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ON ECOCIDE IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE: MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*, LE CLÉZIO'S *ALMA*, AND FELICIA MIHALI'S *LE TAROT DE CHEFFERSVILLE*

Abstract: This paper examines ecological degradation and ecocide as the culminating phase in the literary representation of ecosystem decline, focusing on selected works of contemporary French and Francophone literature—Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio's *Alma* and Felicia Mihali's *Le Tarot de Cheffersville*—as well as the oeuvre of renowned Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood (*The Handmaid's Tale, The Testaments*). It offers a brief diachronic overview of environmental consciousness in French literature and contemporary popular culture. The analysis of these novels suggests that environmental degradation and destruction exert profound consequences not only on nature, but also on communities and individual lives.

Keywords: ecocide, French literature, Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, Felicia Mihali, Margaret Atwood

1. The Concept of Ecocide in Contemporary Culture

As one of the most pressing and least resolvable issues of contemporary society, the relationship toward the environment and its ongo-

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ing devastation serves as a powerful source of artistic inspiration and a call to action for activists. The concept of "ecocide" has emerged as the shameful apex of potentially irreversible environmental decline, representing the final stage of ecological degradation. The term gained prominence in the 1970s. According to the Independent Expert Panel for the Legal Definition of Ecocide, it refers to "unlawful or wanton acts committed with knowledge that there is a substantial likelihood of severe and either widespread or long-term damage to the environment being caused by those acts" (Stop Ecocide International, 2021). The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) notes that, since 2021, there has been an ongoing legal effort to recognize ecocide as a criminal offense under international law, alongside crimes against humanity, genocide, and aggression (UNICRI, 2012). In 2024, the Belgian Penal Code introduced a provision recognizing ecocide as a crime of international significance (Stop Ecocide International, 2025).

The theme of ecocide, as a pressing issue that deeply unsettles the broader public, appears in several works of popular culture produced in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, some of which have achieved significant acclaim. For instance, in the song "Na Zapadu ništa novo" ("All Quiet on the Western Front"), from the 1981 album Mrtva priroda *(Still Life*), rock poet Borisav Bora Đorđević declares, "Factories poison the environment," while in the music video, he and the band members wear gas masks. Notably, the song was composed by piecing together newspaper headlines, pointing—through Đorđević's signature blend of humor and social satire—to the burning issues of the time (which, as it turns out, remain relevant today). Rock music is known for its pursuit of social justice and its tendency to spotlight urgent problems of contemporary society (Gajić 2021; Dylan 2024), and this song affirms that role by highlighting pollution as one of the major concerns as early as the 1980s, a concern to which society has continued to respond with troubling passivity.

Later, the globally acclaimed film *Apocalypto* (2006), directed by Mel Gibson, opens with a quote from the renowned historian and philosopher Will Durant, stating that great civilizations fall only when they

are destroyed from within[2]. This sets the tone for the film's exploration of the dangers of environmental devastation and the exploitative treatment of laborers, illustrated through the harrowing pollution faced by jungle warriors. One of the central themes is the ritual sacrifice of human lives. A large and traumatic part of the film depicts the forced labor of individuals abducted from rainforest tribes and subjected to unhealthy working conditions in the city.

Perhaps the most clearly articulated example is the film *Dark Waters* (2019), which recounts a true story originally reported by The New York Times (Rich, 2016), about the legal case won by attorney Robert Bilott against the chemical industry giant DuPont, the manufacturer of Teflon. The case resulted in settlements exceeding 753 billion dollars, following revelations that the corporation had improperly disposed of toxic waste, endangering both human health and the environment. The film explores the legal battle and its many challenges, as well as the operations of corporations that disregard the health of their employees, the surrounding population, and the natural world. In this sense, the film is highly illustrative, documenting evidence of irreversible chemical pollution: some synthetic compounds, notably, cannot be eliminated from the human body.

The bleak reality of ecological disruption and the profound disorientation it engenders is perhaps most poignantly illustrated in a passage from David Albahari's short story "Learning Cyrillic", in which the autodiegetic (and potentially autobiographical) narrator, a recent immigrant to Canada, befriends an Indigenous man he encounters and gradually learns about his family and tribal history. The story appears in the collection *Another Language*, published in 2003.

