

Dark Ecology

Jeiya Shivaani R S¹, Jothi R², Manimala M³, Manju Reka A⁴

Department of English¹⁻⁴

Sri Sarada College for Women (Autonomous), Tirunelveli

Abstract: Ecology is the study of the relationships between living organisms and their environment, emphasizing the balance and interdependence that sustain life on Earth. Today, the world faces an ecological crisis caused by deforestation, climate change, pollution, and the loss of biodiversity, threatening both nature and humanity's survival. This paper explores the concept of Dark Ecology in Charlotte McConaghy's novel *Once There Were Wolves*, examining the complex and unsettling relationship between humans and the natural world. Based on Timothy Morton's concept, Dark Ecology rejects the romantic idea of nature as pure and separate from humanity, instead showing that all life forms, including humans, are deeply interconnected through both beauty and decay. McConaghy sets her narrative in the Scottish Highlands, where the protagonist Inti Flynn leads a rewilding project to reintroduce wolves into a damaged ecosystem. The novel uses the wolves as symbols of both fear and renewal, revealing how ecological restoration is filled with moral ambiguity and emotional tension. Inti's strong empathetic connection with the wolves blurs the boundaries between human and animal, reflecting Morton's belief that true ecological understanding requires confronting darkness, violence, and discomfort rather than seeking peace or separation. The hostility of the local community toward the wolves mirrors humanity's broader denial of its interdependence with the natural world and fear of facing its destructive tendencies. McConaghy also connects environmental degradation with gender-based violence and emotional trauma, showing how the exploitation of nature parallels the oppression of women. Through this intertwining of ecological and personal suffering, the novel argues that healing can only occur by accepting darkness as part of life and by embracing the cycles of death, pain, and renewal that sustain the planet. In this sense, *Once There Were Wolves* redefines ecological ethics through empathy, compassion, and acknowledgment of complexity. The novel ultimately embodies the principles of Dark Ecology by challenging readers to see nature not as a source of purity or redemption, but as a mirror reflecting humanity's own contradictions. It invites a deeper awareness of coexistence—one that recognizes the moral and emotional truths hidden within the tangled beauty and brutality of the natural world

Keywords: empathetic, exploitation, tendencies

I. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary literature, ecological concerns have become central, reflecting humanity's growing awareness of climate change, habitat destruction, and biodiversity loss. Charlotte McConaghy's *Once There Were Wolves* explores the uneasy and complex relationship between humans and nature through the story of Inti Flynn, a conservationist involved in a rewilding project in the Scottish Highlands. The novel resonates with Timothy Morton's concept of *Dark Ecology*, which challenges the romanticized view of nature as pure or separate from humanity and emphasizes interconnectedness, uncertainty, and moral complexity. In the narrative, wolves are not merely symbols of wilderness but sentient beings whose presence forces humans to confront their vulnerabilities, fears, and responsibilities toward the environment. By blurring the boundaries between human and nonhuman, the novel highlights the ethical and emotional dimensions of coexistence, portraying a world in which humans must engage with darkness, decay, and unpredictability rather than seek domination or idealized harmony. Through themes of rewilding, empathy, and ecological restoration, McConaghy's work embodies the shadows of Dark Ecology, presenting ecological awareness as both unsettling and instructive. This paper examines how *Once There Were Wolves* challenges conventional perceptions of nature, explores the moral and emotional



consequences of human intervention, and envisions the possibility of coexistence with nonhuman life, offering a nuanced perspective on environmental ethics in contemporary literature.

II. UNDERSTANDING DARK ECOLOGY

Ecology studies the relationships between living organisms plants, animals, humans, and microbes and their surroundings, examining both living and nonliving components of the Earth. It seeks to understand life processes, adaptation, and biodiversity, highlighting the interdependence of all life forms and the functioning of ecosystems. Ecology also investigates how humans use natural resources and how these interactions affect the balance of the environment.

Dark Ecology, a philosophical concept developed by Timothy Morton, challenges the conventional, romanticized view of nature as harmonious, serene, and separate from humans. Morton argues that humans are never outside of nature; they are deeply entangled within it, both affecting and being affected by environmental transformations. Dark Ecology asks us to confront the complexity, unpredictability, and often uncomfortable realities of ecological interdependence. Unlike traditional environmentalism, it does not idealize or simplify nature but highlights its chaotic, interconnected, and sometimes “dark” aspects. This perspective encourages humans to acknowledge their moral and ethical responsibilities toward nonhuman life while abandoning the illusion of separation or control.

Morton’s work emphasizes that the “dark” in Dark Ecology does not imply destruction or despair but refers to the uncanny, unfamiliar, and interconnected realities of life on Earth. It asks humans to move away from domination and exploitation toward coexistence, ethical engagement, and mutual interdependence. William Brockliss in his 2018 journal entitled *Dark Ecology and the Works and Days*, examines ancient understandings of ecology from a dark ecological perspective. He claims that Hesiod’s *Works and Days* portrays a kind of ecological awareness characterized by the association between humans and nonhumans, articulated in a dark or melancholy fashion. This reading consistent with Morton’s notion of dark ecology.

