



# **Ecomasculine Identity in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Forty Signs of Rain***

**Vineeth Radhakrishnan**

**Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT) Chennai**

## **Abstract**

Ecological literary studies is an emerging and recognizable school of criticism since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. An ecocritical analysis of literary texts, poems and plays, has helped one to understand human-nature relationship with an earth-first concern. Ecologically aware scholars and writers have dealt with themes related to environmental issues like exploitation of nature and global climate change, bringing along viable solutions through environmental thoughts and awareness. Moreover, theoretical frames like ecofeminism and ecospirituality, which come under the broader domain of ecocriticism, have opened up new perspectives in gender studies, with issues of men and women in society and their link with nature as the primary focus. Ecomasculinity is an emerging theoretical platform which focuses on addressing men and their deeper connection with nature, which also reveal men's sensitive and caring side, contrary to the hegemonic perspective of masculinity. This paper analyses Kim Stanley Robinson's *Forty Signs of Rain* in the light of ecomasculinity theories to identify masculinity centered on the notion of earth care and sustainability as revealed in text.

**Keywords:** Ecomasculinity, Eco-man, Ecological restoration, Sustainability

Ecomasculinity is an emerging theoretical platform which focuses on men's proactive engagement with nature and all its elements. Eco-men use their masculine attributes to protect and care the little left wilderness from further exploitation at the hands of capitalist power. In the process, they exhibit intense human emotions like love, trust, compassion, consideration and cooperation towards all the biotic and abiotic components. Ecological masculinism also subverts male-female dichotomy, as it neutralizes gender, allowing both men and women to move freely between the cultural and social boundaries of social and domestic spaces. Eco-conscious men also promote deep ecological values, with continual indulgence in nature through environmental activism, athleticism, adventure and eco-centric lifestyles. This research, with ecomasculinity as its theoretical base, analyses characters, in the selected American text – *Forty Signs of Rain*, who are affected by life threatening environmental issues, as depicted in the fiction. In addition, the paper creates a better understanding of the theory, as it also traces the development of a new masculinity that touches upon various motifs such as nature,

environmental preservation, sustainable development, nurturing, maternal love, family, friendship, adventure, eros, survival and identity. These motifs become visible and well-defined when they are positioned in contrast to the reality and practices influenced by anthropocentrism and capitalist economy.

*Forty Signs of Rain* by Robinson is an interesting polar science fiction that touches upon the impact of global warming though it is set in the other pole. The novel is set against the backdrop of the melting and breaking of an Arctic ice pack in one August due to global warming. Robinson presents a series of everyday heroes, who battle on behalf of forces of nature with the help of modern technology without knowing that they are heading towards an unusual twist in their work.

*Forty Signs of Rain* is a tale of survival which captures the image of a world, wherein even the patterns of rainfall have bigger signs for the destiny of the biosphere. The novel has very little action and abundant character description. The narrative is more about the four main characters – Anna Quibler, Charlie Quibler, Frank Vanderwal and Leo Malhouse, who go about their daily life, while the environmental tragedy of global warming builds up in the backdrop. Each of the view points of the major characters holds a small fragment of the entire picture of the impending calamity, but they are basically helpless in the face of the bureaucracy and indifference of the politicians, who largely run the USA. Most of the characters are ecological heroes in this novel and some of them even break the traditional social and gender roles.

Anna Quibler is an official in National Science Foundation (NSF), trying for a few funding proposals, whereas her husband, Charlie Quibler is mainly a stay-at-home dad and telecommutes to his job as an environmental advisor to a Senator. Charlie is not a conventional hyper masculinist male but rather a crusader for environment who looks beyond social conventions. Frank, Anna's colleague, is a microbiologist and a rock climber. Frank is lonely, pessimistic and used to interpreting all human behavior in terms of primate sociobiology. Leo Malhouse, who runs a lab for a California biotech company that Frank consults for, is dedicated to the environmental problems.

Though nothing significant happens in the novel, one gets the impression that relatively small events and steps are like the first flutter in the butterfly effect. Robinson sets the novel in the midst of the oppressive heat and humidity of Washington D.C. He also portrays the world of scientific research that is committed to the environmental cause. The message in the novel is loud and clear – there is a threat of an environmental disaster and hence, there is a need to start doing something about it.

