

Altering ‘Ancestral Legacies’: Parent-Child Interactions and Ecological (Re)Considerations in Emmi Itaranta’s *Memory of Water*

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Abstract

In the current era of rampant climate changes, the increasing relevance of ecocritical texts is pertinent in creating awareness and offering plausible solutions to this global issue. The paper focuses on a rather unexplored area in ecocritical studies that of parent-child dynamics and employs the same as a frame through which ecocritical and ethical concerns could be discussed. The paper undertakes an analysis of *Memory of Water* by Emmi Itaranta to study how parent-child interactions occurring at the personal domain transcend this space to pose implications for the world at large, considering the personal, the ecological and the social on equal terms.

Keywords: Dystopia; Ecology; Ethics; Parent-Child dynamics.

Variations in climatic patterns in the contemporary era portend an impending doom that awaits humanity in the form of ecological disasters. In troubled times such as this, ecocritical concerns and studies are made possible through the frameworks of apocalyptic and dystopian scenarios as they prove to be perfect mediums to convey the sense of urgency of the situations and to effectively communicate the need for immediate actions. Emmi Itaranta, the Finnish author presents such a setting in her debut novel *Memory of Water* in which one witnesses a dystopian world writhing under the aftermaths of a climate disaster. The novel which was originally published in Finnish titled *Teemestarin kirja* in 2012, was translated to English as *Memory of Water* and re-published in 2014. The novel received recognition from various quarters such as being shortlisted for the Philip K. Dick Award, the Compton Crook Award, the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the Golden Tentacle Award. The novel has been translated from the original Finnish version to more than twenty languages and the author’s

writing style has often been compared to that of Sheri S. Tepper, Ursula K. Le Guin and Margaret Atwood.

The concerns regarding nature, environmental destructions and conservation have been topics of central importance in fictional and non-fictional writings from early decades. A major turn in the writings belonging to this genre occurred with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) that boldly pointed a finger at unsustainable anthropogenic activities that killed nature and all the species. This triggered the spirit of writers to critically view the human activities that harm the planet and reconsider the relationship between humans and other species. Ecocriticism, the youngest of the revisionist movements that have swept the humanities over the past few decades, thus gained popularity in 1990s, first in the US and in the UK. It addressed various environmental issues and searched for possible solutions for the same. Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Greg Garrard, Sidney Dobrin, Kenneth Kidd, Joseph Carroll, Rachel Carson were among the most prominent figures within the field of ecocriticism who made significant contributions at a time of anthropogenic environmental crisis.

Ecocritical genre that later developed sub-branches like eco-dystopian genre gradually served the purpose of being cautionary tales which primarily intended to induce a fear of an apocalyptic future that would possibly inspire individuals to alter the course of their ego-centric actions. Lawrence Buell, a pioneer in Ecocritical Studies has delved in detail about the representation of nature in literary imaginations. He argues in his seminal work *Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature and Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* that "Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal" (285). Eco-dystopia as a literary genre matured throughout the twentieth century overtly working towards creating awareness with respect to the amendments to be made in the current life styles as they vividly represent and anticipate a bleak future where survival could nearly be impossible.

Climate fiction genre or rather cli-fi genre emerged much later dealing with issues relating climate change and related concerns. By playing a significant role, that of educating the public on the reality of climate change and its devastating impacts, this comparatively new literary genre occupies a major place in the literary canon in the current century. It has also to a great extent been successful in addressing queries from different corners of the world on the serious lack of literary representations on climate change. As climate change issues are occupying grave dimensions in the

contemporary world, the genre garners great attention and significance. Adeline Johns-Putra, an eminent professor and scholar in the area of literature and climate change states, “Many climate change dystopias offer object lessons in environmentalist empathy. . . . Where SF [Science Fiction] has conventionally revelled in technological world-building, these novels push the dark, dystopian side of science to the extreme, and insist on care and love as its only viable alternative” (128).

