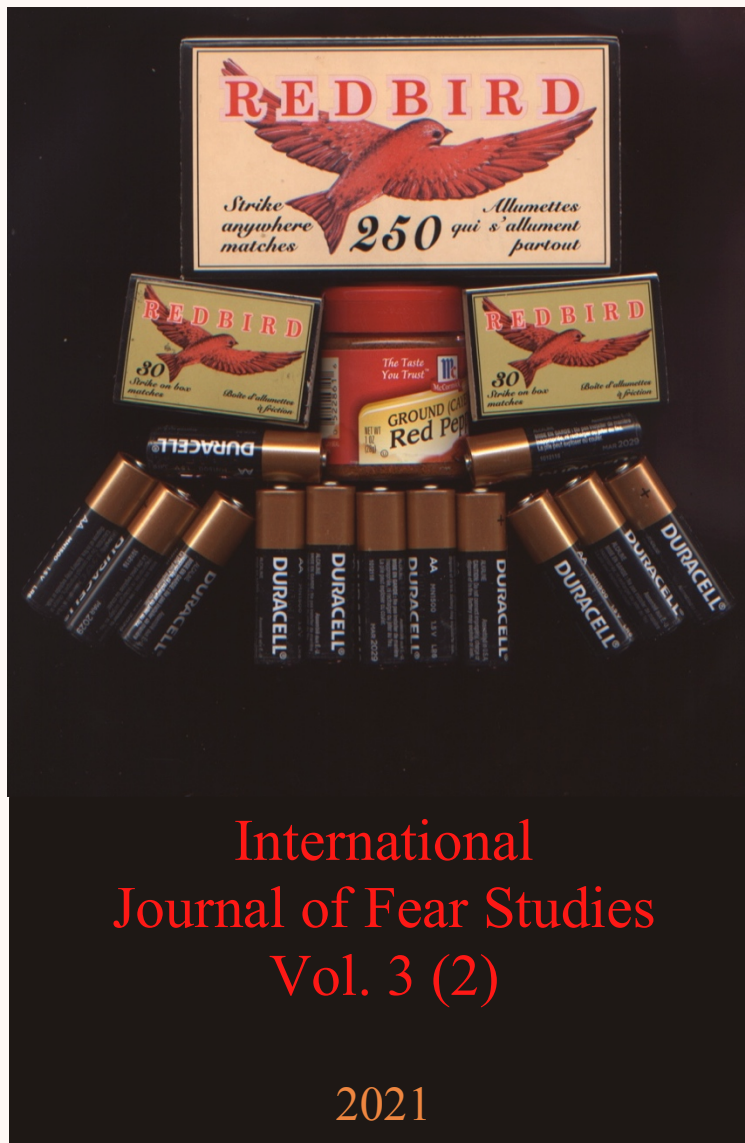


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Dread and its Defeat: *The Sunlight Pilgrims* as a Journey From Fear Towards Fearlessness

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Abstract

Dread is a unique form of fear, which challenges the normal consciousness in human beings. The drastic change in climate depicted in *The Sunlight Pilgrims* (2016) by Jenni Fagan that takes place in the then future, is a glimpse of an ongoing eco-dread to the entire world at present. As the story progresses we see the characters dread but then overcome it by developing the coping strategies which are needed at present and in the future, on the part of each human being residing on earth. To substantiate my claims about the characters' fears and their departure towards fearlessness, I draw ideas from Desh Subba, R. Michael Fisher, Wayne A. Davis, Joseph LeDoux, Barbara Bickel and argue that even at the vortex of fear and amidst dread, humans revive their innate capacity to overcome fear and survive it.

