

Nature, Magic, and Loss: Addressing Climate Change through *When Fairyland Lost Its Magic*

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Abstract

Fairytales are a form of storytelling that convey universal themes of love, loss, desire, and nature. They draw readers into a world full of fanciful and wondrous characters to spark their imagination. Retelling fairytales has become a modern trend selected by writers to help them cope with the complexities of the fast-paced world around them, one of them being climate change and its unceasing effect. Writers like Bijal Vachharajani have found their way to come to terms with and challenge the Anthropocentric worldview. Her book *When Fairyland Lost Its Magic* (2023) with illustrations by Rajiv Eipe is a climate narrative that retells select fairy tales for children. The book depicts the threat of climate change as a real-world issue in a magical setting creating a unique blend of new and old, real and magical. This paper takes up an interdisciplinary approach to investigate the use of magical narratives to address the climate crisis and its ongoing impact.

Keywords: Anthropocene, climate change, cli-fi, fairy tales, magical realism

Introduction

Fairytales are one of the oldest forms of storytelling generally intended for children. The magical setting with its fantastical characters has always sparked the imagination and provided children with an outlet for various real-world experiences. A child also gets exposed to concepts like story, structure, characters, and plot that support their ability to make predictions and comprehend unique storytelling. Its stripped-

down form of storytelling represents a common metaphorical language that lets us connect in a way that can break the boundaries of time and culture. Through its familiar symbols and metaphors, a fairy tale allows us to discuss the dark and uncertain aspects of human existence.

Fairytales promote “moral imagination” and introduce children to characters with whom they can identify their struggles and exercise imaginative freedom with responsibility. They encourage a child to observe and become acquainted with nature. All fairytales concern themselves with a moral, universal truth presenting a “magic” that goes beyond physical or biological sciences. They invite us to make correlations between the imaginary world and the world we live in and make an attempt to resonate with the deepest qualities of humanity, where the power of freedom is limited by the mystery of morality and virtue. Using a compelling narrative, fairy tales position the moral law of nature above all.

The interconnectedness of fairytale elements gives the writer the creative freedom to reinvent multiple facets of the story. A single story can always be reinterpreted and repackaged in a plethora of ways for various audiences. *The Lunar Chronicles* created by Marissa Meyer (2012-2015) and the *Whatever After* series (2012 onwards) by Sarah Mlynowski are interesting examples of how deconstruction and reframing can offer new approaches to the retellings (Tablang, 2022). *The Lunar Chronicles* picks up fairy tale characters and reimagines them in an inter-galactic sci-fi world with cyborgs and an interplanetary plague, while the *Whatever After* series approaches fairy tales with light-hearted comedy. Thus, any modern retelling of a story allows us to choose the most applicable aspects of the old tale and meld them with contemporary concerns to appeal to the present audience. It is this critical, thought-provoking potential of the re-telling that makes them as compelling as they are, as has been variously pointed out by critics like Aidee Ladnier (2021) and Caitlin Berve (2022). To quote Mollie Ehrenberg, “...retellings allow for the story to grow and evolve through the years. They still have the fairytale charm that attracts kids but with a new to draw adults in and see what has changed.” (cited in Tablang, 2022, para 14).

A writer of children’s books and a climate activist based in Bangalore, Bijal Vachharajani has attempted to do the same in *When Fairyland Lost Its Magic* (2023). The illustrations by Rajiv Eipe bring alive the creative vision of the writer. This set of retellings aims to use the old methods of

storytelling to depict the current and future scenarios of humanity that would soon succumb to the disastrous effects of global warming and drastic climate change. The book focuses on shedding light on the grim and dark realities of the Anthropocene, calling out to various generations to act sooner against the disastrous effects of climate change.

This paper analyzes how fairytales can be used as climate discourse to challenge the invisible and gradual impact of human greed and exploitation on the environment. It employs the theoretical framework proposed by Ben Holgate (2019) who has provided multiple threads of discourse as to how magical realism around the world supports the foundation of ecocriticism. It is in this light that the paper examines Vachharajani's text as climate fiction for children. More than its target audience, the book leaves a deeper impact on the adults who are likely to read these dystopic renditions as grim reminders of stolen fairytales and potentially threatened futures.

Magical Realism as Climate Discourse

In the introductory chapter of *Climate and Crises: Magical Realism as Environmental Discourse* (2019), Holgate attempts to find a long-standing tradition that highlights the common aspects of magical realistic fiction and environmental literature, and it is not confined to canonical Latin American texts. Holgate emphasizes that magical realism has historically functioned as a mode of resistance against dominant powers that oppress and exploit. Both magical realism and environmental literature emerge from the writer's deep desire to develop new kinds of expression and language to critique the anthropocentric legacy of the European Enlightenment, which views humans and nature as separate entities (Holgate, 2019).

