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Original Research Paper

# Climate Change and Broader Implications of Human Choices and Actions in Alexandra Kleeman's *Something New under the Sun*

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**Abstract.**

In the "Preface" to her science fiction, The Left Hand of Darkness, Ursula K. Le Guin views that "Science fiction is not predictive, it is descriptive." (Le Guin, 1969) Alexandra Kleeman's second novel, *Something New Under the Sun* evidences Le Guin's thought with its profound unsettling end. The fictional narrative of Kleeman demonstrates that the current reality, human experience and psychological truths and explains how the ways and forms of life on earth are destroyed by human appetites. The wild torrents of climate crisis are negotiated in the novel, by describing the negative outcomes on the human and the nonhuman worlds. Alexandra Kleeman is a contemporary American writer, who has carved a niche for herself through her unique approach to writing. In *Something New Under the Sun,* she makes a wonderful blend of the surreal and the speculative elements. She uses her sharp tongue to address the pressing social issues as well as explore the human psyche and its endless contradictions. The story is set in the near futureon California, which is completely uninhabitable due to climate change. The present study explores the way Kleeman includes climate change in her novel and represents its local and global impacts.

**Key Words:** Climate change, capitalism, synthetic water, environmental devastation

## Introduction

*Something New Under the Sun* is a novel by Alexandra Kleeman, published in 2021. The storyline of the novel marks it as a science fiction or a novel of mystery. The near-future California, with its upcoming society, serves as the backdrop of the story. The crucial issue in the forefront is the severe water scarcity, an outcome of climate crisis.

Patrick Hamlin, the protagonist of the novel is a novelist-turned-screenwriter for films. He has come to Los Angeles to administer the production of his novel's film adaptation. In the course of his work, he traverses the disorienting world of Hollywood. Cassidy Carter, the enigmatic and alluring lead actress of Hollywood has made a comeback after a short break from her career. While residing in Los Angeles, Patrick learns that the situation with the shortage of water has led to the creation of a synthetic substitute called WAT-R, which is being produced and distributed by a major corporation. The synthetic water serves as the only available resource for the drought-ridden region. The realization occurs later that it creates mysterious and dangerous side effects. Meantime, Patrick, entangles in his relationship with Cassidy, involves in unfolding the conspiracy surrounding WAT-R. The three major signs of sinister acts of the production company are deceit, corporate greed, and environmental devastation.

## Theoretical Framework:

*Something New Under the Sun* questions humanity's relationship with nature; it presents the outcomes of human reliance on technology; it talks about the moral boundaries, which humans have crossed in pursuit of survival and profits. As the novel is a thought-provoking and timely commentary on the climate crisis, the objective of the present study is to explore the potential consequences of human actions in dwindling the natural resources, as presented in the novel.

The central action of the novel takes place in California, predicting the depressing, unpleasant and grim future of the Earth. Kleeman has made it a fictional narrative; yet, the drawing the distinction between the imaginary presentation in the novel and the real happenings in California is a challenging

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work to the readers; the episodes in the novel resemble the wildfires, the frequent occurrences in the state. Kleeman delineates her work to be close to the present, as one of the new directors of Patrick's film has worked on an "acclaimed foreign film in the 1980s". (Sun 201) The residents of the state in the novel are normal civilians, living with their day-to-day issues and affairs. The shocking reality is that they reside close to a burning landscape and consume the synthetic water.

As a dystopian novel, *Something New Under the Sun* examines issues such as the corporate power and environmental degradation. It is the changed society, in which the goal of making money has come at the expense of everything else. Human life is reduced to merely existing. Through her novel, Kleeman alarms the citizens of the world about the dangers of corporate greed and the necessity of environmental care. The study intends to explore how the influence of climate change is detailed by the novelist.