Key Words: Climate fiction, defeat, dread, unreal future, fear, fearlessness

Introduction

The Sunlight Pilgrims by Jenni Fagan is a novel which arguably focuses on the theme of fear along with the prevailing issue of climate change. It features Dylan MacRea, a thirty-eight years compassionate Londoner, twelve-year-old Stella and her mother Constance Fairburn as the central characters, who scrape by in the snowy, mountainous highlands preparing for an anticipated record-breaking winter. Constance is a survivalist; living in and even living out of a caravan, that is, a travel trailer sufficient enough for three or four-member-family to live in. She along with Stella spends her days digging through landfills, searching for anything with restorative and trading value. Whenever they pass by a decent piece of furniture Constance inspects it quickly, then she leaves a little bright-colored flag on the top so they can find it later (Fagan, p. 67).

As Dylan arrives in their caravan park in the dead of a dark night, "life changes course for Stella and Constance, though the weather worsens" his presence brings warmth and light to their daily life. With his camaraderie and compassion, they all develop surviving skills and render themselves ready for the time when the dreaded disaster would finally strike. All of them face fear

but collectively defeat it and live though they lose their close community members one by one in the vagary of nature (from a book overview @<https://hogarthbooks.com/books/the-sunlight-pilgrims-tr/the-sunlight-pilgrims-el>).

Literature Review

Scholars and critics have examined *The Sunlight Pilgrims* (TSP henceforth) from different perspectives and consequently have explored different issues in their studies. However, the text has not been examined amply from the perspective of fear.

Jason Heller, states, “*Sunlight Pilgrims* is “more than just a chilling tale of climate change.” Likewise, Hinde Dominic sees the novel as a “call for climate realism through the narrative of climate unrealism.” It can also be termed as an “example of irrealist confrontation” (Dominic p.1). Marisa Silver in her review of the novel observes, “Strange beauty can be found in destruction, and Fagan is fearless and wise to allow her characters to be as entranced by nature’s awesome power as they are terrified of it.” (para. 8). Hence, these authors and scholars rightly point out the theme of nature and climate as well as fear induced by them. Silver has hinted towards the positive fear (cf. reverential fear, Subba, 2020, p. 182) and beauty embedded in nature leading human beings through all the negative fears towards fearlessness.

Similar but a little different than all these scholars my focus is on the recurrent form/s of fear the characters perceive or experience. This inquiry is led by inquisitiveness such as what kind of fear-laden situations the characters undergo, how do they feel and react to it, how do they get over it and eventually what does the novel imply or suggest as a literary medium, with regards to human beings, a challenge like climate change and fear induced by it and its transformation(?)

Methodology

This paper is library research-based on printed as well as online texts and materials. It presents an analysis of the novel within the paradigm of qualitative research model using interpretative design during scrutiny. To render its interpretation authentic, I draw ideas primarily from Desh Subbha’s fundamental definitions of fear (2014), Wyne A. Davis’s differentiation of the “varieties of fear” (1987), R. Michael Fisher’s views on “fearlessness” (2020a), and Barbara Bickel’s insights on the use of the arational for creative mitigation of fright (2020).

The central characters Stella, her mother Constance and Dylan view and react to fearful situations in a subtly different way but their collective motto becomes survival. During the time of crisis they devise different practical coping mechanisms both—rational and arational for “coming to terms with fear” as explicated respectively, by Joseph LeDoux (2014) and Barbara Bickel (2020). Besides these philosophical and theoretical constructs and concepts, it uses the method of

textual as well as narrative analysis based on the characters' dialogues, expressions and words meticulously crafted by the novel's author.

Theoretical Framework

As an initial attempt to interpret a fiction from fear perspective, the paper confines itself within the basic premises of fear(ism) and fearlogy and its application as an experiment on a literary text. I believe for a theory or a philosophy and only their postulations and expansions they are not enough for its proliferation and relevance into practice. Hereby, addressing this issue, the paper aims to open the ground for carving its place in literature as any other "isms" have (Subba, 2014, p. 90). In doing so, it initiates its application as an interpretative and analytical tool for the literary texts.

