

Children and Adolescents' Voices and Experiences in Climate Fiction

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Abstract

This article aims to analytically and comparatively examine the representation of children's and adolescents' voices and experiences in a world entirely altered by climate change. The article focuses on two cli-fi novels: Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible* (2020) and Tochi Onyebuchi's *War Girls* (2019). The article looks at how children's and adolescents' voices and experiences are depicted in a climate changed-world. Climate Fiction (cli-fi) writers can serve as a wake-up call for the world to recognize the needs of children during a climatic catastrophe by incorporating children's and adolescents' voices and experiences in their literary works so that readers of all ages will be able to see how children will harvest their fathers' sins, and what actions needed to preserve the Earth from a climatic crisis. Indeed, children and teenage protagonists in climate change literature have something to say about their current situation and the corruption of their social and political structures, which have caused climate change and destroyed their sole home; the Earth.

Keywords: climate fiction, climate change, children's literature, cli-fi

1. Introduction

Many nineteenth-century literary works, such as William Blake's *Chimney Sweepers*, focused on children's and adolescents' voices and experiences regarding their period. In fact, throughout history, fiction authors have used children's and adolescents' voices and experiences to portray the anguish of their day and critique social, cultural, political, and religious institutions. However, climate change fiction is a newly-established literary genre, and its authors are generally more interested in writing about the experiences of adults in a climate-changing world, with little care for children and adolescents. However, some emerging climate fiction writers are exploring this new field of inquiry by writing fictional stories about climate change from the perspective of children and adolescents to portray how climate change affects their reality and future, as well as to criticize society and adults for destroying the planet and rendering it unlivable for the next generation. In other words, cli-fi writers can serve as a wake-up call for the world to recognize the needs of children during a climatic catastrophe. This article examines how children's and adolescents' voices and experiences are portrayed in two cli-fi novels, Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible* (2020) and Tochi Onyebuchi's *War Girls* (2019).

Climate change does not discriminate against people based on their age; everyone is in danger of being affected by climate change, whether he or she is a kid, an adult, or an older person. Therefore, children's perspectives and opinions on global issues such as climate change are valid and must be heard. To include children and adolescent concerns in their literary works, climate change fiction (cli-fi) borrow elements and features taken from other subgenres, such as Bildungsroman, and young adult literature (YA) to fictionalize the experience of underage individuals in a climate-changing world. Thus, these subgenres will be reinvented with climate change as the dominant theme and post-climate changed children and adolescents as the main characters. Thus, readers of all ages can see how children harvest their predecessors' sins and what actions are needed to preserve the Earth from a climatic crisis.

In her article "Cli-Fi: Reframing Young People's Responses to Climate Change," Judith Wakeman asks if climate change education is acceptable for young adults in 2020. She claims that, while it is a big load to lay on a child, the answer to that question must be yes, simply because "climate change will definitely reach a crisis point in their lives." (Wakeman, 2020, p. 1). In other words, children and young people are more likely than other age groups to be worried and involved with climate change since it is more likely to occur within their lifetimes, and thus they are the ones who must discover solutions to the problem, or else humanity will vanish. Indeed, this particular age group of young people has seen nothing done to safeguard their environment or even their future, and as a result, unlike adults, they have no political and economic motivation for finding solutions other than protecting their existence.

Wakeman (2020) claims that "teens are more vulnerable after environmental disasters" (p.1). Therefore, fostering young people's inner confidence is critical and preparing them for an unpredictable future. In reality, this unknown future will cause some worry and trauma for children and young people; however, this fear or trauma may encourage them to be at the forefront of environmental action. In other words, children and young people can devise ways to mend the climate and rescue the Earth.

According to *World Vision Organization* research (2019), climate change impacts people's capacity to feed themselves, particularly children. Because their bodies are still developing, children are particularly vulnerable to malnutrition-related illnesses such as diarrhea

and malaria. In reality, youngsters are less physically, cognitively, and emotionally prepared to deal with such life-threatening situations. Furthermore, children in undeveloped nations suffer significantly due to poverty, which restricts their ability to adapt to climate change. As a result, these children's offspring are likely to be born into poverty, thus perpetuating the poverty cycle (p.1-4).

