



Climate Fiction & Climate Action: A Comparative Study with other Movements

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact climate fiction can have on climate action; by looking at how other social movements have been impacted by fiction. The paper, having explored these arguments concludes with arguments of how fiction can impact activism, even climate activism, and leaves open for future researchers the question of what in the narrative and or medium might have been hindering this before, and what has been changed for the better, while inferring what else can be done to make cli-fi more impactful.

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Introduction

Climate fiction or cli-fi is a genre of literature that focuses on climate change related narratives such as the problems of development v/s nature, balance between humans and the ecosystem etc. Some argue that it is a 2000s genre, emerging as a response to the climate change discourse that has become an essential problem of the 21st century. The term "cli-fi" is generally credited to freelance news reporter and climate activist Dan Bloom, who coined it in either 2007 or 2008. (Plantz) (Global Warming, The Rise of Sci-Fi, 2013)

The publication of Robinson's "The Ministry for the Future" in 2020 firmly established the genre's emergence according to some, given the work's presidential acclaim. Yet, such nature-based narratives have been popular for a very long time, especially during the first wave of English environmentalism (Guha) ^[8] where many poets and authors campaigned against the rapid urbanization of the English landscape as seen in the works of Larkin, and even Professor Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" The Romantics of English Literature were known for their nature-based lyrics predominantly. In many South Asian cultures, including Indian culture, stories of the struggles and co-existence of humans and nature have a long history. More recent works of Indian Literature like Amitav Ghosh's "The Hungry Tide" are firmly in the established genre of climate fiction, which differs from past nature-based works.

Climate fiction is not just limited to books. In cinema, there was the slew of early 2000s disaster movies, which usually focused on nature turning against humans and survival. Yet, one can argue that climate-fiction in modern cinema started with movies like "Godzilla" and the kaiju genre that gave us pieces like "Pacific Rim" etc. One of the most recent entries into the genre was "Do not Look Up," which follows the scientific community trying to communicate with politicians about an existential threat. In India, short films like "Carbon: The Story of Tomorrow" tackle issues such as pollution and water shortage. Alongside this, we have movies like "Kaun Kitne Pani Mei." Movies like "Snowpiercer", "Princess Mononoke", and James Cameron's "Avatar" have also gained praise globally.

This paper seeks to explore what impact climate fiction works have had on the public perception of climate change, and climate action, and how long any effects last using pre-done studies. The results will be compared to the documented impact of fiction on other social movements such as feminism, the civil rights movement in America, and the gay rights movement to see whether there is comparable difference and if so, what the genre of cli-fi can learn from those that came before it.

Methods Used

The paper "Climate Fiction & Climate Action" aims to build on existing research on the topic, using a comparative analysis method when comparing the impact of movement on different social movements, to hopefully find similarities and differences that can then be applied to climate fiction to induce climate action.

Discussion

To begin with we will look at notable studies in the area of how cli-fi impacts climate thought and action. While one study found that cli-fi's impact on readers is short-lived (does-climate-fiction-make-a-difference, 2021) the authors themselves cite other research to note that "the effects of a single exposure in an artificial setting may represent a lower bound of the real-world effects, as has been argued multiple times. Reading climate fiction in the real world often involves multiple exposures and longer narratives", such as novels, "which may result in larger and longer-lasting impacts." (Kalia, 2021; does-climate-fiction-make-a-difference, 2021) This lends some credence to the idea that continued exposure to cli-fi can impact readers, pushing them into awareness (Kalia, 2021) and perhaps even discourse, something that is supported by an empirical study focused on the popular novel "*The Water Knife*" which found that cautionary climate fiction set in a dystopic future can be effective at raising awareness and empathy for climate injustice and climate refugees. Yet, it was also found that sometimes dystopian cli-fi can lead to ecofascist attitudes (does-climate-fiction-make-a-difference, 2021), If climate fiction might lead some people to associate climate change with intensely negative emotions, that can prove counterproductive to "efforts at environmental engagement or persuasion." Aka climate action. A survey by the same author also interestingly noted that readers of climate fiction "are younger, more liberal, and more concerned about climate change than non-readers", and that climate fiction "reminds concerned readers of the severity of climate change while impelling them to imagine environmental futures and consider the impact of climate change on human and nonhuman life." (SCHNEIDER-MAYERSON) This seems to lead one to believe that climate fiction has no impact on those who aren't already interested in climate discourse, or perhaps those who aren't involved in this space do not engage with climate fiction, showing a need for more popular climate narratives. This is also supported by a 2018 survey in the US, where moviegoers post watching a popular sci-fi movie about climate change seemed more concerned with their carbon footprint than those that did not see the movie. (Kalia, 2021) Yet, the study itself says that a more nuanced reading will make another conclusion seem more likely. While it is possible that readers of cli-fi were already engaged with the topic before, the authors speculate that the engagement with climate fiction can increase their urgency towards the topic.

