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The Theme of Climate Change
in *What We Can Know*

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Abstract

Ian McEwan's novel *What We Can Know*, which is set in the dystopian future, portrays a British professor who is searching for the lost poem amidst the havoc caused by climate change. In *What We Can Know*, the theme of climate change dominates the novel's background and liaises several crucial themes, such as the quest for the lost poem, love, and denialism. Whereas the theme of climate change is instrumental in *What We Can Know*, its significance remains unexplored. Seeking to expand academic research on the theme of climate change in the novel, the article presents a qualitative ecolinguistic study that focuses on (i) how climate change is framed, (ii) what types of metaphors are associated with climate change, and (iii) what aspects of climate change are foregrounded and, conversely, backgrounded in the text. The results of the investigation demonstrate that the theme of climate change in *What We Can Know* is (i) framed through a scientific prism, (ii) represented as the metaphor of Derangement, and (iii) portrayed as climate change denialism. These findings are illustrated and discussed in the article.

Keywords: climate change fiction (cli-fi), an ecolinguistic analysis, Ian McEwan, the theme of climate change, the United Kingdom (the UK)

Introduction

Ian McEwan, who “is arguably the best living British novelist” (Shah 38), is widely known for his highly praised novels (for instance, *Atonement*) and short stories (e.g., *First Love*, *Last Rites*) (Cojocaru 59; Schneider 68). McEwan is referred to as “a master of narrative art” (Amigoni 152) whose work “has been taken seriously by critics and scholars” (Malcolm 4) as well as cinematographers (Golban 218). Moreover, McEwan’s “novels are popular set reading in British secondary schools . . . and achieved critical acclaim and publishing success throughout the English-speaking world” (Garrard 696).

His fairly recent novel *What We Can Know* (2025) takes place in 2119 and portrays Tom Metcalfe, a British literary scholar, who searches for the poem that was read aloud in 2014 and vanished afterwards without ever being published. The poem, however, represents a symbol of the bygone days of the early 21st century, when the life in the United Kingdom (the UK) was seemingly normal, and the climate crisis was not felt as acutely as during the time of the novel’s narration in 2119.

Tom Metcalfe’s quest to find the lost poem, a symbolic Fata Morgana of the UK of the early 21st century, unfolds as a story of climate change, denialism, and suspense. In the novel, the UK is a republic, which has been flooded by the risen waters of the Atlantic. In addition to the catastrophic flooding, the climate change-related crisis impacts negatively on the daily lives of Britons in the 22nd century. Against this background, climate change can be argued to represent one of the major themes of *What We Can Know*.

Currently, however, there are no published studies that investigate the theme of climate change in McEwan’s *What We Can Know* (Guezar 293). In this context, the present article proposes a qualitative study that seeks to examine the theme of climate change in the novel by means of utilising an ecolinguistic framework developed by Arran Stibbe (12). His framework is applied in order to identify possible (i) frames, (ii) metaphors, and

(iii) salient elements associated with the theme of climate change in the novel. Accordingly, the study seeks to answer the following research question (RQ): How is the theme of climate change represented in McEwan's *What We Can Know*?

The relevance of the study is based upon the following points. First, the study sheds light onto the theme of climate change that is portrayed in the novel through the prism of climate emergency. The portrayal of climate change and, accordingly, an ecolinguistic investigation into how it is represented in the novel can help the readers to (i) visualise the climate crisis and (ii) raise their awareness of the negative consequences of climate change (Kapranov, "An Ecolinguistic Approach" 55; O'Neill and Smith 75). Second, the study, which is novel per se, contributes to the existing body of literature on McEwan's literary heritage, while it also provides a needed ecolinguistic insight into the theme of climate change in *What We Can Know*. Third, the results of the present study can be further utilised as a pedagogical tool that facilitates the teaching and learning processes in undergraduate and postgraduate courses and/or modules associated with climate change education and education for sustainable development (Kapranov, "Responsibility, Sustainability, and Threat" 118; Molthan-Hill et al. 1095).

Further, the article proceeds in the following fashion. First of all, I will review the literature on climate change in contemporary British fiction. Thereafter, I will introduce the study and provide the readers with the tenets of Stibbe's ecolinguistic analysis. Afterwards, I will discuss the results of the analysis and formulate the conclusions.