Children and young people are underrepresented in climate change policy and government talks. To quote Maria Leavenworth, "young learners' contemporary opinions on environmental concerns are not always taken into consideration or represented in textbooks, and lack of acknowledgment may result in young learners perceiving a lack of relevance" (2020: p.3). However, this is not the case with fiction; cli-fi not only depicts the effects of climate change on the future of children and young people but also provides them with a voice to express their views on the climate-induced world. In other words, cli-fi is more effective in representing children's rights and voices, educating children about climate change, and empowering them to become climate advocates and activists. Excluding children and young people from climate change conversations may harm them and society. These children and young learners are the future leaders, and they must figure out long-term adjustments and ways to counteract climate change since they will undoubtedly experience it during their lifetime. For this reason, the function of education in general and of literature, in particular, must be reconsidered.

Children cannot begin solving the climate change problem until they understand the subject matter. Indeed, education is the very first step in assisting children and young people to gain awareness about climate change. However, science in general, and climate change in particular, are sophisticated and elite subjects that are difficult for youngsters to grasp. cli-fi, however, is one of the easiest ways to empower children by giving them necessary climate change knowledge while they read a fictitious novel, whose backdrop and storyline are the unfolding of a climate catastrophe amongst relatable modern settings. In other words, by writing their YA cli-fi, young adult fiction writers take on a didactic role, explaining and clarifying scientific jargon and concepts via the voices of their characters.

Furthermore, their writing engages young adult fiction readers with political, economic, and social concerns around environmental calamity and a future caused by climate change. Young adult readers feel empowered as a result and are ready to become change agents. In Wakeman's (2020) words, "in the classroom, cli-fi can raise awareness in a non-threatening and non-personal fashion, provoking discussion and spurring action" (p. 2). Fiction, thus, may function as a pedagogic tool by providing readers with knowledge about climate change, which will indirectly involve them with environmental concerns and spark their imagination by allowing them to experience climate change fictionally. In addition, fiction "fosters action and responsibilities in young readers, thus contributing to future sustainability" (Leavenworth, 2020, p. 4). In short, knowledge about climate change shown in fiction can give people hope and encourage them to act.

According to the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) information sheet "Children and Climate Change," "the climate catastrophe is recognized as a disaster for children and their rights" (2021, p. 1). Children do not have the abilities or a fully developed immune system to navigate an unpredictable future. In fact, "as compared to adults, children require more food and water per unit of body weight and are less able to withstand harsh weather conditions" (2021, p.2). As a result, COP26 supports the engagement of children and young people in the conference, as climate change is one of the most severe concerns confronting this generation. Thus, "the decisions taken at COP26 will affect the life of every kid in every nation on the planet, now and in the future" (UN, 2021, p.2). Thus, cli-fi authors face difficulty in depicting such heinous truths regarding children's situations during and after a climatic catastrophe. They must envisage, imagine, and have inner fire and understanding to symbolize the future fragility of the young. In her work "Picturing the Child in Nineteenth-Century Literature," Jacquelyn Rogers (2008) describes how child labor lowered children's lives and jeopardized their safety while the children's book publishing business thrived (p. 41). This means that the cli-fi genre will thrive amid climate change, just as it did during the nineteenth-century industrial revolution when children's novels blossomed.

Maria Lindgren Leavenworth et al. (2021) note in their paper "Climate Fiction and Young Learners' Thoughts- A Dialogue between Literature and Education" that contemporary concerns such as climate change are addressed and discussed in modern literature as well as other disciplines. They say there is a knowledge gap due to a lack of communication between climate change-related fields. (p.12). Cli fi, for them, may facilitate communication between different disciplines since it is one of the disciplines that is seen as a haven for creatively and imaginatively engaging with current danger. In other words, the portrayal of climate change in cli-fi by and for young learners suggests that formal and informal knowledge may interact, and, as a result, this promotes what is known as a collection agency to combat climate change since children's lives are at stake.

Lydia Millet is an American author with a degree in environmental policy. Her most recent work, *A Children's Bible* (2020), is a climate fable about a group of families vacationing in a summer cottage (the location of the summer house is unnamed, and the year in which the events are taking place is also unknown). The narrative is told by a teenage girl named Evie, who describes the summer days and all the backstories concerning the parents and their children. The youngsters at the summer home meet other children from the one percent (children from capitalist households) and begin to talk about the end of the world and how their parents are preparing for it. Because their parents are always drunk and high on drugs, the children take on the burden of devising a survival strategy. Millet represents not just children's perspectives on climate change but also intergenerational conflicts and various social, political, and cultural issues that may arise due to climatic disasters. Millet adapts the Bildungsroman genre for cli-fi, exploring the roles of teenagers amid climatic crises to demonstrate that they suffer in the event of a climate change catastrophe. Furthermore, the narrative retells the account of Noah's Ark in a modern setting to assist the reader grasp the horrific future he/she will experience. However, at the novel's end, Millet does not propose a cure to combat climate change, instead of forcing her characters' children to harvest their fathers' crimes.

