

Instances Of Environmental Concerns In Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*

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Abstract

Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010) fictionally depicts instances of real environmental issues. It is the story of a Berglund family. The main character Walter Burglund fights for the protection of nature throughout his lifetime. A good section of the novel is devoted to describe Walter's support for the Cerulean Mountain Trust, a group that works to save the endangered cerulean warbler by establishing a bird's sanctuary in West Virginia. Walter is a lawyer who devoted his life for environmental causes. Vin Haven, a Texan, rich tycoon who is motivated by the noble cause, plans to undertake coal strip mining operation and then constructs the bird sanctuary as a corrective action. The article looks into the mindset of the modernity where people take up developmental project at the cost of nature.

Keywords: Society, Family, World, Sanctuary, Cerulean warbler.

Jonathan Franzen, an American novelist, is a favourite among critics, a bestseller, and a magnet for debate. He offers a new form of realism known as neorealism. In his description the contemporary outlook is simplified. He imagines that his characters exist in a society where technology takes the centre stage. It is a free market world. He is known for his realistic portrayals. His writings on climate change have many literary qualities.

Franzen's fourth novel, *Freedom* is about Berglunds, a middle upper-class family. Patty and Walter are the kind of neighbors that one can find a lot to talk about. Patty is Walter's wife. She contributes in creating a better world alongside Walter, an environmental lawyer. He makes use of his bike to go from place to place. Patty cannot accept her son Joey to live with another girl in a different home. Having disappointed with the members of her family for a long time, Patty changed her mindset and started living with a completely strange Richard. But later she left him and came back to Walter to resume her life once more. Walter is introduced in the very beginning of the novel as "Greener than Greenpeace" (3).

The reader meets middle-aged Minnesotan Walter Berglund during his college years and follows him through three decades of his personal and societal history. One after the other there are people at the realm of affairs who promise so many things but fail to deliver them. Walter leads a morally decent family life, raising his children Joey and Jessica and attempting to teach his strong ideals to them. There is closeness in thinking as far as Jessica is concerned along with her father Walter. She is working as an editor. She wanted to become a writer to represent her thought to the whole world.

Although her ambition was still to be a writer, and she was currently working a barely paid editorial assistant in Manhattan, she had a deep green streak and hoped to make environmental issues the focus of her future writings (*Freedom*, 337).

Thus both father Walter and her daughter are interested in preserving the environment. Till his wife Patty betrays him by having an affair with his best friend Richard, Walter has been leading a good life. Richard is a rock singer and he has got altogether a different ideology about life. He does not want life to be filled with merely sexual acts. This ideology and his marriage with Patty totally disturbed Walter. Lalitha is Walter's Indian helper. She has become more affectionate with her boss after witnessing the quarrel between husband and wife for a long time.

Environment has become the subject of concern throughout the life of Walter, whereas other members of the family and the friends of Walter do not show concern for the welfare of nature. Franzen is particularly expressing the disconnected nature of the American people to live away from the natural world. Walter makes an effort to live in harmony with nature, but he is unable to do so because of the non-cooperative attitude of the people he comes across. In a flashback when he was seventeen, Walter spent the summer repairing the family lake cottage in an effort to get away from family squabbles that gives him pleasant experiences. Environmental problem is a sticky issue. People who genuinely work for the improvement of nature may know the result only after their projects are completed. At times their efforts result in

having an adverse impact upon the environment. There are two groups involved in environmental projects: those who work for it and those who do not care for it. People often become highly emotional whenever they discuss for a new windmill station or the installation of waterfalls. The problem is reversed in *Freedom* by forcing Walter to work in the mountain top removal industry in order to conserve the cerulean warbler.

Walter decides to choose conservation as he wants to preserve species of birds. This is good for the environment. Climate change is the fundamental issue confronted by humanity. Franzen deeply works for climate change after he began to watch birds and worry about their welfare. He claims to have recognized the dangerous consequence of climate change that affects all species on earth. One of his most contentious claims in the novel is that, rather than destroying nature for renewable energy installations, it might be preferable to settle for a sharper but higher-quality life, protecting the last remaining habitats of wild animals and plants.

This would ensure that the eco system will be kept intact. Walter reflects Franzen's ideas on birds and conservation. Walter believes that birds are more than just pleasant objects for human enjoyment. Their presence has significance for all in every respect. Lalitha tries to comprehend what Walter observes in birds. There is a type of balancing act available in the environment where every animal pray on every another for their need and not greed. Birds kill insects for food. These animals make minimum damage to the environment or else all they do is a type of giving and talking- giving what is expected of from then and taking merely what they need from nature. Thus none is affected, in fact all are facilitated.

