

AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF 'BEFORE THE COFFEE GETS COLD' BY TOSHIKAZU KAWAGUCHI

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Abstract:

Ecocriticism assumes a crucial role in analyzing literary texts, specifically in examining how nature is represented within the text while evaluating the overall implication of this representation. It seeks to analyze works in the context of how they address emerging environmental and ecological concerns and propose potential solutions to these issues. Ecocriticism in literature emphasizes the interconnectedness between human and nonhuman entities, presenting a perspective wherein all organisms coexist in harmony. Consequently, nature assumes an equally significant role in the novel as human characters. This paper aims to study the novel 'Before the Coffee Gets Cold' through an ecocritical lens.

Introduction

'Before the Coffee Gets Cold' is a bestseller by Toshikazu Kawaguchi written in 2015, in Japanese, and translated by Geoffrey Trousselot. The story revolves around a hundred and forty-year-old café in Tokyo in Japan, named 'Funiculi Funicula', which happens to be made famous through a magazine article headlined, 'Uncovering Truth Behind "Time-Travelling Café" Made Famous by Urban Legend'.

The novel is divided into four distinct sections. The first section, entitled "The Lovers," centers on the narrative of Goro and Fumiko. Their unfulfilled romantic relationship reaches a tranquil resolution following Fumiko's temporal journey to the past. The second section, designated "Husband and Wife," similarly focuses on the romantic relationship of a significantly older couple: Kohtake, the wife, employed as a nurse, and Fusagi, the husband, who worked as a landscape gardener before developing Alzheimer's disease. "The Sisters" examines the narrative of Kumi and Hirai, siblings with infrequent communication and consequently a limited comprehension of one another. Upon Kumi's demise in a vehicular accident, Hirai engages in temporal travel to conduct a substantive dialogue with her. The final section, "Mother and Child," explores the circumstances of the ill and expectant Kei and her unborn daughter. The café affords each individual an

opportunity for temporal regression, and notably, while the future remains unaltered, it exerts a significant influence on transforming perspectives, which proves to be of paramount importance.

Though the genre of the book is magical realism, throughout the novel we get to witness the innumerable ways in which Kawaguchi has incorporated different facets of nature into his writing. From isolating the café from the world outside to making it exist as a part of a healthy ecosystem, his efforts to introduce nature into the story is quite evident.

One plausible question that must be looked at, is how the urban metropolitan capital city of Tokyo fits in the novel that holds an ecocritical viewpoint. For this, discussing the two waves of ecocritical writing is important. Lawrence Buell identifies two waves of ecocriticism. The first wave ecocritics focused on nature writing, nature poetry, and wilderness fiction". They used to uphold the philosophy of organism. Here environment effectively means natural environment (Rosenthal & Buell, 1995, p. 21). The ecocritics of this wave appraised "the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action"(Howarth, 69). So ecocriticism initially aimed at earth care (Mishra, 2016, p.168).

The second wave ecocritics inclined towards environmental justice issues and a 'social ecocriticism' that takes urban landscape as seriously as 'natural landscape' (Rosenthal & Buell, 1995, p.22). This revisionist ecocriticism aimed to locate the vestiges of nature in cities and exposes crimes of eco-injustice against society's marginal section (Mishra, 2016, p. 168).

Kawaguchi's work locates nature in the city of Tokyo through the motifs of the cicada and ghosts. He addresses the issue of global warming and its consequences. Even when dealing with a topic like time travelling, he does not treat it as an escape or an event functioning outside the reality of the natural world. He maintains that everything shall function under the natural order and if something is to go south, one has to take responsibility for it. Therefore, studying the novel from an ecocritical lens becomes inevitable.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative approach, utilizing close textual analysis to explore the ways in which Kawaguchi's "Before the Coffee Gets Cold" presents a nuanced and insightful depiction of the relationship between nature and the humans. Drawing upon relevant literary and cultural sources, this study delves into the thematic and symbolic representations of nature within the novel, examining how Kawaguchi's use of natural imagery and motifs serves to enhance the emotional and philosophical depth of the narrative.

Discussion

In Toshikazu Kawaguchi's poignant novel "Before the Coffee Gets Cold," the author masterfully weaves a captivating narrative that not only explores the complexities

of human relationships and the transformative power of time travel but also presents a remarkable examination of the interplay between nature and the human experience. On the first page of the novel, the writer writes,

“They were in a windowless basement café. The lighting was provided by just six shaded lamps hanging from the ceiling and a single wall lamp near the entrance. A permanent sepia hue stained the café interior. Without a clock, there was no way to tell night and day. There were three large antique wall clocks in the café. The arms of each, however, showed different times.” (Kawaguchi, 2019, p. 166)

The above lines reveal three ways the café is isolated from the natural world to make it a place where magic happens. Because time traveling, in some ways, goes against the natural order it becomes pertinent for it to be divorced from the outside world. Firstly, the fact that it is situated in a basement with no windows, brings in a mysteriousness. It becomes impossible for the customer to experience the café and the food in relativity to the outside weather or scenery. The experience thus becomes secluded, lonesome, or cocooned according to the customer.

Secondly, the three antique clocks, showing three different timings add to the mysteriousness. Kawaguchi himself agrees that without the clock, it is impossible to tell whether it is night or day. Hence, the clocks represent the past, present, and future and their intertwined nature. As for the café, it exists as much in the present as it does in the past and future.