Literary critics consider *Memory of Water* to belong to the climate fiction (cli-fi) genre though during the time of publication of the novel, the term was not widely popular. However, a handful of novels such as *The Swan Book* (1997) by Alexis Wright, *Ice People* (1998) by Maggie Gee, *The Hungry Tide* (2004) by Amitav Ghosh, *The Carbon Diaries* (2008) by Saci Lloyd, *Solar* (2010) by Ian McEwan and *Flight Behaviour* (2012) by Barbara Kingsolver had climate change and its drastic impacts as their major themes. Today the genre has grown extensively as more awareness has gone into recognising and tackling the issues relating climate change and associated matters. Many authors like Octavia Butler, Margaret Atwood, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., Doris Lessing, Cormac McCarthy and T. C. Boyle have made significant contributions to the genre.

The paper focuses on concepts concerning parent-child interactions in *Memory of Water* so as to examine how it could provide better understandings on the responsibilities vested with the parent figures and the crisis of dealing with the future generation during troubled times. This aspect has not been considerably focused within ecocritical studies and is a gap that needs to be filled. Specifically, within the scope of the current paper, studies pertaining to parent-child dynamics have not been undertaken with respect to the primary text. Parenting in a fallen world turns out to be the most confusing and demanding task since being the representatives of the ‘past’ that forged a disastrous ‘present’, parents share the guilt of having denied justice to their children and all other youngsters. And for the same reason, they most often fall short of maintaining a rapport with their children. Answering the posterity hence turns out to be one among the most challenging tasks of the elders in such a world. The guidance provided by the elders hence could turn out to be flawed. Since parental duties are not limited to one generation, but many, this gets complicated and is to be addressed as a serious issue to be dealt with. It is at this juncture that the role played by children, specifically young adults should be considered to understand if they prove to be capable of rectifying the flaws in the parenting modes and taking over a more responsible stance. Young adults (the teens) occupying a stage between childhood and adulthood are of

an age when development in thoughts, attitudes and habits occur. And moreover they represent the promising posterity, the people in whom lie the future of the place and other beings. Itaranta's *Memory of Water* seems to work along these lines that it seeks to enlighten the next generation who are to inhabit the Earth and also the elders who should be ideally serving as role models to them. It is also vital to analyse if the young ones do offer some radical ethical alternatives to the anthropocentric attitudes of their ancestors as well as their parents.

Memory of Water vividly provides the description of a world drastically altered by global warming where the changes in climatic patterns, an increase in temperature levels and global warming led to disappearance of winters, persisting heat and summer, scarcity of water and rising water wars. Ruled by the Chinese military, sources of water are controlled and "chained" and people are provided water rations in small quantities which do not suffice to fulfill their needs. People desperately try to find fresh water and wage war over the scarce resource. Collecting foul toxic water from filthy puddles, building illegal water pipes and committing "water crimes" hence turn out to be recurrent phenomena and people are punished to death for the same. It is in this world that the author places Noria, the protagonist of the story. Noria turns seventeen when the novel begins and is entrusted with the secret of a fresh water spring which remains unknown to anyone else in the place, other than her parents. *Prima facie*, the representation of parents in the text seems to offer a welcoming picture, since they appear to be accommodating in their attitudes, mainly due to the fact that they belong to the group of tea masters who assume it their duty to be the guardians and servants of water. They seem to effectively perform their function as mentors and guides to Noria since one finds that throughout the novel they teach her the need to develop an eco-centric consciousness. They believe that water cannot be chained and hence should be allowed to flow freely without anybody claiming ownership over it. In these respects, *prima facie*, the ecological ethics imparted by Kaitio and his wife (Noria's parents), seems to be in the right direction, but a close examination exposes its shortcomings. For instance, when it comes to executing the lessons associated with the tea master legacy in the right spirit, they fail terribly.