Basically, fear is any imagined or physical threat, which conditions the body to a stressor by activating the stress mechanism (Subba, 2020, p.7). Subba avails fear with definitions wide-ranging from "a beautiful consciousness," "beauty," to the "controlling mechanism of the entire world" in his seminal book *Philosophy of Fearism* (2014). Among all the definitions of fear as explicated by Subba, the Fagan novel seems to illustrate it as a directing force of life, light to see the future through, an alert indicator, and necessity for courage and a powerful weapon to avert danger (2014, pp. 13-19). He also distinguishes between positive and negative fear (p. 29). Both of these are palpable in the novel.

Kerry J. Ressler (2019) focusing on the negative aspect of fear writes that we have all felt afraid, scared, or terrified. He connects excessive fear to a range of psychiatric maladies ranging from feeling of loss of control and a sense of terror, to even impending doom and death (p. 26).

Moreover, Wyne A. Davis (1987) interrelates different kinds of fear and explores their relationship to other mental states, basically anxiety and hope. Uncertainty, fear of the future, worry and anxiety are taken to be its core manifestations. Fright, terror and dread are the three kinds that he distinguishes. To replicate his words, *dread* is caused by a wider category of often long lasting fears, such as the fear that one will fail an exam. There is no disposition to flee, though there may be an urge to avoid the feared situation (Davis, pp. 278-88). Dread can take four forms. First the unconscious emotion fear like that of our first response to the smell of smoke or the sound of thunder. The second form of dread is anticipatory dread of pain— physical, emotional, spiritual or psychological. The third form of dread is doubt, or despair. And the fourth form of dread is "born of reverence," the holy dread (p. 278).

I use the term "dread" (specifically the second and third forms presented by Davies above) in this article for its meaning best illustrates the situation shown in the novel. They fret but do not flee and it is also not a short term or any abrupt phenomenon that makes them afraid but an in

length-induced and anticipatory fear triggered by the issue of crisis re: environment and climate. It does have a theme of “uncertainty” it induces and entails an “aversion” (Davis, p. 288-89). Fear as mentioned by David is governed by a “non-relational state,” that is, uncertainty governs it as its basic characteristics.

Subba is of the view that negative fear such as uncertainty needs to be minimized or nipped in its bud with a positive twist, if not, it is liable to orient human beings to pain and suffering, or at least it should be provided a positive outlet to impart it with a positive tinge. On the other hand positive fear is capable of liberating human beings from all the entanglements of doubt, anxiety, worry, suspicion and uncertainty (pp. 29-30). The most important aspect of this scholarship is to lay bare the positive aspects of fear out of which the world can immensely benefit.

Joseph LeDoux in his article (2019) defines fear as “the awareness that you are in harm’s way.” (p. 2). Such a “subjective state of inner awareness, of phenomenological consciousness” in his words “can result from the presence of an innate or learned threat, or also by imagining the possibility of harm in the near or distal future, even when such a possibility is improbable or even physically impossible” (LeDoux, p. 2). He talks about *fear schema* as “the unique collection of memories about threat, fear danger that you have accumulated throughout life” (p. 2). Fear in this light is a subjective experience which depends on human beings’ mental filters and triggers. Therefore, the experience of fear is tantamount to our mental and emotional make ups that get shaped through our pasts (LeDoux, p. 2). Subba terms it “conditional reflex” (2014, p. 24).

According to Fenselow, fear, like hunger or memory is a theoretical concept (22). In his opinion, fear relates to defensive behavior, in much the same way that hunger relates to feeding and thirst to drinking (18). Moreover, “since Pre-encounter defense occurs when there is no immediate peril, the state affords an opportunity for planning in advance. Anxiety may help focus the organism on how to best plan activities to minimize risk (Fenselow, p. 21). Nonetheless, Maria Jarymowicz, and Danial Bar Tal have argued that hope is always preceded by fear (p. 367).