Tochi Onyebuchi's *War Girls* (2019), on the other hand, transports the reader to the year 2172 after climatic problems have rendered the Earth uninhabitable and commonwealth countries have managed to flee the globe and build space colonies, leaving underdeveloped countries to fight alone on Earth. The novel tells the story of two adolescent sisters linked not by blood but by friendship in a battle to be reunited in a war-torn Nigerian village. Tochi addresses numerous topics via climate problems, including colonialization, family relationships, gender, war injustices, and Commonwealth nations' meddling with Third-War policy and exploitation of their natural resources. Tochi also looks into the fact that children will have to pay for the irresponsible actions of their ancestors, which ruined the world and, ultimately, their future. Finally, Tochi's story depicts the role of technology during a climatic catastrophe and its intervention in producing hybrid and enhanced humans. In doing so, he investigates the ethics of employing such technology to transform humans into machine-like entities (cyborgs) to cope with the ecosystem conditions of a changing world. In addition, the story depicts how developing countries, such as Africa, are excluded from tackling climate change and are left to suffer alone on what was formerly known as Earth. As a result, Tochi's work sheds light on a new type of racism and social injustice towards people of color, who are denied the right to exist in the same way that other privileged are. In a nutshell, white privilege, bigotry, and racism will persist in the future and will be exacerbated by the climate change crisis.

Although the two authors' main protagonists range in age from five to fourteen and are caught up in a world that has been entirely and utterly transformed by climate change, both works are aimed at readers of all ages. The two understudy novels contain a variety of underlying themes, such as intergenerational conflicts, religion, and capitalism. These themes are viewed from children's and adolescents' perspectives that help readers understand their needs and ways of thinking during climate change.

2. Children and Adolescents' Experience of Intergenerational Conflict

The theme of intergenerational conflict is prominently included in both stories. The characters in the two works may be divided into two groups: adults and children. The latter are angry at the former for generating climate change and destroying their future and their only home. In other words, because adults were careless, children and teenagers are forced to harvest the crimes of their fathers as they try to adjust to the new post-climate change in life on Earth. Childhood is being redefined all over again in light of the climate catastrophe. The role that youngsters are expected to perform is inappropriate for their age group. Children feel more responsible for saving their world than adults simply because their methods and ideas to combat climate change have failed or were never adopted in the first place. So, to save themselves and the world, children must devise workable social, economic, and even political solutions.

Adeline Johns-Purta (2019) states that climate change novels place "parent-child relationships under emotional and intellectual scrutiny" (p.1). Cli-fi, she claims, has appropriated the figure of the kid to represent collective worry about the cumulative effect of human activities on the world. In other words, the child figure portrays the concern and fear of the younger and elderly generations about the human predicament in a world transformed by climate change. The youngster is no longer innocent or naive; he or she acquires a new identity to meet the moment of severe ecological damage. His or her emotions and intellect have developed to coincide with the onset of climate change.

On the other hand, climate scientist James Hansen wrote a book on global warming storms experienced by his grandchildren. In his *Storms of My Grandchildren* preface (2009), he writes, "I did not want my grandchildren, someday in the future, to look back and say 'Opa he understood what was happening, but he did not make it clear (p. xii). This demonstrates parental fear caused by destroying nature for future generations. This fear stems from adults' inability to safeguard the Earth from climate change.

Throughout *A Children's Bible* (2020), the Millet children do not address their parents by name, and their identities are not given in the novel. Furthermore, from the first chapter (the attic where they sleep), children demand their space and even declare it a "PARENT-FREE ZONE" (Millet, p.5). They compare their attic to a reservation; it is undisturbed and unaltered by people, and when one of the parents tries to approach it, they "yelled harshly" (Millet, p.5). Parents, in their eyes, are conquerors who want to slaughter them and colonize their "attic." (Millet, p.5). The usage of war imagery by the children to describe their parents demonstrates how the children's relationship with their parents is in conflict. One of the children is penalized for "kissing up to a parent" (Millet, p.7). This is because parents are to blame for the end of the planet caused by climate change. "we knew who was responsible, of course: it had been a done deal before we were born" (Millet, p. 19). The type of conflict between the parents and the children is environmental; the latter is angry with the former for destroying the planet.

In *A Children's Bible*, none of the parents' characters express parental concerns about their own children, and they are uninterested in their children's well-being. Avner de-Shalit argues that the lack of intergenerational obligations results from "the fading away of moral similarity" (Johns-Purta, 2011, p.7) since the demands of the future generation differ from those of the current generation. In other words, parents would be unaware of their children's needs during one because they had never faced a climate catastrophe. As a matter of fact, throughout the novels, parents mistreat or disregard their children, with little concern for their safety or their future. Again, this is owing to a lack of moral resemblance between the two generations, even though they both deal with a specific problem, namely climate change.