### **Masculinity and Ecological Restoration**

*Forty Signs of Rain* is an eco-narrative that brings into its ambit the following themes: a. the need to address climate change both as national policy and international agreement, b. the conflict between the scientific wisdom on global warming and the bureaucratic denial of it, c. concern over the current sea level rise, and d. human behavioral ecology and social ecology. All these themes create a context for ecomasculinist discussions and actions as exemplified by Charlie, Frank, Leo and Drepung. All these characters though show different traits, temperaments and ideologies, they battle in their own ways to address the issue of global warming

Frank perceives everyone through anthropology. His idea of gender and masculinity takes its origin in his understanding of human evolution. According to him, gender discrimination is a result of dimorphism of homo sapiens that has resulted from evolution. He looks at modern human beings with his perspectives and hence masculinity for him is not a gender-differentiated reality, but rather a social role. He thinks:

*Homo sapiens* is a species that exhibits sexual dimorphism. And it's more than a matter of bodies; the archaeological record seemed to Frank to support the notion that social roles of the two sexes had deviated early on. These differing roles could have led to differing thought processes, such that it would be possible to characterize plausibly the existence of unlike approaches even to ostensibly non-gender-differentiated activities, such as science. (FSR 17)

Frank also considers that gender roles are split-natured. He applies this theory on Anna: "Anna seemed less split-natured than many women scientists he had known. Pretty well integrated, really. He had spent many hours of the past year working with her, engaged in interesting discussions in the pursuit of their shared works" (FSR 18-19).

Science, for Frank, is a domain which is outside many social conventions and he likes it. He has a gender-free fascination for Science and his work:

...Chemical mechanics of protein creation as a sort of natural algorithm, in effect. Frank considered the idea, operation by operation. This was his real expertise; this was what had interested him from childhood, when the puzzles solved had been simple ciphers. He had always loved this work, perhaps more than ever, offering as it did a complete escape from the consciousness of himself. (FSR 25)

Frank also believes in randomness which cuts across principles, philosophies and social conventions. This randomness when applied to social biology integrates and cracks the rigid code of human behavior along the axis of gender.

Frank, who is concerned with food security, is also a different kind of male. Though he is interested in Kayaking, an adventure sport; his theory of human senses makes him different. He insists that senses are superior to reason. By rejecting reason, he aligns with a non-conventional masculinity:

"The only things people understand are sensory," Frank insisted. "We're hard-wired to understand life on the Savannah. Someone gives you meat, they're your friend. Someone takes your meat, they're your enemy. Abstract concepts like surplus value, or statistics on the value of year's work, these just aren't as real as what you see and touch. People are only good at what they can think out in terms of their senses. That's just the way we evolved." (FSR 79)

Frank also thinks seriously about road rage, traffic jam and speed. He believes that human beings have reached the evolutionary edge as far as automobile use is concerned. He is also interested in driving and he links masculinity with the driving sense of many men: "The past attacking the future, reactionary attacking

progressive, poor attacking affluent. A beta male in an alpha machine, enraged that an alpha male thought he was so alpha he could zip around in a beta machine and get away with it” (FSR 132).

Leo Malhouse is a scientist and the director of the Biotech company in San Diego. He searches for remedies for various human diseases. Though he is worried about his boss investing \$51 Million on another company and that the company for which he works has not yet been able to show any profits, he is too committed to environmental cause. He is also worried about his house located on a cliff over the Pacific, which faces the threat of coastal erosion in the wake of global warming. His masculinity is a combination of scientific temperament and care for ecology and bioregion.

Leo is fascinated by DNA level experiments. He thinks about the ways to deliver altered DNA into human beings as a part of remedy for Alzheimer and bad cholesterol. He too, is dedicated to his work and makes a case for a masculine identity unfolded in the domain of Science. With his interest in genes and DNA proteins, he looks at human bodies as genderless entities. His masculinist ideology can be understood best in the context of his interest in DNA level research. Genes, more than gender, matter to him:

What they needed now was to be able to insert their successfully tailored gene into the patient’s own cells, so that afterward it would be the patient’s own body producing increased amounts of the needed proteins. If that worked, there would be no immune response from the body’s immune system, and with the protein being produced in therapeutic amounts, the patients would be not just helped, but cured. (FSR 37-38)

Leo has a different type of masculinity. He is married to Roxanne who inherited her house from her mother Leucadia. This house which is on a cliff in California is a symbol of matrilineal culture. Leo, by deciding to live in this house, shows his openness to matrilineal family. He also believes that masculinity is closely connected to genes and being a male or a female is the result of the randomness of the genetic resources. Hence, he does not feel that he is a conventional hegemonic male but rather as a product of genetic accident. However, he has imbibed certain traits of conventional American male. His interest in automobiles and long drive are instances of that.