Above all the scholars, R. Michael Fisher, who has been the trailblazer for fearlessness education in his writings and campaigns, discusses about fear in terms of a dynamic of trying to manage fear and leading human beings to a state of fearlessness. In “Culture of Fear: A Critical History of Two Streams” (2020a), he writes:

To say to end culture of fear would be like saying ending violence or oppression in a society or a nation....the culture of fear that goes on with all these things is not going to end. Culture of fear is all pervasive...the culture of fear has so flooded itself as an organization dynamic that it is like the water we swim in....Ending this culture is not a valid conception but we can mitigate it. (8-9)

It will be a false notion to say that one can end the culture of fear but it can be mitigated. Fisher denies the beliefs that fear can be eliminated: he asserts, “There is no eliminating fear. Human beings will always have fear” (p. 8). It promotes a realistic fear positivist view, that is, viewing fear as a positive force and educating people about it. Fisher’s basic dictum is: *that when fear appears, so then does fearlessness*. The dictum presents “fear as a dynamic principal of life that can be found in any species” (Fisher, 2020b, p. 5). Fisher upholds all the rational, humanitarian ways of handling fear, though not limited only to them, by demystifying it as an innate, positive force. Overtly, Barbara Bickel even goes beyond the realm of rationality to the realm of ‘arationality’ to iterate—how formless or unpredictable it be, asserting that fear can be managed not only with rational means but also through arational modes and ways.

Bickel (2020) unfolds the concept of use of arational ways of managing and mitigating fear through creative outlets such as art and alternative ways that involve human beings’ collective efforts. Quoting Jean Gesber, she argues “arational, which is most often conflated with the irrational, is distinct from, and yet negotiates between and alongside, the irrational and the rational” (Bickel, 2020, p. 2). Quoting Anzaldua (1987) and Four Arrows (2016) she writes:

Historically, it has typically not been acknowledged within the Western canon of philosophical thought despite its ability to be a mediator between the dualistic rational and irrational ways of knowing and being. The arational is ontologically an inherent modality and intelligence accessible to all. Despite the dominant Western colonizing agenda, the arational has remained active and accessible in Indigenous worldviews and in their teachings and practices. (p. 2)

The (re)discovery of the arational as a mediator between the dualistic, rational and irrational ways of knowing and being as an ontologically inherent modality and intelligence accessible to all adds to the belief that fear is basically a pliable emotion that can be mitigated and used for the welfare of human beings. The mention of something beyond the literal and the rational in the novel, that is, the mythical story of the sunlight pilgrims suggests this insight. Hence, *TSP* begins, develops and concludes within the framework of these ideas discussed above.

The Sunlight Pilgrims: An Analysis from Fear to Fearlessness Perspective

The Sunlight Pilgrims, written in 2016, begins in November of 2020 in a distant future. The world is freezing over, each day colder than the last. There's snow in Israel, the Thames is overflowing, and an iceberg separated from the Fjords in Norway is expected to drift just off the coast of Scotland. As ice water melts into the Atlantic, frenzied London residents evacuate by the thousands for warmer temperatures down south. But Dylan grieving and ready to build life anew heads North to bury his mother's and grandmother's ashes on the Scottish islands where they once

lived. His arrival at Clachan Fells brings new hope and hue to Constance's and Stella's life and vice versa, for Dylan also receives tender care from Constance.

The novel begins with the mention of the incredibly plummeting temperatures, and dramatizes the characters' reactions since their knowing about the disaster that the iceberg can cause in re: to the time they get fully prepared for this premonition. The novel though devoid of a conclusion in a traditional sense, ends with some deaths that multiply the trepidation in the populace of the Caravan Park; contrary to fear, it displays a fortification of their hope for life.