Walter says:

The difference is that birds are only killing because they have to eat. They're not doing it angrily; they're not doing it wantonly.

It's not neurotic ... that's what makes nature peaceful (521).

But Walter despises practically all other living things because he loves birds. After Joey has informed Walter about his sinful behavior while working for Long Beach Island, Walter is instructed to deliver lectures to the staff of a recently opened Long Beach Island, and body-armour plant.

Walter knows well that it is impossible to change the mindset of the people. So he ironically appreciates the new American middle class public for taking part in the devastation of the environment. Global warming is increased by the use of coal-fired generators, that adds up to the existing destruction. Walter is very unhappy about his relationship with his wife Patty and son Joy. He tried his level best to change them but all ended up in failures. Walter, having a moral breakdown as he speaks, screams out loud at the end of his speech:

IT IS A PERFECT FUCKING WORLD AS LONG AS YOU DON'T COUNT EVERY OTHERSPECIES IN IT! WE ARE A CANCER ON THE PLANET! A CANCER ON THE PLANET (*Freedom*, 515).

Instead of maintaining a healthy species in the ecosystem, the human population keeps on increasingly unchecked. After having a breakdown, Walter no longer works for the fossil fuel industry, allowing him to interact with nature honestly free from commercial bias. This is the turning point in the novel as Walter finds shifts in his perspective.

Walter is for establishing a bird sanctuary in West Virginia. Vin Haven, a Texan millionaire tycoon, is the person behind the establishment of bird sanctuary. He wants to start a Mountain Top Removal (MTR) mining operation and then build a sanctuary for birds. Its aim is to overpower nature and use it forcibly for the benefits of human being, with the use of advancing technologies in the burgeoning population. This is a type of inclination to continue with environmentally destructive decisions while afterwards justifying them with morally sound goals.

Walter exhibits very high moral standards that may help in his intention to preseve the natural world. Over to his worry for pollution, he clarifies himself that using recycled batteries, buying lower polluted automobile, and the idea of milk being delivered in glass bottles may be good option. He insists on riding bicycle to work in blizzards, further he does not like to use paper towels, and is obviously been bird-obsessed. The birds do not care for anything; it's all about human interest that may show concern for animals. He has a strong belief that every species on earth has the right to peacefully live on the earth without affecting the other species.

Nature plays an important role in the life of human beings. In short, culture is shaped by nature and human response to nature. What Franzen could notice is already explained by the Russian thinker Bakhtin. Both of them understand the power of nature in shaping the life of its inhabitants. There is a true relationship coexist with nature, which is dominated by constant respect and attention for rules and norms. The novel by Franzen represents Bakhtinian principle which

attempts to speak for nature, as nature is silenced in our culture and in the language we use today.

It is in the Appalachian States, particularly in West Virginia, where the fictitious wealthy Vin Haven intends to launch his business, Mountain Top Removal project. According to Franzen, the Appalachian hardwood forest was one of the most bio diverse temperate ecosystems, home to a variety of tree species, orchids, and freshwater invertebrates. However, it appears that this area which is rich in resources could be exploited.

Mountain Top Removal (MTR) is a technique that involves blowing off the top of the mountain to remove the hidden coal. Each mountain top is subjected to explosives in order to extract coal. Mining carried out in mountain destroys the communities of homes, schools, and churches. The coal dust and chemicals used in the extraction of the coal are harmful. It is inevitable that the chemicals we are adding up to natural resource are harmful not only to the inhabitants but also to flora and fauna. The place is contaminated leaving a shocking message to the posterity that earth can no more be utilized for healthy life existence. Water also gets contaminated. Knowing fully well about the deep dangers involved behind the mountaintop removal project, Franzen aims to alert the public about the necessity for remedial measures to safeguard the planet earth.

The presence of overloaded coal trucks and their frequent movement damage the roads often resulting in fatal accidents. Because of the Mountain Top Removal (MTR) activities, the geography of the location has completely changed. Apart from that roads are littered with coal and other trashes. Summer is usually picturesque by trees loaded with flowers. Having the geography completely changed, there is no sign of any summer represented in the environment. Walter looks for different reasons where environment could be damaged. One of his contentions is that overpopulation also is yet another reason for environmental destruction. When people multiply beyond control, there is an absolute need for excess of resources for their survival. As a result they may have to exploit the environment willingly or unwillingly. Walter and his friends decided to join the Club of Rome. This club is an organization which is engaged in slowing down population so as to have less impact upon the environment, saving the world from the apocalyptic vision.