The Literature Outline: Climate Change in Contemporary British Fiction

In light of the climate crisis, the current Anglophone literature "faces up to climate change" (Caracciolo 10) by embracing the so-called "climate change turn" (Bose 170), which is manifested by a growing line of novels written in the genre of climate fiction (cli-fi)

(Mitreá 5; Querubín and Niederer 286). Essentially, the genre of cli-fi is anchored in the theme of climate change (Matiu 88), which is tangent to the interrelated topics of the environment, environmental consciousness, environmental sustainability, and overall awareness of the severity of climate change (Kapranov, "The Image of Climate Change" 135; Kuharić 674). Furthermore, the genre of cli-fi pertains to the issues of ecofeminism (Gaard 171) and climate justice (Evans 103), respectively, which are concomitant with a variety of dystopian topics (Thévenon 174), such as the topic of daily survival amidst climate change-related calamities (Kapranov, "Flooded London" 180). Conceivably, the genre of cli-fi is a hybrid space of literature, climate science, and public discourses on climate change, in which the practices of climate science are absorbed and reshaped within the literary domain (Yusoff and Gabrys 517).

Admittedly, the contemporary British literary scene experiences "the rising tide of climate change fiction" (Craps and Crownshaw 1), which I will further outline in this section of the article. As far as the genre of cli-fi in the British literary scene is concerned, Chao Xie contends that having emerged at the end of the 20th century, British cli-fi "cuts across literature and environment, rising both as a prominent literary mode and an important environmental phenomenon" (2). Furthermore, Xie indicates that British cli-fi is characterised by a wealth of themes, interdisciplinarity, environmental and social activism, and the issue of climate justice (1).

Xie's thoughts on British cli-fi are in alignment with Astrid Bracke, who argues that the major foci of the current cli-fi landscape are largely determined by the notion of environmental collapse due to the climate crisis (45). In particular, Bracke demonstrates that the British segment of cli-fi is typically characterised by the portrayal of floods and sociopolitical instability (46). Moreover, Bracke asserts that the environmental collapse seems to be at the heart of contemporary British cli-fi (47).

Extending Bracke's argument further, Mahlu Mertens and Stef Craps (135-136) suggest that, in addition to the environmental

aspects, the British segment of cli-fi is dominated by the temporal dimension of climate change. Specifically, Mertens and Craps demonstrate that the issue of climate change in a number of Anglophone cli-fi novels is marked by the notion of temporality, which comes to the fore particularly in such works as Richard McGuire's *Here* (2014), Dale Pendell's *The Great Bay: Chronicles of the Collapse* (2010), and Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007). Arguably, temporality in cli-fi "highlights the multidimensional and interdependent relations between times, and stresses tempos and rhythmicities" (Mertens and Craps 150).

Whereas the temporal magnitude of climate change forms an intrinsic part of British cli-fi, Rebecca Oh indicates that the motifs of temporality and the environment are far from being exhaustive in the literary depiction of climate change (92-99). Specifically, Oh argues that British cli-fi addresses the themes of postcolonialism, global capitalism, environmental racism, and the role of the Global South in the climate crisis (134-150).

Oh's observations are reminiscent of the argument presented by Clint Burnham, who contends that the genre of cli-fi involves the concepts of postcolonial trauma and climate grief (36). In particular, Burnham argues that British cli-fi portrays trauma associated with the climate crisis. Similar thoughts are also found in Lee Zimmerman, who suggests that cli-fi articulates a selection of societal impulses that are related to trauma and climate change denialism, on the one hand, and climate change awareness, on the other hand (78). Furthermore, Zimmerman claims that contemporary British cli-fi blurs the boundaries between such antagonistic, yet intrinsically interrelated phenomena as climate justice and climate change-related violence (96).

The portrayal of violence that takes place against the sinister backdrop of anthropogenic climate change is found alongside the depictions of flooding in several British cli-fi novels, for instance, in *The Wall* by John Lanchester (Miller 13; Sandrock 165; Sarkar 310). Concurrently with the ominous motifs associated with the rise in sea levels (Mundler 51), however, the perennial theme of British cli-fi that involves flooding is characterised by a

ray of hope, which is far more optimistic than one could have hoped for, as seen in Megan Hunter's *The End We Start From* (Kapranov, "Flooded London" 180).