> Storm Cloud and I are sitting in the library. In front of us lies a pile of books about North American Indigenous peoples. Storm Cloud shows me a photograph of Crowfoot, the greatest chief of the Siksika. In the image, we see Crowfoot, presumably his wife, and eight children. The caption beneath the photo states it was taken in 1884, and within the next six years, nearly all of them died from tubercu-

[2] "A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within."

losis and other illnesses, including Crowfoot himself. I imagine all those diseases, all those swift and lingering deaths, words swirling in delirium, the loss of hope, the absence of comfort, the vast prairie that suddenly offers no protection. You could mount the fastest horse and ride until it collapsed from exhaustion, says Storm Cloud, and still you wouldn't escape the sickness. And that, he continues, is the most terrifying horror the white man brought with him—the ability to kill both near and far, whether present or absent.We were not afraid of death, Storm Cloud says, but that meant an honorable death—in battle, from a wound, or from old age, when the body returns to the Creator. Now we had to face a death that kills for the sake of killing, as if it takes pleasure in it. Storm Cloud falls silent, placing his palms on the table. Outside, snow is falling. (str. 235–236).

Writers and scholars in the humanities increasingly direct their attention toward the emotional consequences of environmental degradation and its impact on mental health – aspects long overshadowed by the unchecked drive of capitalist growth. In recent decades, science fiction literature has become a key medium for examining both the environmental consequences of human activity and the prevailing attitudes toward them. This body of work merits a more detailed exploration in a separate study. The present paper, however, will focus on several popular and more recent works of French, Francophone, and Canadian Anglophone literature, which likewise foreground environmental degradation and its consequences, and which actively invite reflection on these urgent issues.

2. Ecocide in French and Francophone Literatures: Le Clézio's *Alma* and Mihali's *Le Tarot de Cheffersville*

In French-language literature, the idea of the ecosystem's significance emerged quite early. Notably, as far back as the medieval French epic poem *Charlemagne's Voyage to Jerusalem and Constantinople* (*Le*

Voyage de Charlemagne à Jérusalem et à Constantinople)[3], composed in the mid-12th century, we encounter the notion that the loss of an ecosystem is irreparable, and therefore profoundly terrifying. This comic *chanson de geste* portrays the rivalry between the Frankish and Byzantine empires[4], gently mocking Charlemagne and his knights (whose heroic deeds are celebrated in other works of the genre), while simultaneously highlighting their faith and guilelessness. In the contest between Charlemagne and the Frankish nobles on one side, and the Byzantine emperor Hugo the Mighty on the other, following the famous boasting scene of the Franks (*la scène des gabs*), the Byzantines compel the Franks to fulfill each of their exaggerated claims. God intervenes to assist them, yet the Byzantines remain undeterred, even in the face of the Franks' astonishing feats that defy the limits of possibility. The turning point arrives when, at the command of a Frankish knight, the rivers overflow their banks and cause massive flooding, forcing the emperor and his retinue to seek refuge atop a castle (ch. XLVII–XLIX).

> *God, in His celestial Glory performed such a miracle*
> *That he had the whole river leave its bed,*
> *Spread over the fields—in full sight of all—*
> *Enter the city and flood the cellars*
> *And drench and soak King Hugo's people;*
> *The King flees on foot to his highest tower. (774-779)*[5]

As this represented the greatest trial the Byzantines had faced—despite the many marvels the Franks had previously staged for them, sur-

[3] This comic *chanson de geste* is also known as *The Pilgrimage of Charlemagne* (*Le Pèlerinage de Charlemagne*).

[4] As a developed and technologically advanced empire—yet also distant—the Byzantine Empire attracted a certain degree of critical scrutiny from medieval Western Europe. In this vein, one may read the famous medieval epistle *The Letter of Prester John* (*La lettre du prêtre Jean*), which portrays the magnificent East and can be interpreted as an anti-Byzantine pamphlet (Gosman, 1982).

