



Reimagining Nature: Ecological Crisis, Human Identity, and Environmental Consciousness in Canadian Literature

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Abstract – Canadian literature has long been shaped by the country's diverse landscapes, including forests, rivers, oceans, Arctic regions, and rural environments. In contemporary Canadian writing, however, nature is increasingly represented not merely as a scenic background or national symbol but as an active force connected with human identity, cultural memory, ecological crisis, and survival. This paper examines the reimagining of nature in Canadian literature through an ecocritical perspective, focusing on the changing relationship between human beings and the natural environment. Particular attention is given to 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 present different representations of environmental degradation, climate change, technological intervention, colonialism, Indigenous ecological knowledge, and community survival. The analysis demonstrates that contemporary Canadian literature challenges anthropocentric assumptions by presenting humans as deeply embedded within ecological systems. The selected Indigenous texts further broaden ecological discourse by emphasizing reciprocity, land-based identity, cultural memory, and collective responsibility. Atwood's speculative fiction highlights the consequences of technological control over biological life, while Dimaline and Rice connect ecological instability with Indigenous survival and colonial histories. Maracle's work foregrounds relational understandings of humans, land, animals, and community. The study argues that Canadian literature contributes to environmental consciousness by transforming nature from a passive literary setting into an active participant in questions of identity, ethics, survival, and social justice.

Keywords – Canadian Literature, Environmental Consciousness, Nature, Indigenous Literature, Climate Change, Anthropocentrism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nature occupies a distinctive position in Canadian literary imagination. The vast forests, Arctic landscapes, lakes, rivers, mountains, and coastal environments of Canada have historically influenced the country's literature and cultural identity. Earlier representations frequently positioned nature as wilderness, landscape, geographical challenge, or national symbol. Contemporary Canadian literature, however, increasingly questions these conventional representations. Environmental degradation, climate change, biodiversity loss, resource extraction, technological intervention, and Indigenous struggles for land and cultural survival have transformed the literary understanding of nature.

Ecocriticism provides an appropriate framework for examining this transformation because it investigates the relationship between literary texts and the physical environment. Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) established ecocriticism as an interdisciplinary approach that places ecological relationships at the centre of literary interpretation. Buell (1995) further emphasized the importance of environmental imagination and ethical relationships between humans and the non-human world.

The Canadian context is particularly significant because environmental questions are closely connected with colonial history, Indigenous knowledge, resource economies, and national identity. Contemporary Canadian

writers increasingly challenge the assumption that humans exist separately from nature. Instead, their works portray human identity as being shaped by landscapes, ecological systems, animals, climate, memory, and place.

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* presents a technologically dominated future in which genetic engineering and consumer capitalism contribute to ecological catastrophe. Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song* offers a different ecological perspective based on relationality and Indigenous understandings of place. Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* connects environmental collapse with colonial violence and Indigenous survival, while Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* examines the vulnerability of modern technological systems and the importance of community and traditional knowledge.

The present paper therefore explores how Canadian literature reimagines nature through three interconnected dimensions: ecological crisis, human identity, and environmental consciousness.

II. REIMAGINING NATURE IN CANADIAN LITERARY IMAGINATION

The literary representation of nature has undergone a significant transformation in Canadian writing. Nature was traditionally represented through concepts such as wilderness, frontier, exploration, isolation, and national identity. Such representations often placed humans at the



centre and treated the natural environment as something to be explored, conquered, described, or possessed. Contemporary literature increasingly questions this anthropocentric framework.

The reimagining of nature involves recognizing that ecological environments are not passive spaces. Forests, rivers, animals, climate systems, oceans, and landscapes influence human experience and participate in the formation of identity. This shift corresponds with contemporary ecocritical thought, which emphasizes interdependence between human and non-human life.

Soper and Bradley's work on Canadian ecocriticism demonstrates the importance of environmental perspectives in understanding Canadian literary traditions. Canadian ecological writing increasingly intersects with Indigenous studies, postcolonial studies, bioregionalism, animal studies, and environmental justice.