**Significance of Study:**

The present study explores Alexandra Kleeman's novel *Something New Under the Sun* to highlight capitalism and privatization are drivers of climate change. The study is significant in the present scenario of environmental devastation for raising awareness among the human beings. In this study, an attempt is taken to examine Kleeman's work through an ecological perspective, highlighting its potentials to engage the readers with its realistic interpretation of a world affected by the phenomenon of climate change. Thus, *Something New under the Sun* could touch on various environmental issues and enlighten people with further insight into the pressing demand for sustainability.

The effect of climate change which could also be referred to as global warming is one of the most crucial and imminent matters in the 21st century. With regard to the existing situation, climate change presents a booming problem posing threat to the earth and all living organisms. This can only imply that climate change is an even greater concern than ever imagined before. As a matter of fact, climate change's results are clearly indicated by such events like increased level of seas, melting glaciers, increasing acidity in oceans and drastic weather changes. (Parenti, 2011, p 6) *Something New under the Sun* really resonates with these contemporary reality problems faced by the globe. Knowingly or unknowingly, mankind gets compelled to take part in discussions about climate change as witnessed by an alarming increase in temperatures, devastating fires, growing sea levels, and many other related disasters occurring frequently. Therefore, taking into account the Anthropocene period, there arises an unavoidable necessity for heightened cognizance of human influence on environment along with the repercussions caused by human activities.

Varying Environmental Consciousness of Characters:

*Something New under the Sun* brilliantly encapsulates water scarcity, spiralling forest fires and the pervasive power of corporations. In the novel, Patrick, the prominent character denies climate change; he willingly turns a blind eye to the expected disasters with the sole intention of pursuing his own personal desires. He is portrayed as a climate denier. He is an epitome of the consumer-driven society. He is the representative of many individuals, who find themselves entangled in similar patterns of thinking. He underscores the need for collective reflection of the issues and recognition of the societal influences that shape human thinking.

During their travel to the film studio, Cassidy and Patrick are in compulsion to take diversion and travel in another route. Cassidy says, "There's a fire in North Hollywood – so we can't take the road you came in on". (Sun 70) This statement, delivered in casual tone, indicates that Cassidy is used to wildfires and the inhibitions in travel due to it. Characters like Patrick never look at the spread of fire as a situation of emergency. He normalizes the happening, saying, "Terrible, definitely. But it's not really an emergency – if you can drive around it." (Sun 105)

The people of the land lice a self-centered life, focusing on attaining economic fulfillment and expectations, being unmindful of the massive destructive force, named global warming. Patrick evidences this statement, because he has transferred his work spot to California, even after knowing about the wildfires and such catastrophes, which may become hazardous to him. He is unwavering in his sole pursuit of converting the written book into a film. So, the major climate disasters seem to be insignificant to him. His ambition has blinded him and so the seriousness of the situation could not draw his attention. He is chasing self-realization and desires in California. He is an epitome of personal desires.

There is an attitudinal difference found among the other characters in Kleeman's novel. Alison and Nora, Patrick's wife and daughter reside at Earth bridge, a small commune in Upstate New York. These two characters in the novel are quite aware of the dangers, posed by the wildfire and the booming scarcity. They are worried about Patrick's travel around the wildfire; yet, they are hesitant to accompany him out of fear. In addition, as they are far away from California, which gets affected by the wildfire often, they could not sense the intensity of the situation. They discard his calls sometimes, considering them to be casual ones. They are aware of the climate changes and the environmental devastations, caused by it. They resolve to be correct in their way of living and be true to themselves. In contrast to Patrick, Alison and Nora are the epitomes of social responsibility.