[5] *The Journey of Charlemagne to Jerusalem and Constantinople (Le Voyage de Charlemagne à Jérusalem et à Constantinople*), edited and translated by Jean-Louis G. Picherlt, Summa Publications, Inc. Birmingham, Alabama 1984

passing even the laws of nature—it is only here that they capitulate and concede primacy to the Franks, for nature itself cannot be subdued.

However ancient and instructive it may be, this example did not resonate as strongly as Ronsard's elegy *Against the Lumberjacks of the Forest of Gastine* (*Élégie contre les bûcherons de la forêt de Gâtine*) (Ronsard, pp. 57–58), published in *Élégies, mascarades et bergeries* in 1565. In this beautiful Renaissance poem, written in Ronsard's rich and fluid poetic idiom, sorrow over the destruction of the forest is conveyed through depictions of emptiness caused by the disappearance of flora and fauna, the extinguishing of natural phenomena (such as the wind, personified as Zephyr), and the suffering of mythological beings (Echo, silvans, satyrs, nymphs). Ronsard implores the woodcutters to cease their work, warning that beneath the bark of the trees dwell nymphs who will bleed, and marvels at their inability to perceive them, thus pointing to the ineffable beauty of the forest. The poem also found considerable resonance in the visual arts, serving as inspiration for *The Executioners of the Woods* (*Les Bourreaux des bois*), a painting by Gabriel Guay, a 19th-century French academic artist.

Madame de Sévigné's *Letters* (Sévigné, 1953), in which the blessings of nature are mentioned on several occasions, are also of considerable significance[6]. However, in a letter dated May 27, 1680, addressed to her daughter, Madame de Grignan, this emblematic figure of classical epistolary literature laments the felling of a forest and portrays it as a crime. Her son had ordered the woods to be cut down in order to repay his debts; yet the money was soon spent, and what remained was a desolation, which the writer describes as follows:

> Toutes ces dryades affligées que je vis hier, tous ces vieux sylvains qui ne savent plus où se retirer, tous ces anciens corbeaux établis depuis deux cents ans dans l'horreur de ces bois, ces chouettes qui, dans cette obscurité, annonçoient, par leurs funestes cris, les malheurs de tous les hommes ; tout cela me fit hier des plaintes qui me touchèrent sensiblement le cœur ; et que sait-on même si plusieurs de ces vieux chênes n'ont point parlé, comme celui où

[6] On the importance of nature in Mme de Sévigné's letters to her daughter, see Dimitrijević, 1953, p. 18.

> étoit Clorinde ? Ce lieu étoit un luogo d'incanto, s'il en fut jamais: j'en revins toute triste; le soupé que me donna le premier président et sa femme ne fut point capable de me réjouir (Mme de Sévigné, s. a.)[7]

In the spirit of classical poetics, which draws upon antiquity (Vitanović, 1971), she depicts nature through the lens of mythological beings—dryads and silvans. The emotional devastation due to the forest's loss is stark: her sorrow is so profound that not even a social event to which she would ordinarily attach great importance[8] can dispel the emptiness left by the destruction of this ecosystem.

In contemporary literature, ecocide and its consequences have become a prominent and highly visible theme; indeed, the issue of environmental destruction is increasingly brought to the forefront. For example, French-Mauritian Nobel laureate Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio writes about the island where he was born, reflecting on its colonial and ecological history.

A prominent, if somber, thread in the novel *Alma* is the detailed depiction of the dodo bird (*Raphus cucullatus*, according to Linnaean binomial nomenclature), once native to Mauritius and ultimately eradicated[9]. Le Clézio emphasizes and meticulously describes this extinction

[7] "All those sorrowful dryads I saw yesterday, all those ancient silvans who knew not where to retreat, all those venerable ravens that had dwelled in the dread of these woods for two hundred years, all those owls who, in the darkness, heralded the misfortunes of humankind with their mournful cries—all of it lamented around me so powerfully that it deeply moved my heart. And who can say that many of those old oaks did not speak, like the one that once held Clorinda? This place was a true *luogo d'incanto*, if such places exist: I returned from there utterly sorrowful; not even the dinner at the president of the court's house, with his wife, could lift my spirits." (Author's translation; this letter was not included in the selection by R. Dimitrijević (De Sévigné, 1953)).

