



Social Justice, Human Rights, and Environmental Crisis in Álvaro Colomer's *Ahora llega el silencio* (2019)

Antonella De Sena, Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale", Naples, Italy

Abstract

The novel *Ahora llega el silencio* (2019) by Álvaro Colomer is a recent example of Spanish ecofiction, exploring themes of environmental and social justice in a post-apocalyptic setting. This article shows the novel's potential to address human rights, gender equality, social justice, climate and environmental issues. Through a story of survival and unity in the face of chaos, Colomer's work delivers a timely message about the need for cooperation, respect, and environmental stewardship for a better future.

Keywords

Ecofiction, *Ahora llega el silencio*, ecocritical perspective, environmental responsibility.

Spanish-Language Ecofiction

The 1970s was a decade marked by the rise of environmental awareness and activism, largely due to growing concerns about pollution, deforestation, and other environmental issues. This heightened awareness of the importance of protecting the environment led to the popularization of the concept of ecology, which focuses on the interrelationships between living organisms and their surroundings. It was during this time that ecology became a prominent theme in children's literature.

Ever since Rousseau positioned children as having a natural inclination towards nature, various authors have noted a longstanding sensitivity to nature in children's literature (Curry, 2013; Harrison, 2019; Young, 2018). Before the 1970s, representations of nature in literature were often idealised and did not emphasize the interconnectedness of flora, fauna, and ecosystems. However, with the rise of environmental studies, children's literature began to embrace a range of ecological themes (Wu, Mallan, & McGillis, 2013). In the Spanish literary scene, authors such as Gloria Fuertes and Elvira Lindo have been instrumental in promoting a deeper appreciation of nature in children's literature. Fuertes's poetry, such as *El libro de las flores y de los árboles* (2003), celebrates the beauty of the natural world, while Lindo's novels explore themes of environmental conservation and sustainability.

One recent trend in both Spanish and global environmental literatures is apocalyptic and postapocalyptic fiction, which draws attention to issues such as over-consumption, the exploitation of natural resources, and the influence of multinational corporations. Some works in this strand include Anxo Fariña's *A chave de Atlántida* (2011), Vicent Belda's *História de Sam. Deus ex machina* (2014), Rosa Huertas' *Corazón de metal* (2015), and Álvaro Colomer's *Ahora llega el silencio* (2019). Despite their postapocalyptic settings, many of these books bring together themes of climate change, human rights and social justice. In doing so, these texts invite readers to consider and enact climate literacy pedagogy. These texts are also part of an environmental justice literature that collectively "explore[s] the interconnectedness of human rights, social justice and ecological issues" (Platt, 2004, p.183). These three concepts are central to modern ecofiction and Colomer's novel, as will be outlined in my analysis below.

An ecocritical reading of *Ahora llega el silencio*

Ahora llega el silencio [Now comes the Silence] by Spanish writer and journalist Álvaro Colomer won the 2019 *Premio Jaén de Narrativa Juvenil*. The story is set in the city of Barcelona, where all adults over the age of twenty-two are dying for no apparent reason. This event is attributed to a virus that affects the population over the age of twenty-two, but there are no answers or cures. The narrative begins six months since the onset of the virus. Children, adolescents, and teenagers survive on the streets of Barcelona, trying to cope with diverse tribes fighting for power and control. Divided into seventeen chapters

and three parts, the story is told by an omniscient narrator who enters the minds of the characters, revealing their thoughts and feelings. The protagonists include Astrea, a resilient sixteen-year-old girl who has refined her survival abilities to defend herself against King Death, a malicious individual who derives pleasure from inflicting suffering on others. Alongside Astrea are Nestor, seventeen, and Leon, eighteen, who accompany her on a mission to protect a child, called Lobo, under her guardianship. Lobo, born before the "Silence" phenomenon, symbolises "the bridge between the old world and the new" (Colomer, 2019, p. 59).

Astrea's story particularly foregrounds the notion of human rights. Her narrative invites exploring the links between feminist and environmental issues. It also highlights the importance of issues such as gender oppression and women's contribution to the struggle against "dominant narratives of domination" (Gaard, 2008, p. 323). Astrea's commitment to upholding human rights is best exemplified by her unwavering dedication to protecting the defenceless child in her care. As protector and caretaker in the face of adversity, Astrea embodies nurturing, resilient spirit, and deep sense of responsibility for others. As the narrator states, "she had to be a mother without being a woman first, and now she is forced to take care without anyone thinking of her" (p. 86). Initially, only Astrea is resolute in taking care of the child, whereas her fellow travellers Nestor and Leon are apprehensive about their own survival after King's death, worrying about potential threats that might arise from caring for the baby. However, as time passes, the trio forms a strong bond and evolves into a makeshift family, providing the child with affection and nurture akin to having "two fathers and a mother" (p. 154). By portraying Astrea as a strong and capable leader who takes control of the situation, the narrative challenges gender stereotypes and promotes a more inclusive and equal view of relationships and caring roles traditionally assigned to women. In doing so, the narrative can empower young readers to challenge traditional gender norms and value the perspectives and contributions of women in a climate-changing society.

