

Research Article

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A Critical Study of Ecological Justice in Tokarczuk's *The World in Your Mind*

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Abstract: There is a role that every individual must play for Mother Earth to sustain itself beyond the anthropocentric understanding of the world i.e. human beings and their needs are solely central to the world. As such belief systems have only harmed the planet and resultantly the very people inhabiting it. This research extrapolates the idea of ecological justice "justice to nature" (Wienhues 2017): creating a system that is nearer to a sustainable balance between humans and the ecology around them. Are there any individualized roles that any people could play for a just ecological system? *The World in Your Mind* (Tokarczuk & Croft, 2017) allows a reading of such an ecological justice at play where the protagonist traces a journey – outwards and inwards – through movement, she has understood a balanced subjectivity in contrast with the world around.

Key Words: Ecology, Eco-justice, Mother Earth, Sustainability

Introduction

Olga Tokarczuk is a Polish Nobel Laureate in Literature whose work about world peace, ecological harmony psychological healing, and mindfulness is world renowned. Tokarczuk in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech also talked about tender narratives (Tokarczuk 2019) that human beings must abide by to live balanced lives. To become more nuanced citizens of the planet Earth, "According to Tokarczuk, the ability to go beyond oneself toward other entities or entire alternative worlds is a constitutive feature of humanity" (Jarzyńska, 2024) is a necessity of being humane enough. Our basic humanity thus lies in our ability to be more tender and concerned with our actions and capacities. Olga Tokarczuk has been widely researched, especially in English after her Nobel Prize. Researchers argue that the Nobel laureate's works depict a tendency toward action in today's times where her novels are keenly "depicting practices that promote the perception of today's crises as opportunity rather than disaster alone." (Ochwat & Wójcik-Dudek, 2024) The idea of opportunity in a disaster is merely a notion of being more considerably active in perceiving what the world has come to in lieu of the ecology. Tokarczuk's work is an emblem of ideas and her interest in empowering the ecological world suggests that ideas have a capacity to overpower disasters if only the human race ventures into better lifestyle practices.

This research aims to stick to Olga Tokarczuk's idea of ecology and relevant justice practices where "at the core of ecology (from the Greek *oikos*) lies the concern for the good inhabitation of our common home." ((Ochwat & Wójcik-Dudek, 2024) The writer does not necessarily dwell into larger practices and possibilities of ecological justice – states and firms are not the concern of this research. As the primary text suggests, individual action is also pertinent and thus can bring about a shift that can add to a larger more cohesive eco-justice, especially from the vantage point of thinking systems – I argue the potential of walking in cajoling such ecologically pertinent stimuli. The selected novel segment of *Flights* (2017) in this research *The World in Your Mind* (Tokarczuk & Croft 2017) is a pastiche of a natural scenery where a young girl takes a stroll in the area around her home and wanders off toward the river nearby. The river she sees seems more like a riverine as the water body is rather very thin and ensconced by shrubs and tall

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grasses. The narrator, however, wanders further, now in her mind, and thinks about all the disasters this very river has wrecked in her community as the river lives a life of its own. I thus argue, building on Tokarczuk's narrative and a multidisciplinary understanding of ecological justice that individuals are capable of, if anything, knowing enough and thus taking individual actions that facilitate the world, overall, in a harmony that can be sustainably beneficial for all species in an ecosystem.

Researchers have ventured into decoding the balanced world that Olga Tokarczuk envisions in her books. A researcher adds to the scholarship, "Tokarczuk notes that a country's essence is expressed in that society's attitude toward Animals. If people behave brutally toward Animals, no form of democracy is ever going to help them, in fact, nothing will at all." (Lei, [2024](#)) Particularly mentioning animals with a capital A, Lei suggests the Nobel laureate's idea of other life, especially animals, that the writer inherently believes that how human beings treat other species around them is what staunchly helps them make sustainable societies of their own. When societies are based on harming the ecological world, they are inherently poor and fail to demarcate their own basic good as well. The researcher Xiaochun Lei further gauges that "the principles of Tokarczuk's ideal community are vegetarianism, freedom, independence, cooperation, and nonviolence." (10) Though this research paper does not expound on all themes contingent on Tokarczuk's fiction, however it is important to note that the writer has gravely written about ecologically just practices whether it be choices of food, housing, architectural assimilation with ecology or simply the basic need of humanity to get over violence. Though only a segment of the larger project *Flights* (2017) which also won the prestigious Man Booker Award of 2018, *The World in Your Mind* (Tokarczuk & Croft [2017](#)) helps understand some of these principles and their potential to govern a better world that is ecologically just.