In fact, at no point do they make attempts to reveal the presence of the freshwater spring hidden deep within the caves near their home though they know it could save many lives. While one may consider that its confiscation by the military could have prevented them from doing so, the fear of endangering their lives must have been an equally significant or

a much more pertinent reason. At a certain point, even Noria's mother leaves or rather 'escapes' from the place in order to ensure a safe survival over an ethical one. She moves to Xinjing for her academic pursuits leaving behind the harsh realities of her village to deal with itself. When Kaitio passes on tea master legacy to Noria, he also insists that she keep the knowledge of the spring a secret possibly in order to secure her life as well, though the claim he makes is to preserve the tea master legacy that does not warrant the chaining of water. Kaitio remarks, "Tea and water do not belong to tea masters, but tea masters belong to tea and water. We are the watchers of water, but first and foremost we are its servants" (Itaranta 91). Ironically, the inherent flaw implicit in this ethics that is passed on is the very fact that it contradicts the right spirit of tea master legacy by preventing public access to an ecological resource by concealing the knowledge regarding the same. The father who ideologically presents himself as a servant of water practically acts as an owner of a spring and remains indifferent to the sufferings of those around him. The tea masters' books that Kaitio bequeaths to Noria also further such an ecological divide. The books supposedly contain records of their family customs, tea ceremonies, practices and experiences but as Noria notices, none of these books mention the spring or its source in their records which suggests that the tea masters consciously have attempted to conceal this knowledge. Hence, the ancestral legacy that Noria inherits appears to be wanting in certain respects by being egocentric, though not in the general sense of the term, rather limited to the microcosmic level. Such a perspective therefore is fraught with moral inconsistencies and calls attention to the ethical problem inherent in such seemingly ethical teachings.

The ethics imparted by this ideology though aims to secure the survival of Noria, nevertheless compromises macrocosmic concerns for the sake of parochial benefits and essentially implies the furthering of self-interests and self-preservation as its ultimate aim to ensure personal security and survival over a collective redemption. At a certain point Noria herself is found reminiscing how little she had gained from her parents as they had not told her about the past world and the present conditions in which she was to survive:

The silence wasn't just the silence of the empty spaces my parents had left behind, the lack of their breathing and words and footsteps inside those walls. It was also the silence of everything they had left untold and unsaid, everything that it was now up to me to learn and find out without them. I was only beginning to understand how little I knew: of the spring and other tea masters,

of the strange laws and threatened balances of secret alliances and bribery we had lived by, of this whole dark grown-up world stretching like a lightless desert in all directions around me and blurring into the horizon. I was angry with them for leaving me alone without the knowledge I needed. Why didn't you tell me? (Itaranta 137)

Her father and her ancestors could be understood as maintaining an attitude of "climate apathy", "drawing . . . [one's] circles of empathy smaller and smaller, or by simply turning a blind eye when convenient, [through which one finds] . . . ways to engineer new indifference" since they are in effect claiming ownership over a resource by not sharing it with others (Wallace-Wells 177).

Eric Holthaus, a leading climate-change advocate and journalist, in his writings deals with issues concerning climate change and related affairs. His book *The Future Earth: A Radical Vision for What's Possible in the Age of Warming* has occupied a prominent place among critical works relating climate-change since it offers positive outlooks on dealing with the climate crisis. Holthaus discusses the importance of developing empathy and compassion towards each other during testing times as a means of collaborative survival which could possibly offer hope and solace. He states, "In a world without the centrality of ownership, we'd need to develop deeper relationships with one another and with the natural world, emphasising values and actions like consent, care, dialogue, and trust" (36-37). This however does not materialise in the post-disaster phase in the select novel though Noria's parents could have been instrumental in this regard. Nevertheless, one cannot completely hold her parents guilty for the choices they make as it is also necessary to consider the helplessness of the situation in which they are caught. Parents who are left to communicate with children, mediating between a foregone world and the present one, are often caught in a dilemma. However, it cannot be contested that Noria who is left with a bunch of eco-centric teachings and egocentric deeds emerges to be more mature in her decisions and actions, choosing to follow the teachings and rectify the predecessors' actions.