Many critics conceptualize magical realism as a third plane or space between the real and the unreal, at the intersection of seemingly oppositional elements. Environmental literature similarly focuses on the interconnectedness of all things in the universe. Both these literary forms are transgressive and believe in dismantling binaries such as the human and non-human, and animate and inanimate (Holgate, 2019). However, the limited exploration of the links between magical realism and environmental literature might stem from their disciplinary divide—the former is often considered a narrative mode or literary style, and

the latter is a relatively recent branch of literary criticism that emerged around four decades ago.

In 1978 William Rueckert coined the term “ecocriticism” which refers to literary criticism using ecological concepts. Rueckert also emphasized creating a distinction between Ecocentric (nature-centeredness) and Anthropocentric (human-centredness) worldviews that promoted the exploitation and violence of every natural thing. Lawrence Buell (1996) pioneered environmental criticism, defining certain features to study environmental literature—non-human environment must be used as a framing device in the narrative; human interest is not the only legitimate interest; human accountability; the text should imply that the environment is a process rather than a constant.

Magical realism, with its “fluidity of realm”, is uniquely positioned to assist environmental criticism by deconstructing rigid boundaries without imposing new hierarchies. It assists eco-centric agendas by rendering literal and metaphorical intermingling of human and non-human realms. The scope of magical realism can be enlarged by portraying magical events with realistic techniques. Though climate change is a reality, a magical realm can be a suitable third space to explore its complexities as a scientific and cultural act. Authors representing climate change as a global and controversial phenomenon can move beyond the superficial to produce unconventional narrative trajectories and innovative characterizations. A magical realistic text does not necessarily have to present extreme weather events or climate change as a ‘magical’ event. Holgate also references Amitav Ghosh’s observation that magical realistic fiction should not depict extreme weather as an “unheard” or “improbable” phenomenon. To treat these events as magical would be to downplay the urgency associated with climate change (Holgate, 2019, p. 9).

We live in the Anthropocene, a term coined by Nobel prize-winning chemist Paul J. Crutzen and marine scientist Eugene F. Stoermer to describe the new geological epoch defined by humanity’s profound impact on Earth’s ecosystems and atmosphere. Over the past two centuries, industrialization, large-scale agriculture, and the emission of greenhouse gases have accelerated environmental changes at an alarming rate. Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that the Anthropocene demands new ways of thinking that integrate diverse factors contributing to climate change and devise innovative approaches to address its

challenges. Such approaches could potentially lead humanity out of the current crisis and mitigate irreversible damage (Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 5).

One of the key characteristics of magical realistic fiction is to disrupt the perceived notions of time and space. Within an environmental text, this narrative mode can be used to depict the slow pace of environmental degradation resulting from industrialization. "Slow Violence", a term coined by Rob Nixon represents the gradual and often invisible environmental destruction that takes place across time and space and still continues over decades and centuries (2011, p. 2). Contemporary media and literature prioritize immediacy, making it challenging to represent the protracted and accumulative impacts of climate change. Thinkers like Amitav Ghosh and Rob Nixon call for fiction writers to yet again create new kinds of images and new types of narratives to represent the slow-moving violence associated with climate change and ecological destruction.

Magical realism is a dynamic, constantly evolving narrative mode that can address the imaginative challenges posed by the climate crisis. It can be viewed as a literary style that embraces the complex realities of the twenty-first century. It provides a framework to illuminate hidden aspects of reality by blending the magical and the real, enticing readers to explore alternative realities and hybrid spaces. By fusing seemingly contradictory elements, magical realism enables writers to reimagine the world and emphasize the global scale of climate change. Rather than being confined to a rigid genre, this narrative mode functions as a flexible critical tool that accommodates diverse literature and artistic expressions without diluting their unique qualities. Following the theoretical framework proposed by Ben Holgate, this article critically analyzes how Vachharajani employs magical realism in *When Fairyland Lost is Magic* to engage young audiences with the ongoing climate crisis, using the narrative mode to foster environmental awareness and imagination. The analysis seeks to highlight how fantastical elements can effectively communicate the complexities of climate change to younger readers, encouraging them to perceive and address the world's ecological challenges.

When Fairyland Lost Its Magic as Climate Fiction for Children

By presenting aspects of climate change within the literary world of magic, the author asserts that climate crisis is no longer an idea but a

real event that has already crept into our lives, encouraging readers to reimagine the world beyond time and space. The text is a set of popular fairytales rewritten to be told for future generations who would be devoid of nature and its essence.