The fact that Alison notices individuals, engaged in mundane activities, without acknowledging the appearing crisis adds to her sense of separation from all of them. As she realizes how aware she is of the terrible impacts of climate change, her hopelessness deepens on noticing the disinterestedness of others. She explains in a mild tone the gradual process of the trees in the park dying and being not paid attention by the passers-by. "I look at Nora and I know there's no future for her, and it tears my heart in two." (Sun 27) The intensity of Alison's pain increases on noticing the people are immersed in driving cars and eating cheeseburgers, without being aware that of their impending death. "Not one of them sees what I see, and that means we have no chance." (Sun 27)

Cassidy Carter and Nora face the ecological decline, societal pressure, and socio-political instability. All these characters deal with many current issues in a futuristic setting. By the end of the novel, Cassidy becomes the protagonist and illustrates how the younger generation is the future of our story on Earth. The end of the novel gives a vivid but crude picture of how all these characters are doomed to disaster, as they are taken over by corporations. The synthetic water has poisoned the soil on which they live, indicating the loss of power of the human world, in front of the man-made climate change. The corporation as are the only ones to be benefitedby the dire consequences of climate change. They get an opportunity to monopolize water service, the essential part of human life. This capitalistic monopoly leads finally to the destruction of humanity on the whole.

**Capitalism and Privatization:**

As witnessed in the real world, in the fictional world of *Something New Under the Sun* privatization and capitalism play a significant role in adding to the hazardous impacts of climate change. Every aspect of human life, including their environment is taken over by the corporations. The irreparable damage is caused to the environment by privatization and capitalism; the natural resources are exploited and thus reduced. The objective of the corporations is not to safeguard the well-being of the planet and the people, but to attain the maximum profit. They extend their monopoly water, the essential natural resource and replace it with synthetic water, the sign of capitalism. On the whole, the synthetic, corporate-monopolized water drives the land to a dystopian ecological collapse. By depleting the natural water, the citizens are forced to buy a manufactured liquid, produced by a powerful corporation. It is strange that in such a changed atmosphere, clean and natural water is considered to be a luxury. The use of the artificial substitute for real water pushes causes degenerative brain condition in most of the citizens. The toxicity caused to the environment and the hazards to the public life are concealed tactfully by the corporations. They do so with the sole intention of protecting market share and consumer demand. As pictured in Kleeman's novel, the film industry in Los Angeles acts as another corporate mechanism by building up illusions and distracting the attention of the public from reality. The artificialities, which fascinate the consumers are presented simply to cleanse the minds of the victims from such attraction.

**Destructive Water Variants:**

*Something New Under the Sun* depicts a future where private corporations have already exploited natural resources in their quest for economic gain. This is the outcome of the unregulated capitalism; by prioritizing profit, the world has to await the potential dangers, driving environmental sustainability and community well-being to the secondary status. Kleeman discusses how capitalism can lead to inequality its role in the issue of climate change. "Capital is real to them… Loss is malleable… as obvious as the alternation of sun and moon." (Sun 83-84) Economic motivation contributes to environmental degradation and climate change. While criticizing the practice of prevailing water in bottles, she says "All a swindle…an everyday injustice, but not a crime under the law of capital." (Sun 89) As per the capital-driven laws and regulations, the act of bottling water may not be legally categorized as a crime. Capitalism has been shaping societal structures; it extends its effect on different aspects of human lives. In distributing resources like water, profit id prioritized. "WAT-R is just another bottled beverage product you can buy at the store. Here, it's all you get unless you have a lot of money and a lot of connections." (Sun 87-88)

In the fictional narrative of Kleeman, the climate change has led California to the bitter experience of drought. Horseshoe, a worker in the film industry informs Patrick about the differences between the natural water and the synthetic water. He explains that WAT-R "boils at a slightly higher temperature and freezes at a slightly lower temperature." (Sun 126-27) Another shocking report provided by Horseshoe is that it can form bonds inside the molecule, and with other molecules. The drought, caused by the climate change has forced the residents of California to choose WAT-R as a substitute for regular water. The choice goes to the extreme level that the sale of regular water is banned and so the synthetic water replaces it. The fictional civilization, pictured in the narrative faces the challenge of affording to the synthetic water. The people from average income families are compelled to consume the water replacement and they are liable to diseases. The corporate marketing facilitates the production and supply of WAT-R in countless flavors and varieties. At one stage, people start using it for drinking as well as washing purposes. The main reason for this changed practice is the market has left the consumers with no other choice but WAT-R.