One's selfhood is usually formed in dialogue with his/her familial settings, society, language and fellow beings. Daniel J. Siegel, a neuroscientist and Tina Payne Bryson, a parenting expert share their insightful thoughts and well defined techniques on effective parenting and child development. They comment, "It's really not an exaggeration to say that the kind of relationships you provide for your children will affect generations

to come. We can impact the future of the world by caring well for our children and by being intentional in giving them the kinds of relationships that we value and that we want them to see as normal" (127). Valerie Rose Brinton, a research psychologist agrees with this observation and adds to it stating that, "in doing so we profit in a real sense, we add real value to our life for ourselves, our children, their future families, and the world" (167). Hence the connections and communications maintained in a parent-child relationship assume great significance. Exploring the child motif in the novel offers insights into counter narratives of anthropocentrism, which unravel in myriad ways. The child figure, by occupying central role in the novel, not just questions many of one's deep seated assumptions on his/her obligations, but also hints at answers to those questions. Parenthood thus gets clearly subjected to scrutiny and revisions.

As the title of the paper indicates, the term "legacy" has been used here in plural sense, since the paper focuses on the ancestral legacy of tea master traditions as well as at a broader level, the "ancestral legacy" of a disastrous world that Noria inherits. In a fallen world there are no much choices, the decision one makes from the remaining choices says all. As opposed to the promises that Noria was to keep to her father, she reveals the knowledge of the spring to Sanja, her friend, unable to withstand the sufferings and pains they were experiencing. "I thought of the past tea masters, their choices and their duties. . . . I thought of my parents, who were not here, and of Sanja, who was." She lets her take the water from the spring for her necessities. Sanja asks, "All this water. Is it yours?", "Yes", I said . . . "No", I corrected" (Itaranta 165). Similarly, at another instance Noria says, "One of them had entered my house, sat in my kitchen and taken home my water-only water, I corrected in my mind, not *my* water" (223). This attitude that Noria deliberately inculcates thus stands in contrast to what her parents taught.

The very act of Noria assuming the charges of a tea master though according to the traditions a girl was not permitted to take up the role of a tea master, in itself is predictive of the modifications that would be introduced in the traditional practices. However, she stays true to the legacy she inherited from her father by mastering the tea master ceremony and submitting herself as the "watcher of water" by not claiming ownership over it, thus correcting a fault that the legacy carried within it for generations. While revealing the secret to Sanja, Noria is aware of the potential danger that the revelation could cause, yet resorts to it as she deems it the right action. As time passes, the knowledge of the spring spreads like a wild fire and many people approach Noria for water. She helps all of

them, while maintaining the water level as her father taught her to do.

Noria gains great strength and wisdom through her tea master tradition. Once she gets initiated into the ceremonies, she realises the true meaning of the motto of the tea masters that of being stewards to tea and water. Paula Gunn Allen, renowned American poet and scholar makes interesting observations regarding the purpose of ceremonies in an article titled 'The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Perspective' in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. According to her, ceremonies play a major role in creating in an individual a sense of community, and thus letting him/her shed the idea of being an isolated entity. A union is thus aimed at where he/she becomes one with the universe (249). This materialises in the persona of Noria. She makes use of her ecological wisdom acquired through the tea master legacy to form ties between humans and Nature, as well as past and the present world. Rather than viewing humans in isolation, Noria views humans as 'individuals-in-context', a concept that Neil Evernden puts forth in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*.

Evernden considers it to be of prime importance to acknowledge the relatedness of self with the place, to recognise close connections between the interior and the exterior which plays a crucial role in inculcating a pro-ecological mind set (103). Noria has her beliefs rooted in the same idea, and by adhering to principles of interdependence and interrelatedness she attempts to bring forth the idea that nothing exists in isolation and that all belong to a web of connections. She thus diffuses effortlessly into her surroundings than remaining detached and aloof. She courageously adopts a pro-ecological approach at the time of crisis, learning from the mistakes of the past world and adopting careful methods not to repeat the same. Hence she envisages a transition from the ethos of domination to reconciliation. Towards the end of the novel one witnesses the courage that Noria exhibits when asked to choose between life (by revealing the source of spring to military and granting them access and ownership over it) and death. As opposed to her father and mother who selected two different paths seemingly safe and secure ones, Noria embraces the difficult path leading to her death. The text therefore presents Noria undertaking a journey of her own to create meaning in a meaningless world. She finds strength in herself and moves forward. Abandoned by all, she is a single warrior. Hers is a ceremonial protest which declares protest is ceremony and ceremony is protest, thereby remaining true to her ancestral legacy at the same time rectifying its flaws.