(SCHNEIDER-MAYERSON) While readers have had a divided response on whether reading cli-fi changed their perceptions of climate change, with some saying it made them see the issue more vividly and others responding with no major change in their views, one striking aspect of the study is that cli-fi works were shared via recommendation and not required reading, leading one to infer that cli-fi can create cultural discourse, at least among liberals, since conservatives reported the works to be "ridiculous." The study finally concluded that while cli-fi is leading to conversations and small behavioural changes, none of them were actually helpful in mitigation or adaptation of climate change, thus highlighting the need for nuanced and effective climate solutions to become popular, in both discourse and cli-fi. (SCHNEIDER-MAYERSON)

Thus, multiple studies have concluded that such awareness without cultural messages and possible actions will not result in actionable impact. To see how to solve for this climate fiction-action nexus, we decided to see how fiction accelerated feminism, the civil rights movement in America, and the gay rights movement in the early 2000s.

Impact of Fiction on Feminism

While essays like "A Room of My Own" and non-fiction works such as "The Second Sex," have documented positive impact in the struggle for women's rights, in this paper we will focus more on fictional works and how they contributed to the same. Victorian feminist literature, for example, is credited with not only giving women a source of financial independence through their writing, but also sparked conversations around women's rights, by presenting alternative paths for women, alongside strong female characters that stood in stark contrast to the then social expectations of submissive women. (Bilal, 2023) ^[2] While Victorian literature also tried to enforce traditional roles (Tanya Dangi, 2024) ^[13], works like Ibsen's "A Doll's House," "Jane Eyre," and more challenged those notions, while contemporary works like "The Handmaid's Tale," have started using transcendental media to explore the impact of patriarchy on women's psyche, through both literature and adaptations. To sum it up,

"Literature has both reinforced and challenged traditional gender norms, serving as a mirror of societal expectations and as a catalyst for feminist and gender discourse.... However, as feminist movements and gender studies gained momentum, literature became a medium for questioning and deconstructing these norms. Writers such as Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, and Margaret Atwood challenged the limitations imposed on women." (Tanya Dangi, 2024) ^[13]

While we cannot argue that the impact literature and fiction had on empowering women and helping the feminist movement happened in a vacuum, we can say that the movement both created feminist fiction and benefitted from it. This seems to be two-fold mainly. One by shifting social perceptions of women, whether that be by highlighting their struggles or creating characters that do not follow social expectations, and another by providing female voices a stage to speak on, that could reach a wider audience and start discourse.

While we see that climate fiction or cli-fi is leading to an increase in awareness in concerned readers for at least a short period of time, the major difference in the impact of feminist

fiction and cli-fi seems to be the lack of actionable impact in the case of cli-fi. While this has been said to be due to a lack of cultural messaging and possible actionable ideas, one must question this, since feminist literature was able to accelerate the feminist movement in a time when the culture saw female works as “subversive and dangerous.” (Bilal, 2023) ^[2] Could this then be a place where climate storytelling can step in, by educating people on possible nuanced solutions and thus creating the cultural ecosystem needed for lasting impact from climate storytelling and ultimately community action and awareness of the climate urgency?

To see whether this stands across social movements, we are now going to examine the impact of fiction on the queer and the civil rights movements.

Impact of Fiction on Civil Rights Movement

One of the commonly read works in India that talks about the issues of civil rights and racism in the USA is Harper Lee’s “To Kill a Mockingbird.” Widely credited as a book that showed the realities of the American South, the book tackles racism, the imperfections of the legal system, and discrimination while also providing a timeless bildungsroman that readers can still relate to more than half a decade later. Praised by the then President Barak Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama for “changing America for the better,” “To Kill a Mockingbird,” alongside other works of Civil Rights Cinema and Literature played an important role in showing what racism in America looked like. While “To Kill a Mockingbird,” shared the flaws of focusing on white saviours like Atticus Finch and sanitized settings like the courtroom, over the voices and struggles of Black activists themselves, the movie adaptation was highly influential as it was “the first major production that directly addressed racism and oppression.” (Civil Rights Cinema and its Impact Nearly 60 Years Later, n.d.)