Morton’s explorations of dark ecological aesthetics can enrich our understanding of the Hesiodic *Works and Days* and in particular of the ways in which ancient audiences would have reacted to its explorations of humans and their surroundings. The poem describes the sorts of harsh environments that would have been familiar to such audiences. While some passages seem to accord a privileged status to humans, many others explore intersections of the human and nonhuman. They do so, moreover, in the sort of pessimistic tone that Morton associates with his dark ecological aesthetic.(Brockliss 2)

In literature and environmental criticism, Dark Ecology provides a lens for exploring the entangled relationships between humans, animals, and ecosystems. It challenges anthropocentrism, presenting a vision of the world in which humans are participants rather than masters of nature. Dark Ecology promotes ethical responsibility, humility, and awareness of ecological unpredictability, urging a revaluation of humanity’s role on the planet. By acknowledging the moral, emotional, and ecological dimensions of coexistence, it inspires literature, philosophy, and environmental thought to reflect the complexity, uncertainty, and interconnectedness of life. Ultimately, it encourages humans to engage with the environment ethically, embracing both the beauty and the darkness inherent in the natural world.

III. VOICES OF THE WILD

In *Once There Were Wolves*, Charlotte McConaghy provides a fictional treatment of ecological thinking. It offers many of the disturbing insights that Timothy Morton describes as dark ecology. Dark ecology challenges the normative ways that many people think about nature, as harmonious and separate from the human world. Dark ecology reveals entanglement, contradiction, and the strange kinship that tends to bind humans and nonhumans. Instead of comforting readers with images of a nature characterized by balance or purity, Morton states that a true ecological sensibility is dark, haunting, strange, and terrifying.

McConaghy’s book illustrates the idea behind dark ecology most clearly with its descriptions of wolves. Wolves are not diminished to symbols of freedom or purity or icons of rewilding, as they often appear in the discussions surrounding it. They are instead alive, living beings, whose existence elicits wonder and fear. As Inti introduces the villagers, People were against the project of rewilding. They mentioned wolves as predators that would cause harm and destruction to the society. This highlights Morton’s idea of Dark ecology, where nature is viewed only as a harmonious places but accepting the nature with death, decay and the other unsettling effects is one of the important notion humans fails. One of the core



principle is necessity of monster. while people see wolf killing deer a brutal act. Dark Ecology challenges this view mentioning nature is not always pure and bright instead it has a harsh side for its renewal and ecological balance.

My fingers are turning numb as I sink into a back two seat beside Niels and Zoe. There is a women in the audience holding a sign that reads CIGARATTES AND WOLVES, KILLERS THAT COME IN PACKS and a kid waving one that say WILL THERE BE ANY DEER LEFT WHEN I GROW UP?"(22)

Dark ecology places value in the entanglement and moral value of all beings, animals are not just objects and resources, but sentient agents of ecological networks. Acknowledging that all beings experience some forms of attachment, care, or connection, supports the notion that humanity is constrained to nonhuman life and must understand the emotional and moral relation to others. Inti's father mentions All creatures know love. This connects to Dark Ecology's call to respect the autonomy and inner lives of nonhumans, rather than approaching nonhumans via fear and domination or as objects to be exploited, we must be conscious of ethical being. Inti's mirror-touch synaesthesia, the ability to physically experience what other beings feel is directly connected to dark ecology as it speaks to the theme of interconnectedness and entanglement between humans and nonhumans in the novel. Through her condition, Inti feels the physical and emotional sensations of wolves, other animals and humans, thereby abolishing the boundary between self and other. The final phrase of the novel brings a transformation among the people who had now started to co-exist with the wolves. Inti found Highlands getting restored after a long period of time.

The deer are on the move. Things are growing again. The wolves have come home. And by some miracle, or perhaps it's simply the natural way, the people of this land are becoming accustomed to them....I see locals using binoculars to patiently watch for sightings, that the wolves are working their way into the hearts of the Scottish people.(255)

The chapter indicate that humans must rethink their role in the natural world to cohabit ethically. The local humans' slow acceptance of wolves reminds us that humans must also rethink their cultural and ethical values to coexist in spaces shared with other species, recognizing their independence and inherent worth. Dark ecology is not merely a framework, but it is a way to act with ethical awareness, yet open to ecological complexity in the living world. In this way, *Once There Were Wolves* represents a strong inquiry into how we humans can live ethically, respectfully, and in great connection with nonhuman life.

IV. SUMMATION

when we get into the realm of ecology it is an never ending path. Dark Ecology acts as a part of ecology values and moral emphasising the humans role in the environment. Dark Ecology grasps the human nature relationship mentioning the acceptance of nature with its harsh realities like death, decay, pollution and unsettling effects of nature. It embrace the ecological complexity and discomfort is also essential to develop a more humble, responsible relationship with the planet. *Once There Were Wolves* urges humanity to look beyond domination and rediscover its kinship with the natural world. McConaghy's narrative, intertwined with the real lessons of rewilding and ecological renewal, reminds us that survival depends on compassion, not control.

REFERENCES

- [1]. McConaghy, Charlotte. *Once There Were Wolves*. Penguin Random House UK, 2021.
- [2]. Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Harvard University Press, 2007.
- [3]. Nayak, Shubhajit. "Review of *Once There Were Wolves*." *Literary Oracle*, vol.6, 2022.
- [4]. Brockliss, William. "'Dark Ecology' and the *Works and Days*." *Dark Ecology and the Works and Days*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2018

