

ECOLOGICAL DECLINE AND UNDYING HOPE OF REDEMPTION IN CHARLOTTE MCCONAGHY'S *MIGRATIONS*

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ABSTRACT

Among the many man-made disasters, climate criminality booms as the biggest threat to humanity itself. It indicates the wrongdoings man to nature and environment. The disastrous consequences are met by human and the nonhuman world. In her novel, *Migrations* Charlotte McConaghy depicts both the physical and the psychological conflicts, undergone by the Arctic terns and the human beings. The narrative is built around the tumultuous past and the unwavering determination of the female protagonist. The backdrop of the novel is the world in the near-future on the threshold of ecological collapse. Having been troubled by in her personal life, Franny Stone, the protagonist sets on a journey to the Arctic region to track the world's last flock of Arctic terns. In its course, the novel highlights the defencelessness of the migratory species to the threatening environmental changes. McConaghy underscores the need of preserving biodiversity and protecting its habitats, forced to a critical condition. The novel is a clarion call to the readers, urging them to confront the ecological crisis, unfolding around them and take meaningful action to safeguard the planet for future generations. The novel urges the necessity to reconsider human relationship with the natural world and recognize individual's shared responsibility in protecting and preserving the delicate balance of life on Earth.

The present study attempts to explore the complex and restless nature of Franny Stone, who is propelled by the indomitable desire to connect herself with the natural world, unmindful of the perilous journey.

Key Words: Climate criminality, unwavering determination, vulnerability of migratory species.

Introduction:

The world needs immediate and exclusive knowledge on certain neglected issues and concerns in the present century. In her novels, Charlotte McConaghy explores the complexities of human nature, the vulnerability of the planet and the power of hope. Her most popular novel, *Migrations* highlights the climatic change and its impact on the universe, the negated traumatic experiences of the human and the nonhuman world. The novel opens a new window through which one could witness the grim future,

awaiting the world. Annabel Gutterman states, “In understanding how nature can heal us, McConaghy underlines why it urgently needs to be protected.” (Gutterman, 2020, p 99)

Franny Stone, the protagonist of the novel starts her physical journey to the Arctic regions to trail the Arctic terns. The depredations of the past and her memory loaded with ever fresh wounds have driven her to repressed trauma. She is in dire need of an outlet to her present conflicts and painful conditions. McCaughey is successful in paralleling the lost life of Franny with the increasing climatic crisis.

Significance of Study:

Migrations needs special attention and exploration as the two main aspects are handled in a reflective manner simultaneously in the plot. Franny Stone navigates in a world of personal grief. At the same time, the physical world is traverses through is ecological grief. Franny experiences the pain of personal abandonment and death. The world faces ecological devastation. The plight of Franny resembles the miserable condition of the terns. The study proves that the degradation in the environment is sure to lead both the human and the nonhuman world to hazardous condition in a gradual manner. The Arctic terns, the agents of the nonhuman world are in entrapment and captivity. Franny reacts to their plight and thus draws the attention and respect of the readers to the species. Jessica Murray appreciates the interaction of the human world with its nonhuman counterparts and thus pay “and affirm the value of their animal lives”. (Murray, 2021, pp. 15-33)

Theoretical Framework:

In *Migrations*, McConaghy depicts a world, with her futuristic vision in which human beings have destroyed their environment to the point of no return. To substantiate it, she has placed animal extinction and the protagonist’s resilient character at the centre of the plot. Franny Stone, the instinctual character represents the theme of loss, environmental collapse, and the void in human connection. Her journey in search of the Arctic terns mirrors her own emotional trauma and the need for redemption. The narration highlights the human impact on nature and the search for purpose in a broken world. Franny is pictures as a troubled bird enthusiast; she retains an intense, self-destructive desire to wander. Her haunted past, which was filled with traumatic experiences and her fascination to the sea, drives her to take up the risky adventure. By nature, Franny is passionate and fragile. She is in communion with the non-human world; yet, she struggles with human connection and intimacy. It is evident that she flees stability quite often and causes damage and friction in her marital relationship with Niall, her husband.

More than her ecological concern for nature, Franny believes strongly that she is destined to be a part of the natural world. She is of the notion that she could attain redemption through her perilous journey. She attempts to find sense of home by following the path of the terns.

The Miserable Past:

Franny Stone lives in a dystopian future. Most of the birds have become extinct from her world. She undertakes utmost risk of following the last migration of Arctic terns across the ocean from Greenland to Antarctica. After convincing Ennis Malone, the captain of a fishing boat, she joins as a crew member. Malone assures that the terns will point out the location of fish, their prey. His concern is only for increased

fishing. He reveals the crude reality to Franny that along with the terns the fish also is in the cusp of extinction.