On the other hand, children in *War Girls* (2019) have little memory of their so-called parents. Indeed, they have no recollection of their parents. Furthermore, they do not encounter or interact with them throughout the story; however, they constantly criticize and condemn them for all the conflicts and their effects on their lives. The struggle between the female children and their parents in *War Girls* has a social and environmental dimension. Indeed, it is being used to illustrate how social discrimination against girls will worsen their condition in a climate-changing world. Girls are discriminated against from a very young age. Boys were sent to the army to battle, while

girls stayed home to "wash the laundry and clean the home" (Onyebuchi, p.51). This particular episode demonstrates that societal inequalities based on gender will persist in a future transformed by climate change, preventing girls from gaining the necessary empowerment as their male counterparts during a climatic catastrophe. As a result, in the event of a conflict or a natural disaster, they will be unable to defend or protect themselves. As a reaction, women suffer twice as much as men due to climate change, first due to a historically prejudiced societal framework and second due to an environmental disaster.

Intergenerational conflict is addressed at a deeper level in *War Girls* (2019) Onyebuchi demonstrates that both parents and their offspring faced discrimination in their lifetimes, as both of their rights were denied, and consequently, none of them received any justice. In other words, both the old and new generations experienced the same fate of injustice. Furthermore, their parents are from the lower classes; therefore, their offspring suffer from climate change and a social structure that existed before climate change, which marginalized and discriminated against their forebears. Thus, Onyebuchi shows how the cycle of oppression does not end in a climate-changed world but worsens and produces a new sort of inequality based on environmental factors. Thus, the intergenerational conflict has two layers, which the first is social and the second being environmental.

3. Children and Adolescents' Views on Capitalism

The children among themselves in *A Children's Bible* (2020) are divided into two types: children of capitalist families and children of consumerist families. The two types of children "[discuss] their families' preparations for the end-times" (Millet, p.21). The yacht kids, who represent late-capitalist society, talk about their survival camps prepared for them in case of a climate crisis. The unfortunate kids "don't have a clue what [they] are talking about" (Millet, p.20). This shows that economic injustice is heightened during climate change as the lucky and fortunate ones will have "a survival home for chaos time" (Millet, p.20), and those who are less fortunate do not. Clearly, during a climate catastrophe, children face new forms of prejudice and bullying. The children of unfortunate families are illiterate about what a survival house is. Leavenworth (2021) states that "a seemingly fixed hierarchy is established between those who have the means and those who do not" (Leavenworth, p.11). In other words, in a climate-changing world, the economic and environmental components interact. Economic inequality will cause children and parents who do not have the resources or the means to cope with climate change to suffer twice as much as those at the top of the hierarchy.

Furthermore, in terms of environmental injustice, the members of the middle and working classes are the ones that suffer the most during a climatic catastrophe. On the other hand, their capitalist counterparts exhibit no signs of suffering. Even worse, their tales are not incorporated into the narrative at all. As if climate change is unimportant to them.

Moreover, the children of poorer families criticize their parents' occupations, which only served capitalists to make them richer, to demonstrate that their parents' careers and the money they have collected from them are worthless in a climate-changing world. They even mock their educational degrees, saying they "couldn't have afforded the buy-in" (Millet, p.10). The children explicitly show that they "hated money snobs" (Millet, p.10). Children from the middle and working classes, in my opinion, knew that their parents were slaves to the economic elite, and their educational credentials designated them as such. In exchange, once climate change has arrived, the first thing capitalists do is abandon the so-called former devoted slaves and seek shelter in their private, exclusive camps. Indeed, youngsters blame capitalism for ruining their Earth throughout *A Children's Bible's* (2020) narrative and on nearly every page. Children, unlike their parents, are aware that "capitalism had been the nail in the coffin, said a third" (Millet, p.44).

On the other hand, *War Girls* (2019) discusses the broader scope of capitalism. Unlike the economic injustice discussion in *A Children's Bible* (2020), where economic injustice is shown between the working and capitalist classes of the same country, *War Girls* depicts the tension between different countries, i.e., between metropolitan and developing countries. With the advent of climate change, powerful and capitalist countries abandoned the Earth, the site of all of their battles and exploitations. Instead, they migrated to outer space to establish space colonies. Developing countries, on the other hand, are unable to do so and are thus left to suffer from climate change on their own. Onyebuchi skillfully proves that the countries that damaged the planet in the first place and whose carbon dioxide emissions caused climate change in the first place were not present when the Earth was on the edge of collapsing. This negates environmental justice law, which argues that wealthier nations (whose industrial activities are the principal cause of climate change) should aid poorer countries during a climatic calamity. Onyebuchi, on the other hand, proves that they did not.