It follows from the present literature outline that the contemporary British segment of cli-fi embraces such themes as climate change (in)justice, flooding, temporality, and the environment (Estok 438; Gaard 189). Presumably, they are evocative of the major themes in McEwan's *What We Can Know*. Further in the article, I will consider whether or not this is the case by examining the theme of climate change in *What We Can Know*.

The Present Study: The Plot of *What We Can Know* and the Tenets of Stibbe's Ecolinguistic Analysis

First published in September 2025 by Jonathan Cape in London, McEwan's novel *What We Can Know* is relatively recent. As mentioned in the introduction, it depicts Tom Metcalfe, a scholar at the fictional University of the South Downs in Britain, which is flooded due to the catastrophic consequences of the climate crisis and a series of wars. The image of the flooded Britain accompanies the readers throughout the novel. It is introduced on the first page of the novel, which depicts Tom Metcalfe's journey from Marlborough in the inundated Wiltshire to Maentwrog-under-Sea:

On 20 May 2119 I took the overnight ferry from Port Marlborough and arrived in the late afternoon at the small quay near Maentwrog-under-Sea that serves the Bodleian Snowdonia Library. . . . After breakfast, one of the assistant archivists, Donald Drummond, showed me to my carrel. His domain included my period, 1990 to 2030, and he took a strong interest in my topic, ineptly named Second Immortal Dinner and its famous lost poem, "A Corona for Vivien" by Francis Blundy. (3)

Metcalfe's search for the lost poem "A Corona for Vivien" illustrates a yearning for prosperity, stability, and, essentially, love that appeared to be so easily available to Britons in the early 21st century. In the novel's "now," i.e. in 2119, the way of life in the

early 21st century looks rather sophisticated due to its culture, literature, poetry, and economic prosperity. Hence, the plot of McEwan's *What We Can Know* shows a quest for the glorious past, a Fata Morgana that brightens the gloomy quotidian life of the post-apocalyptic Britain, which drowns in climate-ravaged horrors.

Crucially, the theme of climate change permeates the entire novel. Accordingly, the present study endeavours to unveil how the theme is represented (see the RQ) by means of an ecolinguistic analysis described by Stibbe in his seminal monograph *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live by* published by Routledge in 2015. Informed by Stibbe's ecolinguistic approach, my analysis of the theme of climate change in *What We Can Know* focuses on (i) the way climate change is framed, (ii) the types of metaphors that are used in the portrayal of climate change, (iii) the manner climate change is evaluated, (iv) the role of convictions in the portrayal of climate change, and (v) the backgrounded (i.e., "erased") and foregrounded (i.e., "salient") aspects of climate change in the novel.

Further, I will outline Stibbe's ecolinguistic framework. According to Stibbe, framing is associated with words and phrases that activate a particular, usually stereotypical, situation. In this light, Stibbe argues that frames are discrete mental entities of general knowledge that are triggered by words and/or phrases. Metaphors are seen as a mapping between two distinct and qualitatively different frames, i.e. the source frame and the target frame. As far as evaluation is concerned, Stibbe postulates that it involves a subjective judgement concerning a particular area of life. Typically, the notion of judgement is dichotomic in nature and can be encapsulated along the basic axis good vs. bad. Whilst evaluation is conceptualised as a subjective and, quite often, emotional phenomenon, conviction is characterised by an epistemic dimension, which determines whether or not a particular description is true, certain, uncertain, or false. Following Stibbe, the backgrounded aspect or "erasure" represents a textual element that is not important and/or unworthy of consideration, whereas salience

constitutes a prominent textual element that is critically important in the piece of writing (24-119).

The results of the qualitative ecolinguistic analysis are discussed and illustrated in the following section of the article.

Results and Discussion

The application of the ecolinguistic analysis to the examination of the theme of climate change in the novel has yielded results that pertain to (i) framing, (ii) metaphors, (iii) evaluation and convictions, and (iv) salient and erased aspects associated with the theme. These aspects are further presented, discussed and illustrated in the article.