In contemporary fiction, nature is frequently represented through crisis. Drought, ecological collapse, disappearing species, extreme weather, food insecurity, and energy disruption become narrative conditions that force characters to reconsider their relationship with the environment. Such narratives move beyond romantic descriptions of landscape and instead ask ethical questions: Who has the right to use land? What happens when ecosystems collapse? How does environmental destruction affect identity? What forms of knowledge can support survival?

The transformation can be represented as follows:

Table 1. Transformation in the Representation of Nature

Traditional representation	Contemporary representation
Nature as wilderness	Nature as ecological system
Nature as landscape	Nature as active presence
Nature as resource	Nature as interdependent life
Human domination	Human dependence
Individual experience	Collective ecological experience
Nature as national symbol	Nature as ethical concern
Human-centred perspective	More-than-human perspective
Environmental description	Environmental consciousness

III. ECOLOGICAL CRISIS AND THE FRAGILITY OF HUMAN CIVILIZATION

Ecological crisis is one of the most powerful mechanisms through which contemporary Canadian writers question human assumptions about environmental control. Climate change, biotechnology, pollution, resource exploitation, and energy dependence reveal the vulnerability of modern civilization.

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* provides a particularly significant example. The novel constructs a future shaped

by genetic engineering, corporate science, consumerism, and environmental destruction. Human beings attempt to redesign biological life according to their technological and commercial interests. However, this attempt at control ultimately contributes to catastrophic consequences.

Atwood's ecological dystopia demonstrates that technological advancement without ethical responsibility can intensify environmental vulnerability. Bergthaller (2010) connects Atwood's fiction with questions of sustainability and the difficulty of maintaining human societies within planetary ecological limits.

The novel consequently challenges the assumption that nature can be completely controlled. The manipulation of animals, plants, and human biology demonstrates the dangers of treating living systems as technological objects. Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* presents ecological crisis from a different perspective. Climate disruption is intertwined with political violence and Indigenous dispossession. Xausa (2020) argues that the novel challenges universalizing accounts of the Anthropocene by connecting ecological catastrophe with colonial histories.

Table 2. Ecological Crisis in Selected Canadian Fiction

Literary work	Crisis represented	Major consequence
<i>Oryx and Crake</i>	Biotechnology and ecological destruction	Collapse of civilization
<i>Celia's Song</i>	Cultural and ecological disruption	Loss and recovery of relational knowledge
<i>The Marrow Thieves</i>	Climate catastrophe	Displacement and Indigenous survival
<i>Moon of the Crusted Snow</i>	Energy and infrastructure failure	Community vulnerability

IV. NATURE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF HUMAN IDENTITY

Nature is not simply an external environment in contemporary Canadian literature; it is closely associated with the formation of human identity. Characters understand themselves through relationships with land, community, animals, memory, and place.

In Indigenous Canadian literature, this relationship becomes particularly significant because land is connected with cultural identity and historical continuity. Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song* challenges a strict division between human beings and the natural world. The narrative emphasizes relationships among humans, animals, spirits, community, and place. De Riso (2021) highlights the importance of coexistence and relationality in Maracle's work.



This relational understanding differs from a model in which land is regarded primarily as property or economic resource. Instead, identity emerges through relationships with place. The environment becomes part of cultural memory.

Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* similarly connects land, Indigenous identity, memory, and survival. The displacement of Indigenous communities is simultaneously physical, cultural, and ecological. The loss of homeland threatens not only physical security but also cultural continuity.

Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* further demonstrates how place becomes central to community identity. When modern infrastructure fails, the community's relationship with its local environment becomes increasingly important. The following conceptual relationship emerges:

Land → Memory → Culture → Identity → Community → Survival

This demonstrates that environmental consciousness is not simply about protecting an external environment. It also concerns the preservation of the cultural and relational systems through which people understand themselves.

V. INDIGENOUS ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE AND RELATIONALITY

One of the most significant contributions of contemporary Canadian literature is the increasing visibility of Indigenous ecological perspectives. Indigenous literary texts frequently challenge the Western division between human beings and the natural world. Land is understood through relationships, responsibilities, memory, spirituality, and community.