[8] In contrast, in the letter dated February 21 1689, describing the performance of Racine's play *Esther* at Saint-Cyr, Mme de Sévigné analyzes the play itself and also reflects on the broader social milieu surrounding the theatrical event, which was attended by the king. For more on salon life as a source of inspiration for this writer, see Dimitrijević, 1953, pp. 7–11.

[9] The cover of the Serbian edition features an illustration of the dodo bird, signifying its importance for the story.

to illustrate the extent to which ignorance and arrogance can trigger irreversible processes and lasting consequences, affecting future generations and evoking discomfort and remorse. The protagonist, Jérémie Felsen, a descendant of the island's colonizers, is devoted to researching the bird and its remains; indeed, he is haunted by its fate and driven by a desire to learn as much as possible about it. Through the novel, we encounter the harrowing story of Portuguese and Dutch sailors arriving on the island in the 16th and 17th centuries, and their reckless treatment of the dodo, a bird unaccustomed to predators. They reportedly killed the dodo, slightly larger than a goose, with ease using wooden clubs[10]. 150 years after the colonizers' arrival, the species became extinct—not only due to hunting for meat, but also because of the introduction of invasive species (pigs, rats, monkeys) that threatened its survival. In short, human arrival on Mauritius radically altered the ecosystem: at least one species was wiped out, and the existing natural balance was permanently disrupted. Subsequent generations suffer the consequences, though nothing can bring back the long-extinct bird, which has become an infamous symbol of biodiversity loss in contemporary popular culture[11].

One of the earliest and most evocative instances of the narrator's focus on the dodo bird—and, by extension, toward the island's colonial history and his own existential relationship with contemporary Mauritius—appears within the opening pages of the novel.

> Still holding a smooth, round stone[12] in my hand, thinking: *Dodo, where are you?* I cry out its name, imagining that its guttural, rasping call as the sound of stones rolling down the ravine, or perhaps a scrape of white stone in its gullet: *DODODOdododo!*.

[10] The chapter in *Alma* entitled „The Last Voyage" describes the colonizer's attitude towards the bird (pp. 243-256). It is evident the author studied the dodo bird extensively, according to the Acknowledgements section (pp. 297–298).

[11] For instance, the web site https://www.thedodo.com/, popular on social media and among animal lovers, is named after this bird.

[12] The so-called gastric stone of the dodo bird—according to legend, the source from which the Sideroxylon grandiflorum, or broad-leaved ironwood tree, would sprout—was given to the protagonist by his father. (Le Clézio 2017, pp. 26–27) (Author's note).

> Bent forward, forehead resting on my knees, I wait, not knowing exactly what for – yet I feel I've been waiting for this moment for a long time, since I was a child, pressing the white stone to my cheek with eyes closed. Something ancient entering through my skin, through my closed eyelids, something that nourishes me, running through my blood, giving me a name, a birthplace, a past, a truth (p. 33).

Le Clézio reminds us that nature—and our relationship to it—is a powerful, if not crucial, element in shaping identity, not only of this island nation but of personal identity as well. The extinct dodo bird appears to symbolize the irreconcilability between colonial greed and reckless expansion, on the one hand, and the richness of a once lush, yet ultimately unprotected natural world, on the other[13].

Felicia Mihali, the Quebec-based writer of Romanian origin, takes a similar stance in her 2019 novel *Le Tarot de Cheffersville*. The novel contains autobiographical elements; moreover, on the title page the author herself dubs it a "docu-novel" (Fr. *docu-roman*), thereby emphasizing both its autobiographical and documentary dimensions. The novel documents the experiences of its protagonist, Augusta, as well as the objective circumstances that surround her. It is worth recalling that, like Augusta herself, Mihali lived in Francophone Canada and taught high school students. This novel stands as a written testimony to the reality she encountered during her time in Canada.