The Framing of the Theme of Climate Change in the Novel

The qualitative investigation demonstrates that the theme of climate change in *What We Can Know* is framed in alignment with a scientific approach to the issue of anthropogenic climate change. The science-based framing is evident from the passages of the novel that refer to (i) the realness of anthropogenic climate change, (ii) the international community of climate scientists, and (iii) the typical manifestations of the climate crisis, such as flooding, the rise in sea levels, and the rise in mean temperature (Fløttum 20-24; Fløttum and Dahl 205-210; Kapranov, “British Library’s Discourse on Climate Change” 217; Tvinnereim and Fløttum 744-745). For example, the scientific account of the climate crisis is found in Chapter 5, as seen below:

a radio item that morning about a leak from the UN’s intergovernmental panel. Its report was not due yet, but someone highly placed had divulged that alarm was spreading among the hundreds of contributing climate scientists. The community of nations was heading in the wrong direction at increasing speed. Here came the stultifying incantation: floods, droughts, typhoons and hurricanes, forest fires – increase in frequency noted; measurements across diverse scientific disciplines had confirmed

accelerating ocean acidification, polar ice melt, glacier retreat, sea-level rises, land surface temperatures pushing upwards. Colossal migration, pandemics, resource wars and species extinction predicted – and so it went on. (31-32)

The excerpt above is in line with the contention formulated by Kathryn Yusoff and Jennifer Gabrys (517), who argue that the contemporary segment of British cli-fi has absorbed the findings of climate science and the scientific approach to climate change into the fabrics of literary domain. Indeed, as seen above, the theme of climate change is represented by the phrases “the UN’s intergovernmental panel” (i.e., the United Nation’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), “climate scientists,” and “measurements across diverse scientific disciplines.” The aforementioned phrases are identical to those of the scientific discourse on climate change (Kahan 3; Kapranov, “Metonymy in Climate Change Discourse” 143; Lefsrud and Meyer 1479). In other words, the manner of using lexical and discursive means to frame the climate crisis in the novel converges on the account of climate change in the scientific discourse (Vulpe 257). Arguably, the scientific framing lends credibility and scientific adequacy to the representation of the theme of climate change in the novel.

The scientific adequacy of the representation of climate change is further evident in the following passage:

Twentieth and twenty-first centuries, sea-level rise two millimetres a year, mostly driven by anthropogenic (we explained the term) warming. Warmer water expands, adding to the rise. Freshwater lakes drained by human overuse, the water recycled as rain and snow back into the oceans – more rise. Melting ice, albedo effect explained – more warmth, more rise. (44)

Here, I should draw attention to what is referred to as (i) “anthropogenic warming” and (ii) “Warmer water expands, adding to the rise” (44), which constitute a typical framing of the climate crisis through the science-based lens (Milner and Burgmann 25). The integration of climate science and its discursive conventions

into the fabric of the novel renders the framing of the theme of climate change an objective and factual dimension, as exemplified below:

there were enforced famines, invasions, genocide, drought and savage local wars. They could see what was coming next. When 2.4 degrees above pre-industrial levels was recorded, early in the twenty-second century, no one was surprised. And this despite the cooling effect of previous nuclear exchanges. (177)

From the science-based perspective, the climate science considers it a standard practice to compare the current temperature with that of the pre-industrial era (Kapranov, "Conceptual Metaphors Associated with Climate Change" 93). The rise in mean temperature due to global warming is found among the scientific descriptors that are conventionally employed by climate scientists (Karwacka 292). Global warming is noted by Vivien, one of the main protagonists of the novel, who feels oppressed by an unusually mild winter:

For three weeks in one February, the temperature did not fall below nine degrees. She couldn't remember when she last saw icicles hanging from a gutter. Even snow was unusual. She noted the premature appearance of daffodils, of her roses, of the apples and pears in a neighbour's orchard. (6)

In addition to the rise in mean temperature and mild winters, the scientific framing of the theme of climate change is represented by the description of flooding. In unity with the science-based account of climate change, flooding in the novel is associated with the rise in sea levels due to global warming. In the novel, the risen sea levels determine, to a substantial degree, both the topography and toponymy in Part 1. Specifically, the readers encounter the description of the flooded UK and the necessity to take a ferry in order to commute between what is left of the submerged country on the very first page of Chapter 1, e.g. "On 20 May 2119 I took the overnight ferry from Port Marlborough . . ." (3). In Part 1 of the

novel, the framing of the theme of climate change via flooding is an inherent feature of the post-apocalyptic Britain.