### **Unconventional Masculinity, Maternal Care and Domestic Space**

Charlie is committed to his interest in carbon sinks which he believes can save humanity from global warming. Carbon sinks are environmental engineering project made to capture atmospheric carbon dioxide safely. As an environmental advisor, Charlie, desires: “Carbon sinks could be the only way that our kids, and about a thousand years’ worth of kids actually, can save themselves from living in Swamp World” (FSR 53). Charlie’s ecomasculinity gets manifested in his commitment to ecological safety.

Charlie, who takes care of children at home has internalized his daily chores of babysitting without any conflict. Robinson describes him as a man naturalized to taking care of children: “An hour or so later he would rouse them both with his hungry cries, and then the day would really begin, the earlier interval like a problem dream that always played out the same” (FSR 41).

Charlie is also sensitive to the differences between his children – Nick and Joe. As a dad, he replaces Anna in her ‘momspace’, though he is aware that men in his neighbourhood will not do the kind of babysitting he does. He seems to be enjoying what he is doing with his well developed sense of child behaviour: “The problem was not just Nick’s immobility or Joe’s hyperactivity but the fact that Charlie was always the only dad there” (FSR 47).

Charlie has to be aware of Joe’s movements as the baby is hyperactive. Robinson describes how Charlie understands the temperament of kids and adjusts to them. This understanding makes Charlie a different man:

Joe kept Charlie on his toes. Nick had been content to sit in one spot for long periods of time, and when playing he had been pathologically cautious; on a low wooden bouncy bridge his little fists had gone white on the chain railing. Joe however had quickly located the spot on the bridge that would launch him the highest – not the middle, but about halfway down to it. (FSR 50)

Charlie is most distinctly into a non-male role. Robinson presents details about child care while describing Charlie. These details indicate Charlie’s full time occupation as a substitute for his children’s mother. He remembers how he used to take care of Nick: “He would whine and refuse the nipple, perhaps because it was not the real thing, perhaps because it had taken Charlie months to learn to puncture the bottle nipples with lots of extra holes” (FSR 45).

Charlie also walks around with a backpack and Joe in it. It is almost as if he cannot explore the world without Joe. Robinson describes Charlie’s movements with Joe attached to him. Symbolically, it stands for his maternal role:

There it was a tough call whether to take baby backpack off and hope not to wake Joe prematurely, or just to keep him on his back and work from the bench he had put by his desk for this very purpose. The discomfort of Joe’s weight was more than compensated for by the quiet, and so as usual he kept Joe snoozing on his back. (FSR 59)

Charlie, by nurturing his children, gets close to the ideal of ecomasculinity. He cooks, feeds and takes care of his children and thereby fulfills the role of a mother. These duties are distinctly feminine and he does them willingly and with great skill. By doing so he carves out a different masculinity. He also remembers how he made a transition from the image of an American white male to his present identity:

“Well, I was thirty-eight when Nick arrived, and I had been doing exactly what I wanted ever since I was eighteen. Twenty years of white American freedom, just like what you have, young man, and then Nick arrived and suddenly I was at the command of a speechless mad tyrant. I mean, think about it. Tonight you can go whenever you want to go out and have some fun, right?” (FSR 61)

Charlie is also aware of the role reversal in his family and he remembers his initial struggle to fit into the role of a mother for Nick: “I remember the first Mother’s Day after Nick was born, I was most deep into the shock of it, and Anna had to be away that day, maybe to visit her mom, I can’t remember, and I was trying to



get Nick to take a bottle and he was refusing it as usual” (FSR 61). He doesn’t mind celebrating mother’s day as he does all the mothering at home. However, Phil Chase, the Senator chides him for doing so. Chase’s words evoke the image of hegemonic American masculinity: “...Well Charlie you are indeed a pathetic specimen of American manhood, yearning for your own Mother’s Day card, but just hang in there – only seventeen more years and you’ll be free again!” (FSR 62).

