is shared by many writers around the world. The threats are so pretraumatizing that the characters live through a dystopian future of environmental crisis. The ecocritical studies of dystopian climate futures can help spread awareness amongst ecocritics and fiction readers. Hopefully, the denial halts.

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