The town depicted in the novel is called Cheffersville, a name clearly linked to the mining settlement with a similar name – Shefferville, Quebec (Reiter, 2020). Following the closure of the mine, the town became largely deserted, inhabited by only a quarter of its former population. It is marked by widespread apathy and indifference, as well as hostility toward outsiders. As a legacy of colonialism, in this predominantly Indigenous community (Innu-Aimun), there is deep mistrust toward white newcomers of European descent.

[13] For more on this novel, see Novaković, 2020; Arsenijević Mitrić, 2023 (conference abstract and pre-print).

The author, in fact, examines the consequences of the residential school system (Fr. *écoles résidentielles*), a brutal practice that persisted throughout the 19th and 20th centuries[14]. In the name of assimilation, Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and educated in English or French, deprived of the opportunity to grow up within their own communities, speak their native languages, or inherit the knowledge and customs of their people[15]. This culturecidal policy was officially discontinued only in the 1990s, although activists had been advocating for the revitalization of Indigenous cultures since the 1970s.

Scholars of Indigenous cultures and traditions in Canada emphasize that these communities perceived themselves as inseparable from nature (Martin, 2010; Vaudrin-Charrette, 2015; Beauclair, 2018). Their mythologies, as well as by the work of contemporary Indigenous writers, confirm this. One such author is Joséphine Bacon, who writes in both Innu-Aimun and French. Common motifs in their myths and stories include the tundra, lichens, caribou, and similar elements (Vaudrin-Charrette, p. 155). As these scholars argue, the forced severance of Indigenous peoples from their intimate relationship with nature, the ancestral knowledge they preserved, and the lasting transformation of their landscapes—through confinement to reserves and later relocation to urban areas—has been equal to ecocide.

The effects of environmental degradation are manifested as the depression experienced by adolescents as well as older family members. The struggle with depression involves widespread substance abuse across generations, disinterest in education, distrust of outsiders, and suicide as its most extreme expression. One particularly harrowing scene unfolds during a suicide prevention workshop, where students share family stories about loved ones who have taken their own lives (pp. 198–199). Although Augusta does not understand the Indigenous

[14] Residential schools in Canada became mandatory in 1894; they were gradually phased out in the second half of the 20th century, with the last one closing in 1997.

[15] On Canada's indigenous nations, see the first issue of the journal *Filološki pregled* (2025) – in print.

language in which the workshop is conducted, the gestures alone make the subject painfully clear to her.

A pervasive sense of hopelessness permeates the sociological landscape of the novel, yet the author, a keenly observant educator, reveals something else: a dialogue between the two sides is possible, but it is obstructed by the authorities[16]. When it comes to the environment and the possibility of living in harmony with nature, in accordance with Indigenous cultural values, that vision seems irretrievably lost. Mihali's novel dissects the condition of Indigenous communities in smaller towns and the Canadian government's stance toward them. Although the portrayal is far from optimistic, her lucid analysis points to avenues for action and offers poignant examples of how the uneasy divide between Indigenous peoples and settlers might be bridged.

3. The Ecological Crisis in Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Universe

Although the primary focus is placed on women's rights—and arguably on medical ethics—the ecological crisis is very present in the work of Margaret Atwood, one of the most prominent Canadian and global novelists of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Far from serving merely as a grim backdrop to the dystopian narrative, the ecological crisis emerges as a distinct theme that invites critical reflection on society and demands proactive engagement[17]. The act of ecocide

[16] For example, it is possible to adapt the school curriculum to the needs of Indigenous communities (pp. 161–162), avoid the annual turnover of teachers discouraged by low salaries (p. 239), and refrain from rejecting older, more experienced staff due to inadequate compensation (p. 47), among other measures.

[17] For instance, contemporary secondary school programmes such as Cambridge International and the International Baccalaureate (IB) include subjects that require students to analyze modern society, identify pressing issues, and consider directions for mitigating those challenges. Courses like Global Perspectives and CAS (Creativity, Activity, Service) constitute a substantial portion of the curriculum—roughly one-seventh and one-eighth, respectively. Atwood's work, written as early as the 1980s, strikingly aligns

served as the initial spark for the widespread chaos that gave rise to the dictatorship, a development explored in depth throughout *The Testaments*. The root cause lay in a major environmental disruption, as described by Aunt Lydia:

> In that vanished country of mine, things had been on a downward spiral for years. The floods, the fires, the tornadoes, the hurricanes, the droughts, the water shortages, the earthquakes. Too much of this, too little of that. The decaying infrastructure—why hadn't someone decommissioned those atomic reactors before it was too late? The tanking economy, the joblessness, the falling birth rate. People became frightened. Then they became angry.
> (Atwood, 2020, p. 83).