In addition to the climate change-related flood, the framing of flooding involves the flood caused by a limited nuclear war in 2042, during which one of the missiles hits the ocean and provokes a devastating tsunami. The combined force of climate change-related and war-linked floods is described as follows:

The gigantic waves of 2042 had smashed into the west-facing coast of Britain and also rolled inland by way of the Severn Estuary to form an inland sea that eventually included the Vale of Oxford. After many years of heavy rain and rising sea levels, it surged and forced its way further north and went into the valleys of the southern Cotswold Hills to form a series of islands and numerous islets. Most of those were abandoned a long time ago – too cut off, too small and steep to farm, and there was an acute shortage of labour. (152)

Whilst there are two distinct causes of the apocalyptic flooding, one due to global warming and the other one due to the nuclear war, both of them are framed in the novel as strictly anthropogenic (i.e., man-made). The anthropogenic focus on the flood, or rather the series of floods in the novel, is in harmony with the prior publications by Bracke (45), Kapranov (“Flooded London” 169), and Xie (2), who contend that the current British cli-fi novels highlight flooding as an anthropogenic factor of the climate crisis.

Metaphors Associated with the Theme of Climate Change in the Novel

As specified by Stibbe (110-175), metaphors are involved in the framing of climate change as the quintessential anchors of a narrative that systematise it and, concurrently, provide emphasis to the complex network of ideas (Kapranov, “Conceptual Metaphors Associated with Climate Change” 90-100). In my analysis of *What We Can Know*, I have identified the metaphor of Derangement,

which contributes to the development of the theme of climate change. The metaphor is illustrated by the passage below:

Interesting to note that in the mid-2030s, the Derangement, respectfully capitalised, came into general usage as shorthand for the usual list of global heating's consequences – a litany that wearied activists and sceptics alike. The term suggested not only madness but the vengeful fury of weather systems. There was also a hit of collective responsibility for our innate cognitive bias in favour of short-term comfort over long-term benefits. Humanity itself was deranged. The term did not stretch to include the related Metaphysical Gloom – the collapse of belief in a future, or more specifically, the fading of a belief in progress. (32)

The metaphor of Derangement reflects the lack of long-term planning to mitigate and ameliorate the negative consequences of climate change. The passage above suggests that the sheer madness of interim solutions proposed to offset the climate crisis has eventually undermined the global weather system. In this light, the metaphor of Derangement portrays the human failure to act on the climate crisis in order to prevent the point of no return in the 2030s. Consequently, I contend that the metaphor of Derangement emphasises the human shortsightedness to acknowledge the seriousness of the climate crisis, which gets suppressed by the humankind's collective denial. This contention is supported by the explicit reference to the humankind's blindness in relation to the climate crisis in the early 21st century:

We cannot image how it was a hundred years ago, to experience the vertigo of accelerating change imposed by new technologies, by novel belief systems and by wars. People were blinded by the pace of events. They could not think clearly, even when there rose out of adversity some obvious benefits. (105)

Clearly, the metaphor of Derangement serves as a literary device that shines light onto the irreversible consequences of climate change that eventuate in the 2030s after systemic neglect

and oversight on the part of humankind to act resolutely on the looming climate crisis.

The metaphor of Derangement is characterised by a temporal dimension, i.e. it unfolds in the time span of several decades. This finding is consistent with the argument put forward by Mertens and Craps (135-136), who contend that British cli-fi actively employs and develops the motif of temporality in portraying the theme of climate change. In unity with Mertens and Craps (135-136), we assume that the metaphor of Derangement is reflective of temporality, which contributes to creating a layered representation of the theme of climate change in the novel.

It should be mentioned that the metaphor of Derangement is reminiscent of the motifs in Amitav Ghosh's book published in 2016, which is titled *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. In his book, Ghosh equates the climate crisis with a polycrisis of culture, imagination, and politics. His argument is further expanded upon by Julia Adeney Thomas, Prasannan Parthasarathi, Rob Linrothe, Fa-ti Fan, and Kenneth Pomeranz, who indicate that

the political imagination of modernity is ill-suited for confronting the challenges of the Anthropocene. The dominant political theories, organizations, and actions are products of modernity, such as Enlightenment principles (e.g., rights, liberty, and rational democracy), nation-states, and interstate organizations. Consequently, we have managed to produce only feeble political responses to global climate change – individual moral choices (e.g., picking the right kinds of light bulbs), organized demonstrations that amounted to spectacles rather than revolutions, and intergovernmental agreements compromised by calculations of national interests. Where can we find the moral and political imagination that transcends the inadequacies of modern politics in the Anthropocene? Ghosh offers no proposals and mostly sounds pessimistic. When he tries to be hopeful, it seems a little forced. At the end of *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh, a nonbeliever, contemplates the power of organized religions, unconstrained by modern platitudes, to inspire and instruct their followers into action. (Thomas et al. 945)

Conceivably, the metaphor of Derangement in *What We Can Know* and Ghosh's views on cultural and political derangement in relation to climate change share the identical set of ideas, which point to the human race's utter inability and sheer neglect to tackle the climate crisis, let alone mitigate it efficiently.