The use of the synthetic water by the people extends as the plot progresses. Patrick and Cassidy

are worried about the questionable qualities of the newly introduced water. They work together in exposing the true colour of the producing company. "On the wall behind the bar are countless bottles of WAT-R, some with familiar label." (Sun 239) The worst of all, some bottles of the synthetic water target at children. People are fascinated by the creative names by which the bottles are named. Horseshoe passes his mild comment on this fascination of people, saying, "It's the same as water, just a little bit more so." (Sun 127) As an effect of the capitalist society, the cost of water makes it inaccessible to people. To Patrick's question, "Why would you get paid in water?" (Sun 87), Cassidy says, "I forgot… you're new to Cal-uh-forn-ya-." (Sun 87)

**Dementia as the Negative Outcome of WAT-R:**

The next catastrophe that challenges the people in California is ROAD, the consequence of consuming the synthetic water. It is a neurological disease with serious symptoms. The term stands for "Random-Onset Acute Dementia". (Sun 211) Ashley explains to Patrick and Cassidy how the disease works as a "degenerative mental disease… affects all demographics. It can basically happen to anyone." (Sun 211) Horseshoe hints at the seriousness by the widespread of the disease, saying, "The new dementia is for everybody." (Sun 102) Patrick and Cassidy visit Memodyne, the name in which the newly established clinics function to provide urgent medical attention and treatment to those who are experiencing symptoms like memory loss, swollen fingers, and hallucinations, related to the disease. When Patrick starts experiencing the symptoms of the disease, Cassidy realizes the crude reality that people invest in play out illusions for our pleasure.

The diseased people get symptoms which are mostly surreal, related to metaphors of nature. Hallucinations are about birds and water, hinting at the patients' longing from mental freedom and relentless search for natural water. Patrick's symptoms are mostly memory loss and thirst. He even misses the picture of the faces, known to him. "How can he miss them, his family, if he can't even remember them clearly?" (Sun 105) Towards the end of the novel, Patrick experiences extreme thirst and uncontrollable crawling towards the sea.

**Ecological Devastations by Climate Change:**

Patrick witnesses a big, misshapen tree with a narrow trunk in the middle of the beach. He senses that nothing about the tree is right. He knows the age-old tree co-existed with the scimitar tusks and dinosaurs in the past. "…he is witnessing this tree, something has gone horribly wrong." (Sun 321) The strangeness and the out-of-place existence of the tree hint at the terrible condition, built around in the environment. The graphic description of creatures from prehistoric times, such as gigantic cats and dinosaurs strengthen this idea. The animals are robotic in nature; they eat the "knifelike leaves" with their "hard mouths." (Sun 322) Patrick struggles to make sense of the unusual scene, witnessed by him and he is baffled by his place in the world. He is driven to a kind of existential crisis, by doubting his own identity and sense of purpose. The odd tree has broken his sense of reality. He loses his power to interact with his environment. The truth strikes him that human beings have modified the environment to serve their needs. The damage done to nature is irreversible.

In addition to causing risks to the human life, the impact of the synthetic water extends to the nonhuman world also. It invades its landscape, by giving rise to a new plant species, which are characterized by little blue flowers. It is odd that these flowers have the ability to resisit burning and possess plastic or wax-like qualities. Kleeman's description of the newly emerging blur flowers with strange properties may indicate *Something New Under the Sun* as a Fantasy novel; but, her intention in using this floral symbol in the novel is to point out human activities alter the entire ecosystem.

Climate change has made villages uninhabitable mainly because of the prevailing drought; the dangerous wild fires rage in close proximity to the resident areas, threatening the people constantly and forcing them to leave their place. The description of the unusual trees with spikes, woolly mammoth-like trunks, and arms instead of branches represents a transformed and menacing natural environment. This serves as a metaphor for the destructive consequences of environmental degradation and the impact of climate change.