The novel's engagement with social justice comes from its representation of various communities, each with their own set of rules, which are then compared against one another. One such group is "the savages" made up of young individuals attempting to establish a society based on power over the vulnerable. Referred to as "the new adults," they abide by the law of the strongest, the sole principle enabling their survival:

“There was no one stronger than them, no one more experienced than them, no one more selfish than them” (p. 17). In contrast to the savages is the Children's Tribe, which is based on a society where leadership is shared among several individuals rather than centralised in one leader. Each day, a different child assumes authority by wearing a white shirt, thus taking responsibility for collective decision making. The next day, that responsibility is passed on to another member, fostering a sense of collective leadership. The children in this community chant the mantra “All equal, all free” (p. 122), emphasising their belief in the equality and freedom of all members. The third group represented are the Amazons, warriors who have created an all-female community where men are not allowed, united by a single goal: “to put an end to the oppression of men” (p. 102). This group is constantly growing, welcoming all oppressed women in the city of Barcelona to join together and become stronger in pursuit of their goal.

In depicting the three different societies, Colomer seeks to convey the importance of solidarity, equality, and the rejection of systems based on domination and oppression. The contrast between the brutal rule of the savages and the collaborative leadership of the Children's Tribe highlights the detrimental effects of power dynamics based on strength and selfishness. The Amazons, on the other hand, represent a strong and unified community fighting against gender oppression and advocating for women's rights and empowerment.

While social justice and human rights themes lie at the heart of the novel, the narrative's larger context is of a planetary apocalypse unleashed by nature itself. The narrator describes this as nature's self-defence, as well as its retribution for human arrogance:

The planet, seeing itself on the verge of collapse, had unleashed a global pandemic capable of eradicating, in one fell swoop, those human beings who had caused the greenhouse effect, who had polluted rivers, seas and oceans, who had manufactured nuclear weapons with which they could eradicate all life. [...] In a final act of generosity, nature had decided that the virus would only affect adults, the ones truly responsible for the destruction of the ecosystem and had allowed those who could not be blamed to survive: children (p. 13).

As the novel progresses, and as the characters grapple with the consequences of their actions on the environment, nature's retribution emerges as a theme. The planetary apocalypse serves as a warning of the dire consequences of environmental degradation and highlights the importance of taking responsibility for our actions. The surviving children, who are victims of the destruction caused by adults, play an important role in the narrative, symbolising hope for a better future and serving as a stark contrast to the irresponsible behaviour of the older generation.

A Pedagogical Perspective

Ahora llega el silencio by 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. Through the post-apocalyptic story set in Barcelona, the novel invites readers to reflect on the harmful consequences of pollution and environmental destruction caused by adults, who are portrayed as responsible for the climate crisis. Furthermore, the role of children and young survivors of the tragedy as bearers of hope for a sustainable future highlights the importance of protecting and respecting the environment for future generations.

In the classroom, the novel can be used to stimulate discussion on issues such as human rights, social justice, gender equality and solidarity. By comparing the different social groups represented in the story, students can explore concepts such as power, shared leadership, the fight against oppression and the defence of women's rights. As students reflect on the social and political implications of each distinct social structure, they can bolster critical thinking skills and increase their awareness real-world injustices and inequalities.

Furthermore, the narrative's eco-feminism and the portrayal of nature as a vengeful force against human arrogance can stimulate debate about the need for cultural and behavioural change towards the planet. Students can be encouraged to reflect on their daily actions and the consequences these may have on the ecosystem, thus encouraging greater awareness and commitment to environmental protection, sustainability, human rights and social justice. In doing so, they can be encouraged to enter critical debate and promote equality, solidarity and respect for nature.

References

- Belda, V. (2014). *História de Sam. Deus ex machina*. Edicions Bromera.
- Colomer, Á. (2018). *Ahora llega el silencio*. Montena.
- Colomer, T. (2010). *Introducción a la literatura infantil y juvenil actual*. Síntesis.
- Curry, A. (2013). *Environmental crisis in young adult fiction: A poetics of earth*. Palgrave and Macmillan.
- Fariña, Anxo. (2011). *A chave de Atlántida*. Edicións Xerais.
- Fuertes, Gloria. (2003). *El libro de las flores y de los árboles*. Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes.
- Gaard, G. (2008). Children's environmental literature: from ecocriticism to ecopedagogy. *Neohelicon* 36, 321–334.
- Gasol, A. (1996). Abans de l'ecologia, amb els clàssics. *Faristol*, (26), 4-12.
- Harrison, J. (2019). *Posthumanist readings in dystopian young adult fiction: Negotiating the nature/culture divide*. Lexington Books.
- Huertas, Rosa. *Corazón de metal* (2015). Editorial SM.
- Platt, K. (2004). Environmental justice children's literature: Depicting, defending, and celebrating trees and birds, colors and people. In S. I. Dobrin & K. Kidd (Eds.), *Wild things: Children's culture and ecocriticism* (pp. 183–184). Wayne State University Press.
- Rousseau, J-J. (1763). *Émile: Or treatise on education*. La Haye.
- Wu, Y., Mallan, K. and McGillis R. (2013). *(Re)imagining the world: Children's literature's response to changing times*. Springer.
- Young, R. (2018). *Confronting climate crises through education: Reading our way forward*. Lexington Books, Rowman & Littlefield.