The novel also makes repeated references regarding Noria's obsessive thinking about the past world which hints at the legacy of a disastrous world she has harboured within herself. Though Sanja discourages her, Noria is not deterred, but rather remains stubborn in her decision to gain information about the foregone world. By exploring and excavating "plastic graves" with Sanja where she manages to find remains of the past world technologies, reading research books that belonged to her mother which narrated stories about the past world and digging up information on "Jansson expedition" to the "Lost lands" in search of water sources, she exhibits her immense interest in knowing about the pre-disaster world.

She says to Sanja during one of their scavenging journeys, "I wish I could dig all the way to the bottom. Perhaps then I'd understand the past-world and the people who threw all this away". Sanja replies, "It's not worth thinking about them, Noria. They didn't think about us, either" (Itaranta 25). Though none of the characters in the novel seems to be concerned about the past world, Noria is not ready to easily forget the "legacy" that she inherited. She commits herself to this task so that she could learn from the mistakes of the past and make suitable corrections. As opposed to the adults in the novel who remain stuck within an anthropocentric framework that created the disastrous world in the first place, Noria succeeds in moving out of this ego-centric frame. Noria who recurrently thinks of a different world her predecessors could have left for her refuses to pass this legacy on to the posterity. She notes down lessons to learn from the past-the irreparable mistakes committed and the repercussions of the same. She leaves behind for posterity, a more organised and well-thought out record on her realisations and findings. Noria fills pages writing about the hidden spring that none of her ancestors had ever written before. Once she completes writing, she leaves behind her book in a hidden spot where someone possibly in future could come and retrieve it.

Her stance also shows the significance of a kinship system. Fighting for a stable climate and a better world may be achieved by imbibing and maintaining ideas on kinship systems. Noria, who develops deep understandings on value systems, seems to comprehend the significance of bonding and rebuilding. The realisation that all are trapped together in a cataclysmic world stirs her to work for the collective good. The kinship ties that she forges with Sanja may be deemed a miniature form of this kind of kinship system. In the novel one may note how Sanja was initially indifferent to Noria's deliberations on the past world and a possible future world. Her sole preoccupation was to somehow survive the present since she had her own gripping realities to deal with. But as the story progresses one

finds transformations in Sanja which occurs as a result of her interactions with Noria and her beliefs. It is Sanja who carries forward the story that Noria wished to create. When Sanja hands over six silver-coloured discs to Noria's mother, the story is left with a tint of hope, a hope of a continuation, as Noria always looked forward to.

The legacy that Noria leaves behind becomes particularly important as it is the one that would possibly be adopted by her mother in future. In fact, the final image in the novel is that of Sanja handing over six silver-coloured discs that contain valuable secrets on water resources to Noria's mother. All the efforts, attitudes and actions of Noria are symbolised in the representation of discs. This exchange between Sanja and Noria's mother hence represents an ironic "handing over" of a new legacy by Noria to her parents. Hence, here a child leaves a legacy for her parent to follow when the case is usually the reverse. This possibility cannot be completely discarded as real-life studies have been undertaken to examine the influence of teenagers on their parents, specifically to enable in the latter "parental ecological resocialization" (Gentina and Muratore 162). Eloide Gentina and Isabelle Muratore who have conducted such a study between teenagers and their mothers elaborate the concept of "reverse socialization" or "retroactive socialization" to refer to the influence exerted by teenagers on their parents regarding household consumption.

In this context, what refers to a household or home within the purview of the novel needs to be understood to examine the ramifications associated with consumption. Noria redefines the contours of her household by expanding the sense of the term to refer to the society she lives in, attempting to arrest the intervention of oppressive forces to a certain extent within the capacity of a teenager and sacrificing her life for this cause. The social home that she privileges over her personal security also becomes a means of locating her sense of self thereby trying to create for herself and others, a promise and hope for a place of comfort. It leads her to fully realise her role as a tea master who should actually belong to her natural and social worlds more than to herself. The notion of home or household that Noria harbours which is inclusionary in its framework helps her overcome the temptation to assimilate to a particular culture at the personal level, paving way for an alteration of this culture for the common good of humanity at large. It enables Noria to effectively execute her familial obligations to the society at large that she deems her home.