The book opens in an allegorical imaginary land “far, far away”. The story begins in the tradition of fairytales.... with the three most popular princesses in Fairyland at the helm; except, they are victims of extreme climate change. For children, Fairyland is a world where anything is possible and everything is abundantly present, but the scenarios presented in these stories are an inversion of the idea of the fairy tale. There can be a princess named Rapunzel with hair as long as the tower she lived in. Children would have never thought about how she managed to keep her hair immaculately clean. Now here is Rapunzel struggling to maintain her hair especially since the Great Water Crisis hit Fairyland. She is hesitant to let down her hair from the tower for the prince to save her. She retches and coughs, her eyes are watery. She can no longer enjoy the beautiful scenery outside her tower because all the smoke from the factories has surrounded her tower in a thick smog forcing her to remain in isolation and disconnected from the world. This isn't the ending a child would expect from a fairytale. The disruption in the expectation mirrors the disruptive nature of Anthropocentric modernity.

Imagine Snow White never being able to see snow because it stopped snowing in her kingdom. She escapes her stepmother only to be working in a coal mine with her seven friends. Her beautiful face is covered behind a mask to protect her from the bad air quality. This would not be a surprise for the children living under high AQI (Air Quality Index). But as a part of the tale, they would expect Snow White to eat the poisoned apple her stepmother gives. This is impossible in the given scenario because Fairyland has been undergoing apple scarcity and the local fruit jamun couldn't do the deed. Snow White, now 'No White' tries to attract birds and butterflies with her laughter, but they remain conspicuously absent.

Similarly, the story of Sleeping Beauty is bitterly ironic when children find out that Sleeping Beauty will never be able to sleep, no matter how many cursed spindles prick her because she has been diagnosed with climate anxiety, a psychological disorder caused due to extreme climate changes.

‘Nothing is as is’—Goldilocks’ bowl of *payasam* (Indian porridge) is no longer soothing her; to everyone’s dismay, the bowl is hot and cold at the same time. It is an imagery of the extreme temperature changes in Fairyland that would no longer be controlled by magic. Global warming, the melting of glaciers, and rising sea levels would lead everyone to constantly bob about in boats, to get from one castle to another. These ferry rides become so expensive that the people in Fairyland cease meeting one another and instead depute cheaper Twittering Trolls for communication. The beautiful castles of Fairyland stand in a corner, hidden behind smoke-emitting factories, nuclear power plants, and electric power lines. The juxtaposition of castles in the background with the factories in the foreground symbolizes the temporal boundaries of past and present. Nature doesn’t just serve as a setting in a fairy tale, it represents the everlasting need to move to a simpler lifestyle that connects a child with their idyllic natural surroundings.

The enchanted forest through which Little Red Riding Hood would go to meet her grandmother no longer exists as it has become a hub of industrialization. As such, the Big Bad Wolf has no forest to inhabit, so it moves to a wasteland, remains hungry, and keeps searching for a place to hide from the hunters. This Disenchanted Not-a-Forest also gets exploited for palm tree cultivation to meet the global demand for palm oil, compelling the Big Bad Wolf to move out of the wasteland. The food chain of the wild, the most important natural process for the survival of all species gets disrupted due to deforestation. The forest loses its magical baobabs and banyans, mighty oaks, and sequoias for tree stubs and palm trees.

Children always found the Little Mermaid exploring the depths of the ocean in search of a new adventure, but now, the Big Bad Wolf finds her sitting alone at the seashore crying as the corals have turned white due to oceanic acidification and rising sea temperature. This is yet another sign that global warming and water pollution have taken over Fairyland. The characters are clueless and confused as to what has taken over their realm.

Fairytale characters traditionally are depicted in terms of good and bad, princesses are especially depicted with positive personalities but here we see stories enmeshed and characters needing to reckon with each other. So, we see Sleeping Beauty maliging Cinderella. There is

an introduction of the inevitable sense of degradation and deprivation in shared spaces, planet, destinies, and of course, narratives; as well as the obvious outcomes of conflict resulting from scarcity and lack. Everyone keeps talking about how Cinderella is the leading cause of climate change because her name has Cinder (Carbon) in it. She shares the moniker with another modern day Cinderella from Marissa Mayer's young adult sci-fi novel with the eponymous title *Cinder* (2012). Like the elite in society, Cinderella is ignorant of how her lifestyle is increasing carbon emissions in the atmosphere. She is an independent young lady who is obsessed with private jet travel, shopping, dragon breeding, and investments in mining and carbon-fuelled industry.

Elsa's sister Anna never finds Elsa in her Snow Palace because it has melted away due to global warming. The northern lights on the North Pole that were the entry point to the Snow Queen's palace have disappeared. The author reminds the readers that viewing these northern lights was a majestic experience that had the power to revive our belief in the magical but climate change would strip us away from the beauty of our planet the same way it took away the magic of the Fairyland.