Works like “In the heat of the night”, proved that in times when racism was at its height, fiction in the form of books and cinema could be a tool for activism and change, despite cultural opposition, once again making one question why climate fiction fails to do the same at a large scale. Due to the sheer number of narratives, we can conclude it is not the lack of narratives. (SCHNEIDER-MAYERSON) Are the narratives not powerful enough? Or is it simply that big production houses have become more comfortable portraying climate activists in a non-nuanced and caricature style light to gain views from mainstream viewers?

Impact of Fiction on Gay Rights Movement

When talking about the impact of fiction and storytelling on the Gay Rights Movement, especially in the US, one cannot not mention the 2009 TV Comedy, “Modern Family.” A show that remains popular even today, it was one of the first to centre a gay couple as one of the three main family dynamics shown. While the creators worried about losing viewers from the largest sit-com population in America, they felt the story would be incomplete without Mitch and Cam’s romance. The two characters’ love also followed and impacted more than public perception. While the two start out as living together because gay marriage wasn’t yet legal in many parts of the US, the show has led to many viewers changing their minds on the topic. (Modern Family star: ‘Gay pop culture touchstones are important’) While this show had come at a time where single gay people were acceptable, even in the ballot Americans had shown their distaste for gay

couples. While people loved Mitch and Camerom, especially since the creators of the show used the genius tactic of showing them as new parents instead of giving them gay-only storylines and thus making the two relatable to a wider audience, there was significant opposition and even calls to ban ABC for daring to run the show. The show was called “poison,” and even a danger to the American family. Additional gay viewers demanded on screen affection, but the creators knew that such acts were seen as controversial and had in the 90s led to hearing and almost got PBD defunded. Despite this, thanks to masterful writing, the show tackled the issue such that on-screen affection (and the previous lack of it) for Mitch and Cam became normal, and not a gay issue. That episode “The Kiss” even won awards for its writing. While the impact of Mitch and Cam was not solely fiction, but also activism by the actors themselves, but the writing made it easy for all viewers to see Mitch and Cameron as “just another couple,” regardless of them being both men. The character of Jay, the father of Mitch, is also uncomfortable with the wedding to the point of not attending, and the writers show his change of heart. This storyline is said to have impacted a huge change in voters’ vote for marriage equality. Research itself has shown that if gay couples are given significant screen-time, the same importance as straight couples, and are unopposed by significant authority figures, viewers tend to re-think their prejudice towards gay couples in real-life. (Baume, 2022) ^[1]

Once again, we see that despite mixed cultural reception, fiction can play a positive role in advancing social movements and changing public perception. Perhaps then, the issue with climate-fiction is the complexity of the subject, but more importantly the portrayal of climate activists and researchers and workers in non-climate centric fiction and media. While works like “Do not Look Up,” which focus on the topic are well-received due to their metaphors being universal to other situations as well (dont-look-up-officially-breaks-netflix-weekly-viewing-record, 2022), in shows like “Modern Family” itself, climate activists are sometimes the butt of the joke, despite Mitchelle or Mitch himself being an environmental lawyer, and the opposing activist being perhaps a bit over enthusiastic about the subject.

The Impact of Fiction on Activism as Seen So Far

Feminist fiction, queer fiction, and civil rights fiction all accelerated action as shown in the previous sections, despite significant pushback from cultural norms. (Tanya Dangi, 2024) ^[13] (Civil Rights Cinema and its Impact Nearly 60 Years Later, n.d.) In the case of queer fiction, we saw that is due to a positive portrayal of gay couples, that puts them on par with their straight counterparts, whereas feminist fiction brought to light the plights and prowess of women, while civil rights fiction unveiled the truth about racism and showed how people of all colour are human at the end of the day. As such, one can conclude, that when shown as “normal and relatable” and not disruptive or as a caricature, alongside appealing to emotion and the idea that we are all alike in the end, fiction and fictional portrayals of activists can accelerate activism. After shows like “Modern Family,” tv shows and books showcasing LGBT relations have seen an immense spike. Gone are the days when they were portrayed as only background characters or comic relief. Instead, we have characters with depth like never before as shown in “Sense8”. While the fight for women’s equality continues both on reel and in reality, stories like Plath’s “The Bell Jar” have taken