Gentina and Muratore also focus on communication between teenagers and their mothers. The select novel represents the possibility of the influ-

ence exerted by Noria on her mother, even though there remains no direct communication or interaction between the two once the mother departs for Xinjing. The influence that Noria exerts regarding the distribution and consumption of a household resource here assumes larger proportion since the term 'household' as discussed above within the purview of the text, refers to a macrocosmic entity. Noria foregrounds the possibility of a redemptive socialization through her actions and by passing on her legacy to her mother, probably hoping that the latter would follow suit. The mother, being a researcher who studies on the water resources which existed in the past is definitely ecologically conscious, maintains a pro-ecological behaviour and is in possession of relevant skills, knowledge, and attitudes. Nevertheless, it seems like it requires Noria to envisage a parental ecological resocialization where the former would be informed of her significance in ensuring equal distribution and consumption of the resource that is scarce in the current world that they inhabit. Thus, Noria expects her to undergo "reverse socialization" or "retroactive socialization" as she is exhorting the adherence to a new consumption pattern that is not minimalistic or limited to the personal domain. The study conducted by Gentina and Muratore also concluded that:

. . . warmer mothers are more receptive than are cooler mothers to their teenagers' endorsement of environmentally friendly habits. . . . Among three cooler mothers in our sample, teaching occurs only if the mother believes that her teenager's environmental knowledge equals or exceeds her own . . . warmer mothers are inclined to learn from their teenagers, even if they are more environmentally knowledgeable than are those teenagers. (165- 66)

From the hints provided in the text, Noria's mother possesses a greater ecological knowledge than Noria and hence it is largely probable that she would turn out to be a "warm mother" who would adopt the legacy of her teenage daughter who sacrificed her life for a noble cause. Hence, the novel concludes with the hope that the mother would carry forward the legacy of her daughter to envisage a transformation in the society which is evident in the words that mark the end of the text, "this morning the world is dust and ashes, but not devoid of hope" (Itaranta 263).

Another important aspect to be considered is Noria's sense of inhabiting a place. Her relationship with her surroundings is an organic one where a mutual nurturing and communication takes place. By placing a collective cause over the personal needs, Noria caters to the idea of co-existence and harmony. She also dislodges the teachings of a dominant culture in ac-

cordance with the requirements of a situation by replacing it with a much better ideological framework in order to achieve this end. Noria thus attempts “decolonisation” in dual sense: Firstly, she resists and retaliates through non-violent means against the anti-ecological policies of military that furthered the ecological divide in a fallen world. Secondly, she complements and at the same time corrects the cultural legacy that she inherits from her parents, with appropriate actions. Thus, she puts her efforts into discarding the dominant discourse forced upon her and others by the coercive state apparatus and also into revising a traditional cultural pattern by rectifying the flaws inherent in its system.

To live ethically in a fallen world is a tough path to choose, nevertheless Noria chooses it. Noria’s *bildungsroman* in these respects coincides with the possibility of a brave new world where teenagers more than adults take informed decisions and perform daring acts to preserve an ecologically sound world. In the current society, it is imperative not to overlook the potential vested within its youngsters in ensuring a sustainable future. The paper by looking into the informed decisions that the child makes which address certain social, cultural and ethical concerns emanating from the diminished presence of an ecological resource, has attempted to pose the question if her actions in this regard are capable of influencing her parents and others around. The paper has also examined how the young adult in the text chosen, do not remain merely as the “other” to be saved but possesses considerable voice and agency such that even though she may not be capable of evincing a complete transformation of the prevailing conditions, plays an instrumental role in inciting a positive change that the elders are incapable of making. By questioning and condemning collective anthropocentric attitudes, as well as striking the roots of the same by challenging and repairing anthropocentric orientations in parental concerns, the teenager in the select novel offers corrective measures to parenting mechanisms in an environmentally affected world, reminding readers of the need to initiate changes from the grassroots level.

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