Evaluation and Conviction Involved in the Theme of Climate Change in the Novel

The evaluative component involved in the development of the theme of climate change is associated with Vivien. Particularly Part 2 of the novel is sprinkled with Vivien's occasional evaluative remarks that pertain to climate change:

There were a dozen policemen ahead of us, two on horses. Streaming past us, heading in the same direction, were the city's young, mostly students, some with placards. I remembered. A cabinet minister with responsibilities for the environment would be talking at the Union that evening. A big climate-change demonstration was planned. St Giles and the surrounding streets would be closed. On banners and posters I saw black capitals on red background – OIL IS GREED and BEWARE SEA LEVELS. Every minute of my four days was precious to me, and I was annoyed with them all, until Francis took over. His knuckles were white as he gripped the wheel. He was a better hater than me. He thumped the wheel with a fist. "Fucking looney-left dupes. Ignorant credulous scum." (McEwan 239-240)

The quotation above demonstrates that Vivien, a representative of the educated British middle class of the early 21st century, regards climate change activism as a nuisance that literally stands in the way of her otherwise (nearly) perfect life. In that particular passage on pages 239-240 of the novel, Vivien appears annoyed by the climate change protestors, whereas Francis, her husband, uses a much stronger evaluative judgement concerning the climate change-related demonstration led by, presumably, *Just Stop*

Oil protesters. Vivien's evaluation of climate change protests is not fortuitous in the novel. On the contrary, her evaluation of climate change is utilised in order to demonstrate that the British middle class of the early 21st century does not care too much about the looming climate crisis and its negative consequences.

Following Stibbe's framework, I argue that Vivien's convictions concerning climate change are related to the epistemic dimension, i.e. knowing and/or being aware of whether or not a particular description is true, certain, uncertain, or false. As far as Vivien's convictions regarding climate change are concerned, I posit that they are manifested by denialism. Specifically, the readers observe that Vivien, as well as her husband Francis, and her circle of friends seem to deny the realness and severity of climate change, as seen below:

The subject of climate change, the mild term by which it was still known. That again. It was a major theme for Francis, and Harriet had tactfully excluded his opinions from her profile. He was, as someone had once said, a nuanced denier, but if opposed, a denier to his core. He had the knack in argument of making dissenting opinions appear like personal hostility. (31)

Vivien's indifference to climate change and her husband's denialism of the climate crisis are portrayed as an integral part of societal convictions vis-à-vis the nascent stage of the climate crisis in the early 21st century. This finding is in unity with the literature (e.g., Zimmerman 78), which demonstrates that the British segment of cli-fi involves a clear emphasis on depicting climate change denialism. In this regard, Matthew Schneider-Mayerson (309) suggests that a number of recent British and Anglophone cli-fi novels depict climate change-related (i) denialism, (ii) avoidance, and/or (iii) acceptance. Furthermore, climate change denialism is routinely referred to in a variety of British climate change discourses (Kapranov, "Between a Burden and Green Technology" 86, "Throwing Soup at Van Gogh" 176; Mendy et al. 505), in particular British political discourses on climate change.

Salient and Erased Aspects Associated with the Theme of Climate Change in the Novel

The theme of climate change in the novel gets an additional layer of sophistication from what is not being said aloud, i.e., from what Stibbe refers to in his ecolinguistic approach as erasure. Evidently, Stibbe's notion of erasure is represented in the novel by climate justice. Particularly, Vivien and her husband are completely silent on the topic of climate justice. Whilst the readers may infer from the novel that climate justice is expressed by a group of climate change protesters whom Vivien and Francis encounter briefly, the very idea of climate justice is foreign to them. They seem to erase it from their quotidian lives and from their mental landscape. Furthermore, Tom Metcalfe notes that climate justice is erased by Vivien. Tom ponders on the lack of any active pro-climate change stance by Vivien and her circle of friends. Climate change justice as an erased facet of the theme of climate change in the novel is consistent with the literature (Oh 134-150; Xie 2), which emphasises that the absence of climate change justice typically creates the tension between the protagonists and climate change activists.