The climate apocalypse presented in *Migrations* can be compared with the internal struggles and desperation of Franny. Franny has a dark past history, which has converted her into a damaged, unpredictable and violent character. In addition, she suffers from insomnia, which is a risky condition in a fishing boat. Her turbulent Irish childhood was packed with childhood trauma, when she was ordained to live without a mother. The tragic loss of her stillborn child has thrown her to a state of severe restlessness and mental instability. She prefers escapism as her broken condition has compelled her to perceive her known people as demons. Since her childhood, Franny has an inherent, wild impulse to wander. Surrendering herself to the force of her impulse, Franny goes away from her home. Her mother ended her life out of abandonment. Being unable to bear with the trauma, Franny deceives herself by blaming her dead mother as a woman who abandoned her child. Her married life with Niall, the ornithologist could not last long as it resulted in the birth of a stillborn daughter. This profound grief fractured her marital life and worsened her mental well-being. At one stage, her deteriorated condition drives her to commit crimes like choking her husband. On the whole, the life history of Franny evidences that her decision to follow the Arctic terns on their final migration is not just an ornithological quest. It is her attempt to outrun her tragic guilt.

It can be elicited that Franny's wild nature propels her to wander, resembling the wild migration of the terns. It can be derived as an act of escapism from her haunting past. Franny had been a destitute after the imprisonment of her father and the abandonment by her mother. She was in the compulsion to move from Ireland to Australia to spend her days with her grandmother. But, Franny is driven to still more pathetic end by the loveless home at Australia. The adolescent period of Franny gives her the desire to find her mother in Ireland. Her frantic search at Australia is stopped by Niall, who reminds her of her mother's death during her infancy. It is a strange psychological fact that Franny has repressed the crude reality of her mother's death.

Franny's Ardent Desire and Journey:

Franny Stone reaches Greenland meaning to get work on the Saghani fishing ship. She is hopeful of utilizing the last chance to track the flock of Arctic terns on their migration from Greenland to Antarctica. Ennis Malone, the captain of the ship is in his desperate effort to find fish. The crude reality strikes that most living beings, including fishes have gone extinct by the unsustainable life style of the human beings. Franny convinces Ennis saying pursuit of the terns will lead them to fish. Thus she gets a chance to board the ship. Franny, in her heart of heart is against people like Ennis who cause the destruction of the planet by their act of fishing. To fulfil her desire to follow the three tracked Arctic terns across their voyage through the Atlantic Ocean, Franny pretends to be in compliance with the present business of Ennis.

On boarding the ship, Franny finds the crew, composed of a myriad of different cultures and personalities. She introduces herself as an ornithologist from the University of Galway Ireland. The narration indicates later that Franny she has never gone to University but was working as a janitor there. Her fascination to birds has drawn her to the seminar conducted by Niall Lynch, an ornithologist. His elaborate

and illuminating talk on the destructive impact of humans on the animal world bewitched her and leads to her love and marriage. Franny could not settle in her marital life because her nature is that of a wanderer; she changes her place constantly to discover distant places. Her marital relationship is sustained only through letter communication. Whenever, she is tormented by nightmares, Franny pours out her emotions and conflicts in her letters to Niall. But the irony is she never posts these letters.

The sail of Franny and the crew goes well, tracking two of the terns. Unfortunately, a huge storm breaks out and destroys the life of the birds. The severe injury caused to Samuel by the mysterious uproar of the storm breaks the aim of the crew, one of the crew members is severely injured. They are in a hurry to head to Newfoundland to restore Samuel to his family. In the midst of activists, who blame them of swindling the resources of the sea, they reach the home of Samuel. Franny is amazed to the peculiar life style of Samuel's family; they live with their children in a lighthouse; their survival and reliance depends on the vegetation by their effort.

Franny and the crew become aware that commercial fishing prohibited in Newfoundland. As it is considered an illegal act, severe penalty will be laid to the offenders. The seriousness of the issue hits the crew. It goes to the extreme level that Franny is attacked brutally by one of the activists. However, she defends herself and kills the man. After this unexpected trouble, the crew escapes from Newfoundland as fugitives along with Franny on the Saghani. The members are resolved not to give up their attempt of tracking the last of the Arctic terns.

The mystery behind the invulnerability of Franny in murdering a man causes perplexity among the crew. Comprehending the need to reveal her past, Franny speaks out how murder has been normalized by her. She admits that she is not an ornithologist. She has spent a part of her life in prison for causing the accidental death of Niall and another woman. She invited her own imprisonment out of her guilty conscience and traumatic experience. Just before the car accident, Niall and Franny have spent time in Scotland at the Wildlife Conservation, a place for last chosen animals. Niall has come out with his wish that after his death, his ashes must be spread in Antarctica, where the Arctic terns mate. He is of the strong belief that if the Arctic terns extinct, the universe will be lost the next moment.