Charlie has to go for shopping with Joe on his back. During such sessions he constantly talks to Joe as if he is reminding himself of the shopping list. This too is not a traditional masculine trait. It indicates the anxiety and concern of a mother for her family:

“Okay, whole peeled tomatoes, pitted kalamatas, olive oil extra virgin first cold press – it’s the first press that really matters,” slipping into their friend’s Italian accent, “now vat I am forgetting, hm, hm, oh, ze pasta! But you must never keel ze pasta, my God! Oh and bread. And wine, but not more than we can carry home, huh Joe.” (FSR 102-103)

Robinson also redefines the notion of a family in the context of a universe that family creates. This idea of family makes Charlie realize that nuclear families necessitate different gender roles and flexible sense of responsibility: “Each nuclear family in its domicile is inside its own pocket universe, and for the time it is together it exists inside a kind of event horizon: no one sees it and it sees no one. Millions of pocket universes scattered across the surface of the planet like dots of light in nighttime satellite photos” (FSR 103).

Even in the company of men, Charlie does not assume the role of a conventional man. He continues to do the domestic chores as if they are a part of his identity. He cooks even while he talks to the Tibetan monks, emphasizing his awareness of his role: “Charlie slipped on potholders and lifted the pasta pot over to the sink, tipped it into the colander until it was overflowing” (FSR 106).

Charlie is concerned with Joe’s well being. He speaks to Joe constantly though Joe is too small for a conversation. Robinson describes Charlie’s lifestyle which is very contrary to the most of the American men: “They stayed in the house for the balm of the air-conditioning, falling out of the ceiling vents like spills of clear syrup. The wrestled, they cleaned house, they ate breakfast and elevenses” (FSR 146).

Charlie admires a woman volleyball player, Jackie Silva. He compares himself to her and says, “I am going to be the Jackie Silva of Senate staffers” (FSR 148). This is a very unusual comparison. He demasculinizes himself by identifying with a female. This reveals the fluid gender boundary that he believes in. Elsewhere in a meeting, Charlie is very eloquent and speaks about oceanic ecosystem. His commitment to such an issue makes him an eco-man. The real eco-man in him articulates: “The thing is, Mr. President, the world’s climate can shift very rapidly. There are scenarios in which the global warming causes parts of Northern Hemisphere to get quite cold, especially in Europe. If that were to happen, Europe could become something like the Yukon of Asia” (FSR 159).

Joe is a part of Charlie’s identity. He has to take Joe, wherever he goes. Robinson describes how Charlie becomes a substitute for mother:

And Joe was definitely stirring. His face was burrowed sideways into the back of Charlie's neck, as usual, and now he began doing something that he sometimes did when napping: he latched onto the right tendon at the back of Charlie's neck and began sucking it rhythmically, like a pacifier. Always before Charlie had found this is a sweet thing, one of the most momlike moments of his Mr.Momhood. (*FSR* 162)

The Tibetan monks – Drepung and Rudra Cakrin, visit Anna's house. Drepung is also a translator for Rudra Cakrin, the official ambassador from Khembalung, a nation which is literally drowned by the swelling Indian Ocean. They are not the conventional American males and Charlie is able to connect with them immediately as these monks and he have a common interest in climate change: "Charlie found them surprisingly easy to talk to. They were about his age. Both had been born in Tibet, and both had spent years, they did not say how many, imprisoned by the Chinese, like so many other Tibetan Buddhist monks" (*FSR* 104).

Anna in her interaction with Drepung and Rudra Cakrin realizes that these two men are not like any other men who she has met with. Robinson describes these men from Tibet with a touch of strangeness. They are not like the hegemonic white American males; the two men make quite a contrast: "Drepung young and tall, round-faced with a kind of baby-fat look; Rudra Cakrin old, small and wizened, his face lined with a million wrinkles, his cheek bones and narrow jaw prominent in an angular, near fleshless face" (*FSR* 67).

Robinson also uses the technique of matrimonial advertisement to indicate the changing paradigms of gender in America. In one such instance, he captures a non-hegemonic masculine mind: "SBM, 5' 5", shy, quite, a little bit serious, seeking woman, age open. Not good-looking or wealthy but Nice Guy. Enjoy foreign movies, opera, theater, music, books, quiet evenings" (*FSR* 81).

### **Masculinity and Wilderness**

Frank has his moments of excitement in nature. He experiences great delight when his plane hovers over Arizona and when it tilts down. This excitement reveals his nature-bound personality: "It was amazing the way things changed when you crossed to the dry side of the ten-inches-of-rain-a-year isobar. Frank put his forehead against the inner window of the plane, looked ahead to the next burnt range coming into view. Thought to himself, I'll go surfing" (*FSR* 171).