There is a note of optimism at the end of the novel *Freedom*. It is this ray of hope that made the novel highly successful. Lalitha has been a moral support to Walter to establish a bird sanctuary for the replaced birds of Mountain Top Removal (MTR). He fulfils her dream after her death with the assistance of the billionaire Win Haven. Walter's wife Patty also returns. Walter succeeds in his endeavor to establish a bird sanctuary and fulfill the expectation of Lalitha. A sense of optimism that permeates at the end of the novel could also be as a result of a more favorable political situation around that time. Walter represents Franzen himself. He opines that there is no effort on the part of the government to bring in any environmental friendly project. Governments one after another politicize the issue where there is no progress in the ground reality.

Clinton had done less than zero for the environment. Net fucking negative.

Clinton just wanted everybody to party to Fleetwood Mac. 'Don't stop thinking about tomorrow'? Bullshit. Not thinking about tomorrow was exactly what he did environmentally. And then Gore was too much of a wimp to let his green flag fly, and too nice a guy to fight dirty in Florida (*Freedom*, 231).

Franzen has got great respect for ecological consistence, where every species lives in a balanced way. There are instances where species take advantage of others. Walter has got concern for all living beings of nature. He maintains a bird sanctuary where he protects cerulean warbler birds. He likes to enjoy the sight of birds. Unfortunately cats disturb these birds and there are instances where some birds were eating by cats. Annoyed by the destruction of cats, Walter separated the cats and dumped them outside the city. This represents so many things. Birds are the natural part of ecological system. Cats are predators, which disturb the birds. There are people in our social set up who want to disturb nature like those of cats. It is time for us to separate such people and punish them for the sake of coexistence of the ecologically balanced system. The aim has to preserve the weaker section to make the system to roll on.

In the novel *Strong Motion*, there are instances of enough ecological concerns. The setting of the novel *Strong Motion* is Boston. This city collapsed in the recent Earthquake. The family of Louie Haland was affected in the earthquake. The grandmother of Louie Haland died on this unfortunate incident. There is a lot of collateral damage caused by this natural calamity. Rene is a seismologist, accidentally she happens to meet Haland. Being a Seismologist, Rene could explain the cause of the earthquake. She identifies the cause as the pumping of chemical into the soil. Sweden Aldren, the company that produces the chemical waste is involved in spoiling the soil. There is a huge protest against this company as it is solely responsible in bringing collateral damage to the people of Boston. So a case was registered against the company.

The company doesn't take up the responsibility and they say that they cannot be held accountable for what had happened. The Court denied punishing the Company rather strong warning was given to it. They were instructed to safely dispose the chemical waste.

In the essay collection Franzen goes deep into the problem of ecological issues. He is a constant bird watcher. His experience as the bird watcher is reflected in his essays. He has the intention to write from an island, away from the crowded city. Then placing himself in the midst of nature, by watching objects of nature, the birds, animals that could act as sources for creativity and enjoyment. The ecological aspects has been reflected in the other works of Jonathan Franzen . In terms of politics, Walter's bumper sticker on his hybrid Japanese automobile towards the end of the novel serves as an impetus to harbor fresh passion.

The sticker features the image of the then presidential candidate Barack Obama, Franzen and the people of American have got high hope on Obama as he has been guaranteeing policies to create environmentally friendly companies. Though Franzen thinks that Obama was a wonderful president, as he stated in an interview with an Italian newspaper, he has been largely inactive in addressing the climate problem. Franzen doesn't talk about the disappointment he felt rather he is hopeful of a great change because the environmental challenges are entrenched in beliefs and practices that Americans will find extremely difficult to give up, the novel itself demonstrates that there is no immediate way to resolve them. Even a very slow transformation appears unlikely to occur, giving futility of Walter's attempts. Lalitha, Walter's idealistic and ardent assistant, died in a car accident near the end of the novel. The accident is a form of retribution for those who are materialistic in nature. Ultimately the human body performs temporary existence. The effort of accumulating wealth is utter futility. This is the greatest lesson nature teaches for humanity.

Eco-criticism is an attempt to transform culture; the author would like to influence culture by bringing policy changes. This may ultimately change the behavior of individuals as bringing change in the form of awareness alone result in environmental consciousness. The novel has an even greater responsibility as a tool. The connection between nature and human emotions is highlighted in *Freedom*. There are philosophical and ideological principles that are vital to comprehend in order to change the action man wants to change. The main topic of the novel is not the environmental crisis, but the creation of Walter's own identity; this inevitably involves one's thoughts and feelings.

Bird is part of nature. Franzen has an inclination towards the protection of birds. The author attains happiness in creating Walter's who is against man destroying nature. Everything a person admires or respects about nature and the animal kingdom always stands for something else. The author shelters beneath environment to safeguard himself from the failures of matrimonial world, which is filled with betrayed and separation.

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