Maracle's *Celia's Song* provides an important example of this relational framework. Human beings are not presented as isolated individuals existing outside ecological systems. Instead, relationships among people, animals, land, and community become central to the narrative.

Similarly, Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* emphasizes storytelling, traditional knowledge, community, and cultural memory as resources for survival. The novel demonstrates that ecological survival cannot be separated from cultural survival.

Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* also emphasizes local knowledge when technological systems collapse. The community's ability to survive depends partly upon its understanding of land, seasons, food, hunting, cooperation, and community relationships.

Table 3. Indigenous Ecological Perspectives

Element	Conventional anthropocentric view	Relational ecological view
Land	Property/resource	Relation and responsibility
Animals	Objects/resources	Co-inhabitants

Knowledge	Scientific/technical	Multiple knowledge systems
Survival	Individual	Collective
Identity	Individual/social	Place-based and relational
Environment	External	Integral to life
Responsibility	Human-centred	Reciprocal

These literary representations demonstrate that Indigenous ecological knowledge offers an important alternative to purely instrumental relationships with the environment.

VI. TECHNOLOGY, CONSUMERISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Contemporary Canadian literature frequently examines the connection between technology and ecological crisis. Technology itself is not necessarily represented as inherently destructive; rather, the texts question the social and economic systems within which technology operates. In *Oryx and Crake*, biotechnology represents the extreme extension of human control over biological systems. Scientific innovation becomes closely associated with corporate power and consumer culture. Atwood therefore raises questions about the ethical boundaries of technological intervention.

The novel's ecological catastrophe suggests that technological solutions cannot automatically resolve problems created by excessive consumption and human domination. Scientific knowledge without ethical responsibility may instead intensify ecological risk.

Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* approaches technology from another direction. The sudden disappearance of electricity and communication demonstrates how dependent modern communities have become on complex technological infrastructure. The crisis reveals that technological convenience can conceal human dependence on energy and ecological systems.

These texts therefore create a productive tension between technology and ecological consciousness.

Table 4. Technology and Environment

Aspect	<i>Oryx and Crake</i>	<i>Moon of the Crusted Snow</i>
Technology	Genetic engineering	Electricity and communication
Main issue	Excessive control	Excessive dependence
Environmental effect	Ecological catastrophe	Infrastructure vulnerability
Human response	Technological manipulation	Community adaptation
Critical question	Can nature be controlled?	Can humans survive without modern systems?



VII. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

Environmental consciousness in contemporary Canadian literature involves more than awareness of pollution or climate change. It involves recognizing the ethical relationships connecting human beings, communities, ecosystems, and future generations.

The selected texts repeatedly challenge individualistic approaches to ecological problems. Survival depends upon collective responsibility. In *The Marrow Thieves*, cultural knowledge and community relationships become essential to survival. In *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, cooperation becomes increasingly important as external systems disappear.

This emphasis on community challenges the idea that environmental problems can be solved solely through individual lifestyle changes. Literary narratives reveal that ecological systems are collective systems, and therefore environmental responsibility also has collective dimensions.

Atwood's fiction provides a contrasting warning. In *Oryx and Crake*, individual ambition and corporate technological power contribute to a broader ecological catastrophe. The novel therefore demonstrates what can happen when human desires are separated from ecological responsibility.

Environmental consciousness consequently involves three levels:

Individual awareness → Community responsibility → Ecological ethics

The literary value of these texts lies in their ability to transform environmental problems into human experiences. Climate change and ecological destruction become questions of home, memory, identity, survival, and justice.

VIII. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

A comparison of the selected texts reveals both commonalities and important differences in their representations of nature.

Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* emphasizes the destructive consequences of technological domination. Nature is transformed through genetic engineering, and human beings ultimately experience the consequences of attempting to redesign biological systems.

Maracle's *Celia's Song* offers a relational alternative. Rather than positioning humans above nature, the novel emphasizes coexistence and interconnectedness.

Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* adds the dimension of environmental justice. Ecological catastrophe cannot be separated from colonial history and Indigenous dispossession.

Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* focuses on dependence and community. The collapse of modern infrastructure

reveals the importance of local ecological knowledge and collective survival.

Table 5. Comparative Ecocritical Analysis

Dimension	Atwood	Maracle	Dimaline	Rice
Nature	Manipulated	Relational	Homeland	Life-support system
Main crisis	Biotechnology	Cultural/ecological disruption	Climate + colonialism	Energy collapse
Human position	Controller	Participant	Survivor	Community member
Knowledge	Scientific/technological	Indigenous relational	Traditional + communal	Local/Indigenous
Main concern	Technological domination	Coexistence	Environmental justice	Community resilience
Ecological vision	Warning	Reciprocity	Resistance	Adaptation

IX. DISCUSSION

The analysis demonstrates that contemporary Canadian literature is actively transforming the cultural meaning of nature. The movement is not simply from one literary style to another; it represents a deeper reconsideration of the relationship between human beings and the more-than-human world.

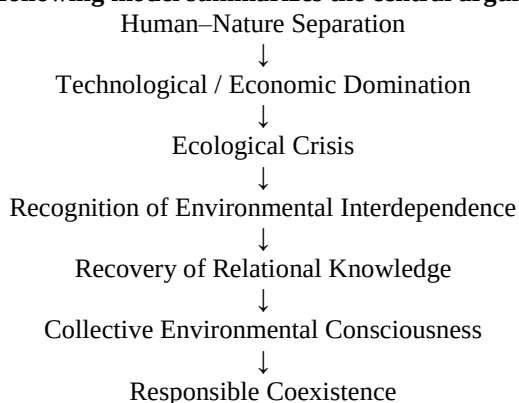
Three major patterns emerge. First, nature increasingly possesses narrative agency. Environmental conditions influence characters, communities, and possible futures. Second, human identity is increasingly represented as ecologically embedded. People understand themselves through relationships with land, animals, climate, memory, and community. Third, ecological crisis is increasingly understood through questions of justice and history.

The Indigenous texts are particularly important because they challenge universal accounts of environmental responsibility. They demonstrate that environmental destruction has different consequences for different communities and that colonial histories remain relevant to contemporary ecological questions.

The literature also complicates the relationship between technological development and environmental consciousness. Atwood presents technological domination as dangerous, while Rice demonstrates the vulnerability produced by technological dependence. Together, these works suggest that environmental consciousness requires not a complete rejection of technology but a more ethically responsible understanding of technological power.



The following model summarizes the central argument:



Thus, contemporary Canadian literature functions as a cultural space in which readers can reconsider what it means to be human in an ecologically changing world.

X. CONCLUSION

Contemporary Canadian literature demonstrates a significant transformation in the representation of nature. Nature is increasingly removed from the position of passive scenery and placed at the centre of questions concerning identity, survival, culture, technology, justice, and ethics. Through the works of Margaret Atwood, Lee Maracle, Cherie Dimaline, and Waubgeshig Rice, ecological crisis becomes a means of examining the limitations of anthropocentrism and the consequences of treating the natural world primarily as a resource.

The selected works demonstrate different but interconnected approaches to environmental consciousness. Atwood exposes the ecological consequences of technological domination; Maracle foregrounds relationality and coexistence; Dimaline connects environmental catastrophe with colonial histories and Indigenous survival; and Rice emphasizes community, place, and dependence upon ecological systems. The study therefore argues that reimagining nature also means reimagining human identity. Human beings are not independent observers of the environment but participants within complex ecological relationships. Contemporary Canadian literature makes this interdependence visible by connecting environmental change with cultural memory, community, land, technology, and survival.

In this sense, Canadian literature contributes significantly to contemporary environmental thought. It does not merely describe ecological crisis; it invites readers to reconsider how humans understand their place within the living world and how literature can participate in developing a more responsible environmental consciousness.

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