Movement and Ecological Justice

Building on a multidisciplinary understanding of ecology and justice this research paper argues that individual movement can help ascertain, more harmonious with nature, values that can resultantly help the larger-than-human affairs of planet earth – our movement allows us to engage better with the world around us. Engaging with the world around us is a part and parcel of holistic living. The life forms around us, "Ecology enriches our world and is crucial for human wellbeing and prosperity." (British Ecological Society n.pag) add to our lives, unbeknownst, and cohesively we all live practicing interconnectedness. As discourses of human growth and insurmountable anthropocentric power (Stibbe, & Appraisal, [2015](#)) have appraised with colonization, globalization, and modernity (Mignolo, [2011](#)), scholars like Walter Mignolo argue that such growth hampers our very humanity as it is only rooted in an idea of coloniality: the logic of a colonizer to solely make gain and profit out of a people and place. Such anthropocentric notions, "the concepts of colonial modernity, capitalism, and the rhetoric of the 'Anthropocene' – have played a major role in formulating hegemonic forms of knowledge and placing humans at the foundation of planetary existence." (Sharma & Pal, [2025](#)) have only harmed Mother Earth in ways that humanity today cannot necessarily predict a just future for the generations to come. When a man thinks of himself as central to the planet and ignores the validity of other species, a just world does not come to be, as has been the result of the principles of coloniality.

This research framework is building upon the idea of ecological justice that buds first from delinking with paradigms of human centrality and then understanding the importance of every species's ecological being and then traces the roots of somewhat similar research on eco-justice in literary texts to pave the way for a literary analysis of *The World in Your Mind* (Tokarczuk & Croft [2017](#)). Where ecological justice is rather clear academic jargon, it bears legal and moral baggage. Bringing legality to the idea of ecology and environment "environmental issues need to be integrated with our thinking about morality and justice." (Kortetmäki, [2017](#)) demands first a morality principle in the discourses of society where preserving the ecological world around should be a moral duty pertinent to all and sundry.

The idea of deep ecology by Arne Næss asserts that equal rights of all species are inherently of value to the planet Earth's vitality, the writer asserts that "There is ecological sustainability if, and only if, the richness and diversity of life-forms are sustained." (Naess, [1993](#)) Hence, morality demands that we value the existence and sustainability of all species around us without bearing a centrality to human beings. This could be an oxymoronic call as well since it is not easy to justify or clarify if human beings or any species for that matter are capable beyond self foregrounding politics. Researchers have kept such a nuance at



hand when venturing into the calls for ecological justice as one differentiates environmental justice from ecological justice, "Ecological justice is the idea of doing justice to nature and forms the counterpart to environmental justice which is concerned with justice between humans with regard to nature." (Wienhues [2017](#)) Though this study does not aim to get into the demarcations of space in scientific notions as Olga Tokarczuk's narrative is hybrid in its essence of catering to the environment and ecology, however, it is important to know that ecological justice does not create portals of give and take and judge them but aims to breach the gap between anthropocentrism and biocentrism to create a veritable epistemic paradigm.

The researcher Anna Wienhues suggests that since all species are interconnected in an ecological setting, "all living beings should be included into this community of ecological justice which I call a 'community of fate' because it constitutes a non-consensual sharing of destiny." (Wienhues [2017](#)) The researcher acknowledges that finding an ideal route is not an easy task but all species deserve a fair distribution of resources – arguing for a more inclined biocentrism sort of understanding of justice, the researcher says that since the fate impending shall be shared by all species, hence it is only but just that everything that is not human should also be considered a part of the community that is to be made better through more robust practices. The acclaimed ecologist Lawrence Buell argues that "All creatures process their environment subjectively and seek to modify it in the process of adapting to it." (Lodge & Wood, [2008](#)) hence centrality is crucial to the evolutionary mechanism of all species somehow. Buell further clarifies this phenomenon, "It is not a question of whether we can evade this ground condition but of how to make it subserve mutuality rather than proprietary self-centeredness." (Lodge & Wood, [2008](#)) that human beings should ideally try for mutualism as a way of going about the ecological crises planet earth undergoes constantly, day in and day out.