**Horrible Wildfire and Climatic Catastrophe:**

In her interview to Dashiel Carrera, Alexandra Kleeman talks about the perils of the American landscape and the necessity for her novel *Something New Under the Sun*. She has been reading books on post-apocalyptic conditions, atomic bombing to know how the post-world is imagined in them. Human beings in the present times live in the midst of disasters, which are omnipresent and invulnerable. Climate change is now visible in its varied and diffuse manifestations. It is an indication of distortion of the normal. As far as these manifestations are far away from us, we have the tendency to either intellectualize it or normalize climate change.

The varying weather patterns, portrayed in *Something New Under the Sun* reflect the impact of climate change on the land. Throughout the narrative, the characters witness shifts in weather conditions and undergo the aftermath of such changes. They have the realization that fighting against climate change is seemingly impossible. At one stage, the individuals and the communities feel helpless in the face of the horrors and devastating impacts of climate change. Patrick witnesses the destruction done by the wild fire, caused by climate change. He explains terrific scene of Cassidy's house on fire in a phone call to Alison. He expresses

his helplessness at such a burning occasion. He could witness the water burning in the basement and the swimming pool on fire. The poor bunnies flee "from the scorching fields into the Kmart lot to huddle beneath parked cars. It smelled like a barbecue restaurant." (Sun 273) The implication of this scene is that nature is being demolished by the flames of climate change. Patrick feels misery over his helplessness in either preventing or mitigating the damage.

The novel begins with the description of the sun, shining bright and ends with the clouds on the horizon. The sunshine symbolizes hope for better future and creates a positive tone, even in the midst of the terrible events that unfold in the course of the novel. The landscape is taken over by drought, the outcome of climate change. The clouds foreshadow the coming darkness and symbolize death. It is strange and threatening to note that the patients, afflicted with an abnormal disease called ROAD are tormented with the hallucination of clouds in the sky. In the natural process, clouds are the bearers of rainfall, which sustains life and keeps the world in balance. But, in the modern fictional world, instead of being a positive sign, the cloud is perceived as devilish force, foretelling the impending death. Thus, climate change makes human life fragile and hints at the instability of our existence. In the world, experiencing the aftermaths of climate change, man exists losing his relationship and compliances with nature, as the natural forces go beyond his control.

In America, California in particular faces the wildfires due to certain reasons such as the combined Mediterranean climate, profuse combustible vegetation and mainly, the extension of the residential areas into the fire-prone forests. In *Something New Under the Sun*, there is a perennial existence of wildfire, near the residential areas; yet, none seems to be concerned with it. The burning landscape in wildfire is described in an alarming tone by Kleen as: "orange scraps of flame dulled by the sunlight" (Sun 105) and "bright wound of light on the hillside". (Sun 89)

**Conclusion:**

The novel develops the issue of climate crisis as its main subject and investigates the various problems that arise from it. It underlines the need to change from individualism and materialism to a community life and an environment-friendly consciousness. It is the only way for human beings to reconnect with the earth. Individuals and nations should alter their lifestyles to promote sustainability and preserve the planet for future generations. The narrative clearly shows the complex interaction of human activities and their results on the planet. "Why couldn't you live life the way you wanted to? Why were you always strapped to the sinking people around you…?" (Sun 148-49) At another occasion in the novel, Kleeman describes the characters, who navigate through a landscape, which has been damaged by the devastating fire. The passers-by do not pay attention to the destruction, happening around them. In fact, they drive around the fire to reach their destination. "The sound of small life fleeing from the fire, scurrying toward more fire elsewhere. Terrible, definitely." (Sun 105) Kleeman criticizes the contemporary conflicts and the challenges of surviving in a culture that prioritizes materialism and possessions.

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