The Fairyland is officially on the verge of ending. The singing reindeer is a protected species of Fairyland and it sings out a cry for help. His song is about mass migration, loss of habitat, and the universal impact of climate change which has resulted in rising global temperatures and melting of glaciers. This song is followed by an illustration of a huge crack in the core of Fairyland. A realization that everything is falling apart. The fairy tale characters then go on to reflect on the contemporary anxieties about climate change. The mighty glacier was a metaphor for the lasting and unwavering impact of the narrated stories but with its melting away all the memories, identities, and stories have been swept away.

The Witch from the 'Grimm Brothers' Tale' remains hungry because Gretel and Hansel keep themselves occupied learning about climate change in school and how to combat it. The two siblings from the human world who grew up in the enchanted forest act as role models. They initiate a dialogue on the effects of the Anthropocene and attempt to restore the lost balance of their ecosystem. Gretel recites an important quote from William Shakespeare's play—'That which we call Rose by any other name would smell as sweet' to send the message that however

Fairyland might be named and regarded by its different inhabitants, it is of tremendous value to them all, and as such needs to be prioritized. Combating ecological issues is not a singular task, it is a collective initiative that must be taken by humanity. To combat this global threat, hierarchal and binary classifications have to break down and go beyond ideas of nationality, race, gender, and class.

A romantic fairy tale always ends with the arrival of a prince on a white stallion, but instead, the prince arrives on his motorbike that emits gaseous pollutants. He comes bearing an idea to profit out of all the land recovered after the melting of the glaciers. This disappoints everyone and he is forced to flee. It is believed that a narrative can only have a metaphorical closure but according to the fairytale characters, their world may be ending permanently as they reach an abyss separating them from the real world. The characters reflect upon the events that are taking place in the real world. A grey poisonous smoke is being pumped into Fairyland. It directly comes from a world that has heavily promoted industrialization and economic development over environmental harmony. Here airplanes, trains, trucks, and cars emitting poisonous smoke are a common site. Many wildlife species continue to go extinct as their habitat is being used to store plastic and other waste. It is the human world that is polluting Fairyland.

The abyss that separates the two worlds—the magical world of Fairyland and the human world is a representation of the third space that Ben Holgate (2019) suggests helps provide an impactful discussion on climate change. The final illustration in *Fairyland* runs into several pages where all human and non-human characters hold each other's hands to send the visual message—'Unity in Diversity.' It promotes the idea that our ecosystem is inclusive of humans and non-humans, looking after the welfare of all is a responsibility that cannot be ignored. Integrating such powerful visuals with the narrative significantly contributes to a child's experience with the text and it increases the opportunity for a child to interact with the ideas inherent. Illustrations with characters in Indian attires can help a child identify with their community, creating a deeper connection with the text.

The author emphasizes literature as a powerful medium of communication especially for children and how it can contribute towards holistic development. Nature and science can be sources of inspiration for

children and the more they explore, the more they would connect with the idea of protecting our environment. Nature needs to be nurtured and celebrated, not conquered or controlled. This idea resonates with the main purpose of environmental literature for children.

The ambiguous ending of the text leaves its readers wondering whether the community of Fairyland survives the catastrophe. One of the characteristic features of climate fiction is the use of tropes of an apocalypse, an impending ecological disaster with no escape. The text refuses to have a narrative closure as a symbol of hope that there would be a significant shift in our understanding of humans' relationship with their environment. All the characters wish for the human world to learn to respect and explore the natural world, allow the ocean to flourish with beautiful corals and sea creatures instead of plastic, and for the children to develop a sense of wonder and inculcate a sense of respect for the biodiversity of the planet before the locust infestation eats away the pages of the text.

Conclusion

The conclusion in the novel is symbolic of the detrimental impact humans have had on their surroundings. The book marks the importance of storytelling and creative imagination in our daily lives. Nature has inspired millions of stories in the past but the irreparable damages we have inflicted on our environment are putting it in serious jeopardy. Many modern writers have focused on Anthropocene or climate fiction to bring awareness to different age groups. These writers constantly search for new ways to criticize the drastic changes around the globe in their narratives. It helps them engage with the temporal and spatial scale that is necessary to depict the state of crisis we and our future generations await. The book is reminiscent of the forgotten natural world and its impeccable beauty that will keep calling us back, reminding us that it is never too late to go back to our backyards and relive the magical childhood that awaits us. These enmeshed, besmirched fairytales collapsing onto themselves are as earnest as they are ironic. The hyphenated space between fact and fiction, or reality and fairytales is the ideal space from where we can envisage the grim dystopias which can be embedded into certain kinds of narratives that we all take for granted. In the context of the urgency of climate change, rewritten fairytales will read like dystopic ecological fiction. The universality of

the fairytale metaphor further indicates how this is to be our common narrative and concern beyond the ideas of nationality, race, gender, and class.

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