Finding a balanced middle ground between excess and need is a quandary that humanity undergoes as superficial ideas of gain and growth rupture our mental frames of fathoming the world around us. These frames (Stibbe, & Appraisal, [2015](#)) can be nurtured toward betterment pursuits, nonetheless, where situating without a hierarchical approach is a form of ecologically just framing, "The hierarchical approach disallows our developing an actual flourishing relationship to other species and indeed to nature as a whole" (Gilbert, [2024](#)) as quantifying who deserves more: the nature of the man, is another pursuit rooted in coloniality where the logic sustains that whomsoever professes more power thus exerts it and takes away. Creating a hierarchical priority of biocentrism or anthropocentrism is thus against the spirit of ecological justice, "What the problem of anthropocentrism requires is an inquiry into how human personhood encompasses the moral agency with which we will contemplate our relation to other species." (Gilbert [2024](#)) Ecological justice thus comprises such an understanding of equality, or demarcation, as Bennett Gilbert asserts that humanity needs to question their morality and decode the lack of ecological alacrity in our discourses which shall be an act of ecological justice.

In literary studies, ecological justice paradigms explore "how literature reflects and influences issues related to environmental inequality, access to resources, and the unequal distribution of environmental benefits and burdens among different social groups." (Hebbar & Mallya, [2024](#)) thus enabling a reader to learn, through metaphors, frames, and general discourses how ecological awareness is pertinent to being active participants of Mother Earth. Ecological justice has been explored as a literary pursuit by various researchers. The researcher Antonella De Sena builds on famed philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's idea of justice and equality (Cranston, [1984](#)), where the philosopher argued that all inequalities are man-made projections of individual gain, suggesting that children's literature can help imbibe more ecologically just understanding of the nature where "Rousseau positioned children as having a natural inclination towards nature" (De Sena [2024](#)) hence children's literature can potentially achieve the goal of ecologically just literacy at a very young level in communities. The researcher strengthens her research by giving the example of a novel, "Álvaro Colomer can be useful to discuss climate literacy in young adult literature, as it deals with issues related to ecology, nature, and the ecosystemic consequences of human actions." (De Sena [2024](#)) Tokarczuk's selected text segment in this research paper also starts from the voice of a child who wanders into nature and creates a very ecologically nuanced picture for the readers on the basis of a child's innocent observation.

Ecological literary studies can help build a nexus of understanding ecology better thus promoting ecological justice through various literary genres. Abd. Rahman Rahim et al. explore Febrialdi R.'s novel to

understand ecology by doing a literary reading of the protagonist's adventures in the novel. The researchers argue that "Literary ecology is divided into two things, namely the context of natural ecology and cultural ecology." (Rahim et al., 2024) suggesting that the former suggests living with a respectful attitude toward nature and the latter suggests that culture "consists of six forms, namely beliefs, values, norms and sanctions, technology, symbols, and language" (Rahim et al., 2024) and all these factors pertain to narratives of ecology that can further ecological justice. There is a potential in literature to create more ecologically just narratives, "the capacity of literary works to cultivate empathy and forge emotional bonds with the natural world" (Muhsyanur et al., 2024) is also a call for writers and readers to embrace ecological nuance, as pertinent to the works of writers like Olga Tokarczuk as well. Citing Wallace (Muhsyanur et al., 2024) suggest further that, "Literature-based environmental education can serve as a powerful tool for cultivating ecological identity, fostering a sense of belonging and responsibility towards the natural world" (Muhsyanur et al., 2024) ecological empathy can be learned through literatures that are more ecologically just in their narrative.

As this framework has imbibed ecological justice can be practiced by a more morally upright understanding of the world around, where centrality does not lie with man or nature as such but mutualism and discourses of justice flourish through better discursive practices. Literary works can add the most to such discursive practices. Olga Tokarczuk's works, as the writer claims herself, seek a world of proportion where through movement – the protagonists in *Flights* (2017) take walks to become more ecologically aware – characters learn better about the nature around as the forthcoming section shall argue from the vantage point of ecological justice as explored above.