4. Children and Adolescents' Views on Religion

A Children's Bible illustrates the end of time with several biblical themes and stories. A book entitled "A Child's Bible: Stories from the Old and New Testaments" was given to one of the children. "Religious education was not a priority" for the parents (Millet p. 29). However, it is vital for the children because it explains the end of time; after all, they live in the apocalypse. The flood tale assists kids in comprehending what is going on because their parents refuse to explain anything. In other words, the parent generation's cultural memory does not assist future generations in comprehending the newly established reality brought about by climate change. The Bible, on the other hand, was the source that provided cultural and even emotional context in which children might find some solace. Indeed, the novel retells the narrative of Noah's Ark. In the absence of their parents, youngsters turn to the Bible for guidance on what to do in the event of a flood. In doing so, Millet draws on the reality that no rulebook instructs humanity on how to respond in the face of a climatic disaster except the Bible. Children, moreover, believe that "nature gets misinterpreted" (Millet, p.58) because the word God might mean nature.

Onyebuchi's *War Girls'* (2019) religious theme, on the other hand, is approached from many perspectives and for various ends. To begin with, it is utilized to remind someone of their previous shape before being enhanced and becoming a cyborg human being. One of the

boys has a "zero percent machine" (Onyebuchi, p.59) in him, and despite his displeasure, Ify informs him, "you are as Allah created you" (Onyebuchi, p.59). In that regard, religion serves as a memory of how humans appeared before they had any type of mechanical organs in them prior to climate change. They, indeed, are as natural as "Allah" made them be. Secondly, islamophobia is represented through Ify's figure. Ify thought that the statement "Allahu Akbar" (Onyebuchi, p.147) is generally spoken before someone blows himself/herself up. However, once she was saved, met Muslims, and discovered her history, she declared, "Yes, I am a proud Muslim" (Onyebuchi, p.148). Onyebuchi uses islamophobia to illustrate the dangers of indoctrination, particularly on children. Brainwashing is taken to a higher degree in a climate-changing world since it entails implanting or erasing memories in a child's braincase, as in the case of Ify. Thirdly, the tale of "the Binding of Isaac," as recounted in the Book of Genesis, Chapter 22", is used to demonstrate that even in a climate-changed world, human sacrifice is still required because it may be the only way to go ahead, just as Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son.

5. Children and Adolescents Experience Mental Illness

According to Lindsay Galway (2019) young people may experience mental illness impacts due to climate change (Galway, p.3). Millet in *A Children's Bible* (2020) investigates the psychological disorders that result from climate change. The personalities of the parents began to fade and regress. Some of them, on the other hand, were stunned, perplexed, and later lapsed into a form of depression. Indeed, some of them became filthy and began to smell. However, the only medicine accessible was home cures, which proved ineffective. The psychological impact of climate change on children is initially expressed in Onyebuchi's *War Girls* (2019) by firstly ecological grief, as they feel sad for the Earth because it is no longer a livable planet. Second, in anxiety and sadness, children constantly fear for their lives as countries compete for resources. This theme of Solastalgia is included in both novels. Third, the children in the two novels are seeing the deterioration of their land and surroundings, which significantly influences their physical and emotional health. Finally, children have developed ecophobia since the environment and nature are no longer pleasurable; on the contrary, nature for them means the end; death.

6. Conclusion

In the face of climate change, youth voices are rising as a source of power and inspiration. *A Children's Bible* (2020) by Lydia Millet and *War Girls* (2019) by Tochi Onyebuchi are examples of cli-fi novels that tell the story of climate change through children's eyes. They both take on the mission of investigating how climate change would affect the reality and future of future generations. They are similar in how they approached intergenerational conflict between children and parents and how the former harvest the latter's sins simply because they did nothing to save the Earth, and subsequently, their children suffer from climate change. Indeed, both novels elevated the theme of coming-of-age to a whole new level, in which young people are trying to define themselves in a world altered by climate change. These two cli-fi novels, therefore, can be classified as eco-Bildungsroman. In addition, these two novels represent children's and adolescents' critique of social, religious, and political matters prior to climate change.

Disclaimer: "Abdelazim Sultan is an employee of the U.S. Embassy, Amman. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. government."

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