The most intriguing part in the novel is that the characters' actions oscillate between the mention of dread and some action they take to mitigate it. The dread goes together with the defensive mechanisms. The novel displays the extreme projections right from the very beginning:

[T]hey mark the arrival of the most extreme winter for 200 years. Roads jam with people trying to stock up on fuel, food, water. Some say it is the end of times. Polar caps are melting. Salinity in the ocean is at an all-time low. The North Atlantic Drift is slowing. (Fagan, 2016, p.1)

The intense trepidation against their subsistence is posed by nature. The fabrication and projection of fear in the future activates them for preparation for life, and so they collect the basic needs. Besides, it is predicted that a four month plummet will conclude with "temperatures as low as minus forty degrees Celsius or even minus fifty" (Fagan, p.1). The characters have long induced dread for the extensive future as Davis defines it as a "phenomenon that makes them afraid but a long induced and lasting issue of environment and climate," however, surely it does have a theme of "uncertainty" that it bears (pp. 288-89). Out of the "conditional reflex" (Subba, p. 14) that cold might kill people they get afraid of the life threatening happenings such as freezing to death:

Corpses will be found staring into a snowy maelstrom. A van will arrive lift the frozen ones up, drive them to the city morgue—it takes two weeks to defrost a fully grown man. Environmentalists gather outside embassies while religious leaders claim that their particular god is about to wreak a righteous vengeance for our sins—a prophesy foretold. (Fagan, p.1)

Dread of probable death numbs them. The fear is built up through religion as a punishment to sins or a certain vengeance. Therefore, Constance Fairbairn, her child Stella and the incomer Dylan as well as the neighbours step out onto porches and everyone is unusually quiet, nodding to each other instead of saying hello (Fagan p. 2). They become the voiceless prisoners of dread. The newspapers too highlight the fear by publishing the news about it in the front pages, "It's the bloody ice age, mate, that's the front page news today! There lies the "fear of extermination" (Fagan, p. 17). The reason for the ice age is given as "human beings acting like a fucking cancer on this here of beautiful planet" (Fagan, p.18). To universalize the theme the major and even advanced cities of the world, such as London are mentioned which was freezing (Fagan, p. 21).

Cold and ice is taken as the dread inducing major factors or threats, “an imagined threat” as the novel is the story of the future (Subba, 2014, p.7). Dylan who has reached Clachan Fells, the fictitious town in Northern Scotland, located between the sea and the fields to reside, feels like migrating to warmer countries like Vietnam or Cambodia if only he could sell his caravan (Fagan, p. 23). Dylan did not have the “disposition to flee” though in him there was “an urge to avoid the feared situation” (Davis, p. 278-88). Had he migrated, it would have been an act of escape out of fear (Subba, 2014, p. 105). However, he had an urge to transform the situation or take the situation under his control by doing something creative; it reverberates Bickel’s images of the clay bird towards its making. Dylan too focuses on strategies to ease the situation. In its response, people are shown to be protesting, that is, they are displaying the consciousness for their safety and security (Subba, p.105).

“Footage flashes environmental protestors outside Westminster. Rows of police officers stared through them. Save the planet, signs bob up and down” (Fagan, p.26). “High alert. High alert. High alert!” (p. 27). We are not sure whether Fagan has had the conscious knowledge about the positive aspect of fear or not but she articulates that it can be used as an apparatus of alertness. The repetition of the word “alert” yelled out to public for a need of a recluse; it is a call to the people for their collective search of a solution.

To impart more credibility to the issues of weather extremes they are presented through the eyes of Constance, who is a permanent resident at the Fells. She says it’s “getting more extreme each year” (Fagan, p.30). It reaches minus six (°C). Nobody knows how cold it is going to get this winter, exactly. They guess there might be icebergs. Not only Constance but lately “fear is following” Stella too. It is two tiny pit-a-pat feet always skittering behind her (p. 34). It is reported that the snow takes lives of the people living around, one by one—Ethel at number seven, died too (p. 44). They have dread and “aversion” for death because in winter it gets so cold that one could freeze to death in their bed” (Davis, p. 289; Fagan, p. 45). The toilet seat is freezing (p. 48). Death seems to be ever pervasive but nobody even thinks of any alternative reason that might cause death. They perceive and react as if the absolute cause of death is cold.