the battle to the psyche of women under oppression (Tanya Dangi, 2024)^[13], showing them as fully fledged humans with autonomy and in Indian cinema, we see stories like “Lipstick under my Burkha,” showing how sexual oppression under the guise of culture stops and humiliates women for the same need that we see celebrated in men every day. While in the case of the rights of people of colour, the world has progressed over the years and we are in a global society with media showing intersectionality and the struggles of characters who are marginalized on multiple levels and their road to success, like the character of Captain Holt in “Brooklyn 99,” there also been pockets of discord leading to regression, visible to the masses in the age of media whether that be through social media platforms or fiction. An example of the same is the show “The Rookie,” where the character of John Nolan is told explicitly that as a white cop he has been given respect that a person of colour would never have had they been accused of his crimes. Another example from the same show is the character of Jackson West, whose arc explored a lot of racism done by white cops to coloured communities, at the behest of the actor. These storylines show the abuse of power and how when coupled with racism and lack of systemic accountability, it can not only hurt the communities the system wants to protect but also hurt those asking for a better change. While fictional and probably sensationalized, these stories continue to spark conversations in offices and homes, like feminist fiction had done for women in times past.

The question now is that despite science fiction focused on the climate is influencing thought and starting discourse, is it leading to effective actionable change like “Modern Family” did?

Conclusion: The Role of Climate Fiction in Activism and What We Learnt So Far

With works like “Wall-E” and “Do not Look Up,” we have seen that fiction tackling issues or set against the backdrop of settings like pollution or wilful government ignorance can entertain if done right.

Now, the goal is to make it effective in causing climate action, which from what this paper seems to have found can be done by increasing exposure to climate narratives (Bruce, 2017), creating shareable narratives that induce hope and transportation- perhaps by being believable in their radical descriptions of the future, especially for those who are somewhere in the low to middle end of the climate anxiety scale (Brandon McWilliams, 2024)^[3] and make people feel empowered to tackle climate issues as done by feminist narratives, provide climate solutions as done by feminist narratives, and also show climate enthusiasts as normal people like “Modern Family” did with gay couples (Baume, 2022)^[1], instead of showing climate activists as caricatures or Debbie downers which shows like “How I Met Your Mother,” tend to do. From the civil rights movements we can learn how to show raw and unflinching tales without making the readers feel hopeless as apocalyptic climate fiction can sometimes do to the detriment of the movement. Feminist works like ‘The Testaments’ (2019), have also used an imagination of gender dynamics in the future to reflect on present inequalities, something that speculative cli-fi could use to show present intersectional struggles exuberated by climate change or to showcase the biological impact of climate change that might occur in the near future.

Shows like “Loki” which use storytelling to bring the realities

of climate change into the popular discourse as done in two episodes, play an important role in that regard as they take climate change from the research labs and make it real for everyone, by blending it with everyday life. (Kalia, 2021) This will help create a cultural environment where activism can thrive, especially if we can learn from the flaws of movies like “Interstellar” where the climate part of the story was lost in the larger picture.

As shown again and again, movies about climate change do tend to indirectly increase a sense of personal responsibility, but also unfortunately lead to guilt (SCHNEIDER-MAYERSON) and don’t really show any major changes in the idea of human responsibility, perhaps because people believe that extreme events as depicted on reel will never happen. (Kalia, 2021) Furthermore, shows like “Loki,” can show the intersectional nature climate chaos, by depicting the plight of women, children, the less affluent, the disabled, and the marginalised in these stories (Kalia, 2021). We can infer, that such stories can be appealing to a larger audience, and might thus get more people in the climate movement, yet we must remember to make the narratives engaging, hopeful, if possible community-oriented (Brandon McWilliams, 2024)^[3] and empowering towards actions that actually make a difference. Further, we must see how long-term exposure to such narratives effect readers’ response to climate action, and also account for the impacts of framing in the research cited. (Brandon McWilliams, 2024)^[3]

Cli-fi, especially in films, does tend to spark discourse, but its impact seems limited compared to historical relationships between fiction and activism. Whether that is due to a lack of positive portrayals, or simply because the genre is in its nascent stages in popular media despite being around since the works of Jules Verne, or due to the negative feelings such narratives inspire or due to a lack of longer more engaging and popular cli-fi texts or because of a lack of presented solutions can be researched upon further. From previous movements, we know fiction that shows marginalized communities in an empowered or normalized light and gives us access to their realities can help accelerate activism, which could be useful in showing the intersectional impacts of climate change, and moving away from the media view of climate activists as disruptive clowns.

Scope for Further Research

Future researchers can look at what, if any changes, are needed to make the medium and narrative of climate fiction to ensure climate fiction has the same impact that other works of fiction have said on their respective social movements, apart from what is mentioned in the paper.

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