Research Inquiry

The capacity of the river, in Tokarczuk's *The World in Your Mind* (2017), to trace a course of itself against the local people's efforts of containing it into a man-made current against its natural order creates a cause for ecologically exploring the said text. The protagonist walks toward the river first as an aimless silent observer and eventually as a narrator of an ecological crisis at hand. There is thus a need for exploring literary texts from the vantage point of eco-justice. This research paper aims to theorize such a literary justice as can be explored from the primary text selection from the following research question: Is arbitrary movement a potential resource for gauging ecological crisis, especially at an individual's end – can walking encourage ecological stimuli, and stimulate an individual toward taking ecologically sustainable actions? Olga Tokarczuk's protagonist in the aforementioned novel segment helps me critically locate a literary voice for ecological justice in today's capitalist world of gain and mundane routine structures.

Reading Ecological Justice in Tokarczuk

Reading Tokarczuk's narrative in *The World in Your Mind* (2017) from the standpoint of ecological justice, I argue that walking allows a person to behold the ecological world around and hence – despite the politics of land and environment – fathom what it truly means to have "intrinsic value" (Naess, 1993). Every entity, human or non-human, on Mother Earth, bears an intrinsic value that is ecologically holy. Afar the debates of anthropocentrism and biocentrism, it is validly acknowledged that the world we live in is not ecologically just, not even to human beings but this eventual injustice has been caused by the activities of human beings, especially since colonial and industrialization eras. As walking allows "holistic investigation into notions of place and space" (Panneels, 2013), the narrator of Tokarczuk wanders, aimlessly, toward the river near her house; I read this journey from the vantage point of my research inquiry.

The narrator reaches the river, in her vicinity, by aimlessly wandering away from home. She finds the river everywhere, "the river was ubiquitous in that valley" (Tokarczuk & Croft 2017). The river is present not only in the geography but also in her memories, stories, and desires. The narrator compares the river to a road. The parallel though harmless, is somehow afar the spirit of the rest of the story where the river is not comparable to anything human-made. I read this comparison hence as a metaphor where upon coming across the natural world, human beings tend to associate it with man-made things, like roads, due to a destitution of metaphors and framing tendencies. As a frame, "is the cognitive imposition of a story from one area of life onto another area," (Stibbe, & Appraisal, 2015) the narrator like most human beings is furtively used to voicing the aesthetic and the metaphorical frame as the tangible and the material.



The narrator, who is a young girl at the start of the novel segment, reads into the anarchic power of the river, "it flowed as it liked, essentially unimpeded, prone to flooding, unpredictable." (Tokarczuk and Croft 10) Nature, when observed as the girl does without any preconceived perceptions of gain, is an entity in constant movement, against the road with which it was compared to previously; the road is barren and bizarre while the river is full of rigor and restlessness. When we look at the anarchic movement of the river from the narrator's eye, "the river flowed on, parading, concerned only with its hidden aims beyond the horizon," (Tokarczuk & Croft 2017) we witness a lack of agency at the human being's part. The river does not care for our understanding and needs for its flow; it is as aimless a wanderer as the narrator is when walking away from home in randomness, with a dandy spirit. I argue that reading nature afar human personhood, as Gilbert names this lens, is a way toward ecological justice. The researcher's argument can be read here, "an inquiry into how human personhood encompasses the moral agency with which we will contemplate our relation to other species" (Gilbert 2024), that exploring the moral rights of the river, to flow as it pleases, afar the lens of human beings is actually what would come near to the true spirit of the nature. Arguing for controls and borders for water bodies has always proven as a futile endeavor since even the ruins of Indus Valley civilization prove that the then Indus River just changed its flow and one of the world's oldest civilizations just met a fate of finality.

The narrator, now living the river in memory while beholding its awe in front of her, recalls, "Each year someone drowned in the river" (Tokarczuk and Croft 2017). Reminiscing the traumatic deaths of fellow country people, she narrates the rather all-mighty potential that the river bears. Mother nature, I read this instance of horror as an emblem of ecological strength that human beings often too leniently, respond to the utter horrors perpetuated by human beings and the response is not something humanity can associate any personhood with since life-affirming metaphors of nature are framed oftentimes with personhood but when haphazard actions of nature are perpetuated, human beings fails to share their humanist frames as such. The narrator further explores the mental synergies, associated with trauma in this likelihood, by associating those who died by drowning not as devoid of life but, "the water had rinsed all the life out of them" (Tokarczuk and Croft 2017). The agency prescribed to Mother Nature here is an all-mighty evil that humanity cannot condone, nor can their legal structures. This helps me read into ecological justice, especially when the tables are turned.