Thirdly, the sepia hue that engulfs the café is often related to nostalgia. Mostly used in order to make something look classic and vintage, it has the same effect on the cafe. Even in the present, it arouses an acute awareness of the past and the future. The fact that one can visit the past but not change it gives a feeling of nostalgia and melancholy which is represented by this colour. It evokes a warmth that the opportunity to revisit the past brings, along with the inevitable sorrow that resides in having to let go.

However, while the writer takes measures in order to locate the café in a way that divorces it from the nature, Kawaguchi emphasizes the role that the outer world plays in the functioning of the café. He points out how the café's location is chosen from an ecological perspective. Situated in a basement allows it to maintain a pleasant temperature at all times. In the summer it is kept cool, while in the winter there is a warmth in the café. Kawaguchi also emphasizes the absence of air conditioners in the cafe. This shows the writer's sensitivity to the environmental issues. A research points out,

“Air conditioners remove not only ambient heat from buildings, but they expel heat from their use of electricity. In other words, coolers don't just move heat from the inside to the outdoors, they also add new heat just by being machines that consume power. In fact, Tokyo sucks up about 1.6 gigawatts of electricity for every 2 degrees of warming on a hot summer day, the researchers say. That's equivalent to the output of one-and-a-half nuclear power plants” (o'Hanlon, 2007, p.1).

Thus, urban cities like Tokyo suffer during summer seasons, the awareness of

which is apparent in Kawaguchi's writing. It is important to note that these mentions do not make any major contributions to the plot, hence it is an indication of Kawaguchi's intellectual and emotional cognizance of the environmental challenges.

Apart from the above, Kawaguchi also mentions that in summer the temperature soars to thirty degrees Celsius which makes it difficult for a café even if located underground, to not become sweltering. The café has a large bladed ceiling fan, which is more useful in the circulation of air than to generate a strong breeze to calm down the temperature. The writer also points out that the highest temperature recorded in Japan is forty-one degrees Celsius, however, the café happens to be pleasantly cool even then. (Kawaguchi, 2019, p. 58)

In the aforementioned lines, Kawaguchi engages in a bio-sensory dialogue. In contrast to an Anthropocene understanding of the environment, which positions humans as dominant figures with an inherent compulsion to exploit all natural resources, he presents a more bio-sense-oriented perspective on the dynamics between humans and the environment. This perspective acknowledges the exploitation that humans are practicing on nature, recognizing ways in which it is both avoidable and unavoidable.

Donna Haraway, in her book 'Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene', talks about 'Sympoiesis'. The word which literally means 'creating together' was introduced in order to do away with the word 'Autopoiesis' which means done by one's self. Thus, through this concept, Haraway conveys how no single thing exists in a vacuum. This encourages one to consider the co-makers and co-existing components of everything including the environment.

In the book, the author references the 'Higurashi Cicada'. This insect is commonly heard in Japan during autumn and late summer. Kawaguchi employs the imagery of the insect to evoke a sense of nostalgia and melancholy. He notes that the abura cicada and min min cicada are associated with images of intense sunlight, midsummer, and hot days, while the higurashi cicada is linked to evening and late summer. The author further incorporates the insect into his narrative as follows:

"It was one August evening. Outside, the abura cicada was loudly shrilling, *jee jee jee jee*. The weather office had reported this day had been the hottest of the year. But in the café, it was cool despite the lack of air conditioning." (Kawaguchi, 2019, p. 166)

Furthermore, the author introduces the presence of a spectral entity in the form of a female occupant of the seat that facilitates time travel. This apparition functions as a keeper of balance between the different dimensions of the universe. The regulations that Kazu the waitress introduces serve as guardians of the time-traveling system. The ghost not only exemplifies interconnectedness but is also Earthbound. Donna Haraway, through her concept of Earth-bound terrestrial beings, proposed the necessity to reject transcendence in favour of addressing the Earth's challenges. If, in the process of time traveling, one fails to return by consuming the coffee before it becomes cold, one transforms into the ghost occupying the seat. This emphasizes the importance of

confronting the consequences of one's inactions. Consequently, the ghost becomes an extension of the cafe's ecology, not separate from human relations but deeply intertwined with them. In the first part of the book titled 'The Lovers', which narrates the story of unrequited love between Goro and Fumiko, after she returns from the past, the ghost smiles, closing the book named 'The Lovers'. This action reinforces the notion of her existence, not as separate from humans but in connection to them, even playing an active role in the events throughout the novel.

This is Kawaguchi's special take on the nonhuman entities of the natural world. He addresses not just the weather, and the insects but even the ghosts who inhabit the earth. The world is not just home to humans who have substantial emotions and intellect but also to the vast network of non-human entities, both living and non-living, that collectively shape and sustain the earth's ecological balance.

Results

Toshikazu Kawaguchi has employed magical realism in his book 'Before the Coffee Gets Cold'. Through his narrative, he has addressed issues such as trauma, memory, and introspection. The novel explores the necessity for individuals to live in the present and pursue life without regrets. However, he notably writes in a manner that does not confer an unequivocal advantage to humans and their experiences; rather, he positions them within a balanced ecosystem where all natural entities coexist and function simultaneously. He utilizes methods to incorporate ecology into his writing, thereby inspiring authors to compose narratives with an awareness of ecological realities.

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