As the crew listens to Franny's past with rapt attention, their journey is stopped by one crew members calling the police on Franny. By the help extended by the other members, Franny escapes from the Saghani in a small boat along with Ennis. They desperately continue their voyage and reach Antarctica eventually. They could sense the unusual climate change in the Antarctic region. Fortunately, they locate many Arctic terns, fish and other animals, which are believed to be extinct. The level of Franny's hope increases and she regains her strength to fight and rebuild the earth.

Franny's Unwavering Decision:

As a novelist, McConaghy is successful in presenting a nuanced and multi-dimensional portrayal of Franny. The inner turmoil and fierce resilience of the woman is pictured with sensitivity and depth. Franny has met with personal tragedy. Yet, without losing hope, she seeks redemption and retains a sense of purpose. The journey of Franny symbolizes the lost identity and sense of belonging in the staggering world, edging on the verge of its collapse. Her relationship with her fellow crew members is complex. The

emotional resonance, occurring in the course of the narrative enables the readers empathize the struggles of Franny. McConaghy weaves themes of loss, redemption, and environmental urgency. By portraying the intricacies of human nature, she exposes the fragility of the plane.

Franny is pictured as a determined woman, ready to face the personal and the climatic issues that have been engulfing her. The Arctic Terns are on their last migration route, moving towards extinction due to global warming. Franny has undertaken the perilous journey not only due to her love for the community of birds but also to fulfil the last wish of her dead husband. His ardent love for the terns has already been expressed to Franny, saying, “If there are no terns left, I would like to be buried, so that my body can give its energy back to the earth...” (*Migrations* 245)

Franny is caught up in domestic, psychological and emotional situations, from which she wishes to move on. The narrative starts with her first move from her house after the demise of her mother; the dysfunctional domestic life, imposed by her grandmother drives her again out of home; the grief of losing her child added with the psychological trauma of losing her parents makes her emotionally detached from the society around her; the final physical move of Franny happens, when she escapes from the prison. Franny is not to be branded as a murderer; she was the cause for the death of two people accidentally. Her acceptance of imprisonment is a sort of redemption to her. The caged life in the prison, filled with abuse and pain created utmost discomfort to her. Comprehending Franny’s basic instinct to enjoy a life of liberty, one of the inmates in the prison advises her as, “Don’t die in here. Not in a cage. Get free and die if you have to” (*Migrations* 139) The urge for freedom has initiated her voyage to trace the final migration of the Arctic Terns.

The narrative of *Migrations* oscillates between the past and the present of Franny Stone. Her past has been tumultuous. Yet, she exhibits unwavering determination in the present. Her physical journey is the tool used to explicate the environmental challenges, faced by the world. She is determined to protect the fragile ecosystems. The course of her journey underscores the interconnectedness of species as well as the whole ecosystem.

There is a ray of similarity between the wandering nature of Franny and the migration of the Arctic Terns. Wandering is the basic quality of the species; they prefer wandering in spite of their sensing of the climatic displacement and the starvation out of scarcity of food. Movement is the intrinsic trait of birds; McConaghy parallels that characteristic with that of human beings. This may seem to be a far-fetched semblance between both the beings; yet, it serves the purpose of interconnecting the human and the nonhuman world. This interconnection, extended by the writer facilitates a common ground for negotiation and comprehension. McConaghy’s projection of mobility as a characteristic of the human world is not anthropocentric in its approach. He views the act of mobility as an extension of the basic trait of birds.

Conclusion:

The novel brings forth to the view of the world that major portion of the wildlife of the world has become extinct due to human caused climate change. Franny, the amateur ornithologist follows the migrating terns out of her personal reasons. The life span of the Arctic terns is about thirty years; yet, within

the short duration of their life time and their tiny stature, they migrate by flying nearly 19,000 miles. Niall, a professor in Ireland is fascinated by the life history of the terns. He is worried about the hazardous impacts on the birds; he considers human beings to be a plague on nature. He witnesses Franny, who was not ready to touch a dead bird at the beginning. Later, she is involved in a car accident and checks the condition of the dead woman.

At the end of the fiction, Franny and Ennis, the captain of the ship make it to Antarctica. Having found out that the ship becomes useless on the ice-covered sea, they walk on the ice itself for three days and reach the natural sanctuary of Arctic terns. Franny feels content that she has reached her migratory conclusion. She jumps into the sea, considering it her grave. The realization strikes her that human beings need not be plague to nature; they can nurture it, instead. She rises out of her negative situation with the hope of staying ashore and seeking a way to alter the environment of our present world where human beings exist. .

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