The protagonist furthers my reading into ecological justice by sharing her own partially moral judgment on the scenario, "in spite of all the risks involved – a thing in motion will always be better than a thing at rest" (Tokarczuk and Croft 2017). The natural, though anarchic or fluid, is partial to the ecological world in contrast to the artificial, though moderate or in control, such is the nature of the universe. The narrator adds more, "which is static will degenerate and decay, turn to ash, while that which is in motion is able to last for all eternity" (Tokarczuk and Croft 2017). Human beings have tried to imply personhood to rivers for their own positional good and resultantly like Pakistan's Ravi, these rivers have gone barren with the inhumane politics of state systems. Though seemingly arcane, ecological justice is a movement larger than one force, and revitalizing Mother Earth is a project beyond single-state control systems. This novel segment helps read into the divisive banalities that hinder the cause of ecological justice movements and hence sustainability practices, resultantly, do not pass beyond a certain framework, into the larger well-being of all.

Tokarczuk voices awe of mother nature's enigma through the narratorial voice of a young girl, who is by now a young lady, in *The World in Your Mind* (2017). The narrator beholds the awe of the river from her childhood meandering and, "From then on, the river was like a needle inserted into my formerly safe and stable surroundings." (Tokarczuk and Croft 2017) the ecological setting, now immersed in the subconscious through her walks, is a cause for a moral recalcitrance against the usual human-beings-are-supreme-beings anthropocentrism. She feels that the river, which is rather thin in her vicinity as well, is a piercing needle that stays in the mind. Here, I argue in a psychogeographical style, that mapping the river in her mind as a needle is a metaphor. Tokarczuk adds nuance to this "map as metaphor" (Panneels, 2013) by further saying "This needle went all the way through, marking a vertical third dimension; so pierced" (Tokarczuk and Croft 2017). Nature, the river representing the ecological world, now immersed in her mind through the qualms of knowingness is like another dimension, possibly of wisdom.

The narrator takes a walk as a child and builds a narrative of knowing the river as a perpetually asserted stimulus in her mind. This metaphor of the river mapped in memory as a needle is hence a cause to instigate stimulus. Wandering and moving within ecological settings allows human beings to live beyond their assumed sagacity and personhood, to bask in the magnified allure of the world around them that is simultaneously enthralling and frightening. The narrator of the segment ends her narrative by personalizing her stance, "I've tried, a number of times, but my roots have always been shallow" ((Tokarczuk and Croft 2017). She posits that she cannot live a life demarcated to shallow controlled environments and must move as "My energy derives from movement" ((Tokarczuk and Croft 2017). The narrator builds herself on her own reading of the ecological world which is a world in movement. Movement auspiciously lies at the heart and center of any life and mobility fuels this mechanism when we observe sensorium around us and infuse ideas and dreams effectively to bind together, not as a coherent whole, but as informed and sensual fragments that commit to the whole for growth and joy.

Training the mind, at least toward an individual understanding of the ecological world, is a process toward ecological justice, "What will work is a process: our intellective, cognitive, and social abilities work dynamically, reflecting into our epistemic base and onto our moral, social, and political bodies of experience the nourishment on which they grow." (Gilbert 2024) Tokarczuk probes the readers to implore around and take vengeance against the capitalistic benefits by trying to exonerate their essence from the commonplace notions of surplus and value about time, space, and situating especially in ecological terms, as I read. These sensorium, as instilled in the narrative, are thus a theoretical creative effect to sustain, endemically as informed citizens in this world, anywhere on the globe where at times it seems like by merely existing, informed by the ecological through observation and movement, one is resisting against the benefice.

Positionality Statement

As a South Asian Pakistani woman, I assimilate my narrative with Tokarczuk's work to implore ecologically just stimuli through locomotion. Having observed the Ravi around my vicinity, as a contested river always in political vocabulary, I can relate to framing nature into personhood by human beings, only for material gain. The ecology of Ravi is not a narrative largely propagated but only how its destitution as a water body harms the farmers around is a plausible public discourse. I have seen the Ravi flooded, as a child too. Everyone around said finally the farmers can use natural water instead of paying for electricity to water the rice crop. The Ravi is not in flood anymore, hasn't been in an age now. It is dry and barren in anthropocentric terms. The ecology Ravi River is associated with, however, writhes in disarray because two countries decided to make it a border river whose waters shall only flow in a certain perimeter. Ecological justice is hence personal to me too as it should be to all human beings since our definitions of justice are not ecologically informed and are gravely inept still.



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