The restriction of human rights in Gilead unfolds together with the erosion of environmental entitlements—including the right to maintain gardens, or even potted plants. Access to any form of ecosystem was severely restricted (pp. 21, 30, 50, 283 et passim). The Commander's Wife is permitted a garden, yet both the duration of her presence there and the motives behind it are strictly codified; the Guardian Nick occupies a starkly furnished room devoid of any plant life; and the Handmaid Ofglen can only recall earlier times when people visited parks, observed the earth after rainfall, tended gardens, and so on.

With the disappearance of a healthy ecosystem comes the disenfranchisement of the individual—bodily autonomy is lost:

> People made speeches. A Canadian relative of a woman who'd died in the Gilead Colonies cleaning up deadly radiation talked about slave labour. The leader of the Survivors of Gilead National Homelands Genocide told about the forced marches to North Dakota, where people had been crowded like sheep into fenced-in ghost towns with no food and water [...]" (Atwood, 2020, p. 66).

with the pedagogical objectives of these subjects, as she brings to the fore the fragilities of modern economics, human rights, and ecological systems.

A particularly significant space in Gilead, concealed from both the female protagonists and the readers, is the Colonies: toxic wastelands used as dumping grounds for nuclear waste, where so-called Unwomen are sent. These sites are doubly perilous: first, due to the real threat of contamination, and second, because they function as penal colonies. The Unwomen—infertile women, or those deemed unusable within Gilead's ideological framework—are exiled there. Among them are nuns who chose this punishment over abandoning their value systems[18].

The protest march against Gilead, heralding freedom from oppression, clearly articulates environmental issues:

> Some kids had added green signs: GILEAD, CLIMATE SCIENCE DE-LIAR! GILEAD WANTS US TO FRY!, with pictures of forest fires and dead birds and fish and people. Several teachers and some volunteer parents were going to come with us to make sure nothing violent happened to us. (Atwood, 2020, pp. 62–63).

The root of this dehumanizing attitude toward all forms of life lies in a fundamental disregard for the environment. From there, repression took the form of restricting access to a healthy living space. Atwood urges us to reflect critically and act promptly to prevent ecological collapse and ecocide—and warns of the very real possibility that such chaos could give rise to a dictatorial regime.

[18] „Women's Prayvaganzas are for group weddings like this, usually. The men's are for military victories. [...] Sometimes though, for the women, they're for a nun who recants. Most of that happened earlier, when they were rounding them up, but they still unearth a few these days, dredge them up from underground, where they've been hiding, like moles [...] The old ones they send off to the Colonies right away, but the young fertile ones they try to convert [...]. They aren't allowed to become Wives though; they're considered, still, too dangerous for positions of such power [...]. They always have those welts, they've always done that time, so rumour goes: they don't let go easily. Many of them choose the Colonies instead. None of us likes to draw one for a shopping partner. They are more broken than the rest of us; it's hard to feel comfortable with them." (Atwood, 2006, pp. 240–241). Atwood describes religious persecution in Gilead many times in the novel (e.g., pp. 30, 43, 90 *et passim*).

4.Conclusion

Ecology remains one of the central concerns of contemporary thought and education, as is evident in modern literature and other arts. The degradation of ecosystems has prompted authors to examine this phenomenon from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives, focusing primarily on its impact on individuals and society, as well as the motivations and intense emotions it evokes.

In the novels analyzed in this paper, ecocide appears either as a central theme or as part of the broader context—manifesting in its most severe forms, or as the degradation and violent alteration of ecosystems caused by human activity. Authors consistently highlight the dangers this poses to both the physical and mental health of populations, as well as to collective identity, while simultaneously calling for more thoughtful planning and responsible action.

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