Whereas erasure in *What We Can Know* is associated with climate change justice, salience in the novel comes to the fore under the aegis of the following elements that are related to the theme of climate change: (i) science-based framing, (ii) the metaphor of Derangement, and (iii) the motif of affluence. Whilst I have already discussed framing and the metaphor of Derangement, I should expand on the motif of affluence, which is a salient element associated with the theme of climate change. The motif of affluence involves a juxtaposition of the British way of life in the early 22nd century with that of the 21st century. Particularly, Tom Metcalfe and his contemporaries in 2119 can only dream of the lavish life-style, air travel, sophisticated food and beverages, and abundant resources that their predecessors enjoyed 100 years ago. The motif of affluence is evident, inter alia, from the passage that describes Vivien's preparation for her birthday party:

She drove eight miles to the market town of Cirencester to collect from the butcher five brace of prepared quail, unnaturally plump. She would wrap them in bacon and roast them in red wine and herbs, along with ceps picked in the beechwoods of the Chiltern Hills and brought to the Barn by a friend. She also bought eight pounds of potatoes for the oven and, in the same greengrocer, three cauliflowers whose florets she would cook in a large paella pan with olive oil, garlic, chopped green chillies, anchovies, cherry tomatoes, black pepper, thyme and breadcrumbs. (5-6)

The lavishness of her birthday menu looks bizarre to Tom, who was raised in poverty and deprivation. Moreover, Vivien's life-style contrasts significantly with that of Tom. Admittedly, the motif of affluence provides an additional nuanced take on the climate change catastrophe, which uprooted the seemingly settled and well-off routines of the 21st century and brought about misery, poverty, and a prolonged fight for resources. This finding is in agreement with the literature (Kapranov, "Flooded London" 181; Miller 13; Sandrock 165; Sarkar 310; Zimmerman 96), which demonstrates that the contemporary segment of British cli-fi resorts to the tension between such intrinsically interrelated facets of the theme of climate change as the fight for resources, malnourishment, and a scarcity of material means to sustain the level of life that used to be enjoyed by the protagonists before the onset of the climate crisis.

Conclusions

The article has applied an ecolinguistic lens to the analysis of the theme of climate change in McEwan's novel *What We Can Know*. The results of the ecolinguistic analysis reveal that the theme of climate change in the novel is framed, quite systematically, by a science-based approach. The framing of climate change from the vantage point of climate science is ubiquitous in the novel. Moreover, the framing of the theme of climate change appears to be determined by the foundational principles of climate science

postulated by the scientific community that ascribes climate change to anthropogenic causes, which are manifested by (i) the rise in mean temperature, (ii) the rise in sea levels that results in catastrophic flooding, and (iii) the melting of the sea ice.

Furthermore, the ecolinguistic analysis indicates that the science-based framing of the theme of climate change in the novel is employed to create the tension between the scientific and denialist views of climate change. The tension is evident from the metaphor of Derangement, which encapsulates the aftermath of a denialist, as well as highly irresponsible, attitude towards the climate crisis by the British middle class in the early 21st century. The metaphor of Derangement has been established to resonate with the literature on the British segment of cli-fi, and other literary and non-literary works on climate change, in particular *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* by Ghosh, which capture the collapse of both the climate and ecological systems due to human neglect and denialism.

In this regard, the ecolinguistic analysis has uncovered that the climate catastrophe explicated by the metaphor of Derangement corresponds to a shortsighted denialist approach to climate science, as well as a thorough neglect of the realness of climate change. The analysis of the metaphor of Derangement and other constitutive elements associated with the theme of climate change (for instance, evaluation and conviction) shows that the societal denial of climate change that pervades the British middle-class mindset in the early 21st century results in the irreversible climate catastrophe of apocalyptic proportions.

In conclusion, it should be observed that the present qualitative investigation is one of the first attempts to examine *What We Can Know* through an ecolinguistic prism. Hopefully, the results of the study will be extended in future research publications. Conceivably, the study will facilitate a follow-up analysis of the theme of climate change in the novel, which will, potentially, examine its relationship with the other major themes, as well as peripheral motifs associated with the theme of climate change.

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