The dread of numbness and Sun even not rising haunts them—Constance thinks, “This winter is going to be the death of all!” (p. 57). They talk about the “iceberg coming from Norway. Big bloody iceberg, bigger than the Wishbone Hotel.” Constance asks if it was going to arrive at Clachan Fells (p. 63). As LeDoux defines, fear as “the awareness that you are in harm’s way,” they all get gripped by the major “objects of fear,” that is, the lack of sunlight, low temperature, snow and the iceberg (Davis, p. 287). However, instantly they talk about what would stop it crashing into land? (Fagan, p. 63). Hence, the psychological shift is from fear to rescue. Irrespective of the dire situation the innate life force comes into consciousness.

They hear about “an unidentified person by the cliff area” then they get warned to “leave the danger zone; to get out of their zones!” (p. 70). When Dylan slows down, his face gets numb, it’s disconcerting. He needs to walk faster. He is “unsure if he can even feel his toes any more” or he had “the awareness that he might be in harm’s way” (LeDoux, p. 2). Dylan is a movie maker, “he captures the minute alterations in the weather and climate” (Fagan, p.83). The description of the environment suggests a kind of gloom due to the use of different shades of grey, and pain words such as sting and numbness which are also the implied manifestations of fear (?).

“Disoriented,” he peers forward. He can’t breathe. What if the cloud won’t lift?” (p. 90). The phrases like “chilled-to-the bone,” “disoriented” suggests anxiety and fear, and they had the inexplicable panic due to the dropping temperatures. The characters’ panic is an extreme form of fear (Ressler, p. 26). The temperature gauge on the wall says minus nine—it is getting colder almost every hour right now, winter is going to come and they will be snowed in like Eskimos until spring (p. 94). Though they have dread, fear and panic, they develop coping mechanisms to survive it. They focus realistically on what they can do for reviving courage collectively:

As you all know, for once we are not alone in having an extreme winter, but this one is going to be more severe than most and so we’re already putting plans together to ensure we can all get through it safely. Over by the Exit doors there are list of jobs that we need volunteers for. The council will salt the roads but not all of them we need to raise money to grit the smaller roads. (Fagan, p. 95)

The only way out of difficulty is through it. Similarly, the way out of fear is through it too—it seems they know it well. Gradually they move from the state of fear towards the state of fearlessness. They aim to keep the church open all winter and the village hall is going to offer respite, and even somewhere to stay or get a hot meal or warm clothes or a bath, for anyone who needs it (p. 96). They realize that a secure shelter, hot meal and warm clothes would mean a lot in the process of adaptation to the probable emergency.

They ponder how to start a fire with a battery (p. 33). They make a bonfire (p. 40). They go for warm wears such as “some steel toe caps one size too big, so they fit your winter socks underneath” (p. 44). They also keep basic medical aid on offer; they make sure there’s a back-up, if they should need it (p. 96). “We all need to focus on getting this community through the winter, the head nun says”; they go collectively to deal about the dread (p. 96). Fire, socks, medicine, all of it implies survival and security in the impending threat. Their communal efforts echo Bickel’s communal practice of spontaneous art during the pandemic for keeping her fear at bay (p. 3). Barber holds that the connecting through creating a *field of care* and compassion, *via* communal practices helped nourish, restore and sustain an eco-system by attending to the health of well-being of the individual within the whole (pp. 3-4).

Fagan suggests that in such cases of danger to lead people from the state of fear towards fearlessness, efforts are to be made not only at a personal and communal level but also from political or state levels. In the novel the Prime Minister releases a statement saying people must stop panicking. Due to the panic, some of the residents even have gone insane as such, however the others don't lose hope; as a last resort, they place hope in the Sun and its light which they believe can also be stored in human bodies for keeping the cold problems at bay.

Out of this belief comes the title of the novel "The Sunlight Pilgrims." It has been discussed in detail as a sub-theme in the narrative: "You can drink light right down into your chromosomes, then in the darkest minutes of winter, when there is a total absence of it, you will glow and glow and glow, I do, she says" (p. 51). Gunn told Stella that there was an island close to Norway, but still a part of the archipelago, that was home to a bunch of monks they called sunlight pilgrims. All they had to eat was gannets and one year they all went mad, threw themselves off the cliffs, about seventy of them. Nobody knows what did it, but they were totally isolated from the mainland and they had one boat but they couldn't go for help until spring. They all died apart from one. They found him on the mountaintop naked, sitting in lotus, drinking light—orange to grey. That's how he said it. He said you just drink it. He said it keeps humans right. He claimed that he hadn't eaten for weeks and the devil had taken his brothers, but he was okay, he said he got everything he needed from the sun. Apparently all the bones of the monks are still there on the island, Dylan relates (p.145).

Dylan recalls someone told him one can drink energy from the Sun, store it in our cells so you grow strong. Stella thinks they should all do it. It could become like a back-up store of it in our cells; she repeats there were sunlight pilgrims doing it all the time—it is how they get through the dark, by stashing up as much light as they can, Stella says (p. 144). This way they even think about storing Sun light, which is the last resort that one can imagine when it comes to the mode to survival after which the novel is named too.

In a nut shell, the entire narrative of *TSP* revolves round the second form of dread, that is, "anticipatory dread of pain especially emotional and psychological" as observed by Davis (p. 278). It is based on the imaginary fear about the future mostly based on local narratives and myths, which is a fake fear as *per* Subba (2014, p. 28). However, it is a probably an *eco-fear* phenomenon (Adhikari et al., 2020), analogous to other fear related areas. Therefore, the novel can be a resource towards teaching fearlessness to the world. The characters undergo and deal with dread of physical, emotional and psychological pain. They, along with courage and caution, succeed to avert and mostly go through it akin to the generic axiom that the only way out of difficulty is through it.

Conclusion

The drastic change in climate depicted in *The Sunlight Pilgrims* by Fagan takes place in the then future which, on one hand, is a metaphor to the ongoing eco-threat in the entire world at present, and on the other an example of artificial fear of the future. Due to the weather alterations induced by climate change worldwide fear has been injected into human minds irrespective of their age, gender and geography. It can be deployed as an insight to envision analogous forms of fears for preparedness against them as a first step in a journey to fearlessness. The characters, like the world citizens at their own contexts, undergo every manifestation of fear; the fear words like fright fear, scared, panic but beauty and staunch hope follow these negative fear terms throughout the novel.

We are challenged by the decreasing temperatures constantly mentioned in the novel from the beginning to the end. Analogously one can think of excessively high temperatures and devise proper safety mechanisms in time. However, the challenge and fear induced by dismally low temperatures, are balanced and beaten with the mention of rational and arational means and measures of hope and fearlessness such as use of heat, layers of clothes, stays-in, and the probable act of sipping the Sunlight as the title suggests. It is reminded that the Sun is the eternal and inexhaustible source of warmth, light and life, which we even can drink and retain for long in our bodies exactly as a camel does when it comes to water for its survival in the desert. There are ways to fearlessness given by nature, we only have to discover them at times with our efforts. Fagan, as mentioned above by Silver in her review of the novel, is fearless to allow her characters to be as entranced by nature's awesome power nonetheless they are terrified of it in the beginning. Though literally the novel seems a story of fear, metaphorically is an illustration of fearlessness; the title of the novel also stands by it to justify it.

It is a visionary story of courage and spirit. It displays fear especially dread, deals with it in detail, leads us through the kinds of psychological stress various characters undergo due to fear and also (pl)eases us with the coping mechanisms they revive or develop which lead to commendable mode towards fearlessness. Finally the novel concludes with a note to human beings to defeat dread out of courage, and preparedness as of the survivors do, though they are not presented as standard heroes, are depicted as conscious human beings who could transform fear and danger into caution, collaboration and survival.

The novel is a message to the world that if alertness, observation, optimism, precaution and preventive measures are there, we can endure even the worst of fearful circumstances. Fear at times of natural calamities as the iceberg in the novel or any other kinds in any other contexts can serve as a trigger to devise the defensive modes and mechanisms for fearlessness; if not, we should train our minds to make fear do so.

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