Frank is equally excited when he is near the sea. He realizes that he is very much at home in the sea near San Diego. Robinson describes Frank's sensual pleasure when he is at sea:

Happy at the sight, Frank walked into the water, which was very cool for midsummer, just as they all said. But it felt so good now that he ran out and drove through a broken wave, whooping as he emerged. He sat in the water and floated, pulled on his booties, velcroed the ankle strap of the board cord to him, then took off paddling. The ocean tasted like home. (*FRS* 206)

Frank has an elemental identity connected with water. Robinson describes how water triggers memories and good sense in Frank. This description underscores again the ecomasculine personality of Frank:

He lay in the shallows and let the hissing whitewater shove him around. Back and forth, ebb and flow. For a long time he lolled there. In his childhood and youth he had spent a fair bit of time at the end of every ocean session doing this, “grunioning” he called it; and he had often thought that no matter how much people worked to make more complicated sports in the ocean, grunioning was all you really needed. (*FSR* 207)

### **Ecomasculine Agency and Scientific Experiments**

Researchers portrayed in this novel are working on the broader impacts. These are men concerned with greenhouse gas abatement strategy, land-ocean interaction, aerosol study etc. In their concern for such issues, they are also ecomasculine figures. Robinson’s characters from his earlier novel *Antarctica*, also appear in this narrative. Wade and Chase have their presence and their ecomasculine perspective reflected in this novel. In their respective fields such as politics and science, they are committed to the cause of environment.

All the members at the NSF are involved in climate mitigation plans. They try to lobby for environmental activism. They also include the wisdom of the men from Khembalung. “They included climate mitigation proposals, many highly speculative, all extremely expensive. A carbon sink plan included reforestation that would also be useful for flood control; Anna made a note to tell the Khembalis about that one” (*FSR* 318).

Frank, while making a presentation at NSF, reveals his ecological commitment though he is largely frustrated with the lack of effort on the part of the government. He states unambiguously his stand on scientific organizations. By articulating his concern for the planet, he expresses his ecological self: “...you should make more efforts to increase the power of science in policy decisions everywhere. Organize all the scientific bodies on Earth into one larger body, a kind of UN of scientific organizations, which then would work together on the important issues, and would collectively insist they be funded, for the sake of all the future generations of humanity” (*FSR* 321).

The narrative takes a decisive turn with Hypernino – a phenomenon which causes torrential rain that lasts for days together. Robinson describes the weather which threatens to affect the entire America. The description is also a caution that Robinson raises to the world. In doing so, he uses fiction as a medium to spread ecological awareness. He too, thus, becomes an eco-man, fighting through the medium that he knows best for the environmental protection:

THE HYPERNINO that was now into its forty-second month had spun up another tropical system in the East Pacific, north of the equator, and now this big wet storm was barreling northeast toward California. It was the fourth in a series of pineapple-express storms that had tracked along this course of the jet stream, which was holding in an exceptionally fast run directly at the north coast of San Diego County. (*FSR* 329)

Leo also experiences the effects of Hypernino. His house on the cliff is smashed by the wind and rain. Robinson describes Leo’s state as the latter watches with great shock, the rough sea and rain. There is indeed some amount of grit in him – the grit of an eco-man:



And Leo had never seen the sea look like this before. All the way out to where rapidly approaching black squalls blocked the view of the horizon, the ocean was a giant sheet of ranging surf. Millions of white caps rolled toward the land under flying spume and spray, the waves toppling again and again over infinitely wind rippled gray water. (FSR 330)

The magnitude of erosion is so overwhelming that Leo is spell bound. He can only watch the lashing rain and waves helplessly. He understands his relative insignificance in the face of such forces. “The erosion was not a new thing. The cliffs of San Diego had been breaking off throughout the period of modern settlement, and presumably for all the centuries before that. But along this level stretch of seaside cliff north and south of Moonlight Beach, the houses had been built close to the edge” (FSR 330).

Charlie too has a similar humbling experience. It turns nightmarish for him: “Once again he felt that he had crossed over into space where the real world had taken on all the qualities of a dream, becoming a glossy and surreal, as unlikely and beautiful, as stuffed to a dark sheen with ungraspable meaning. Sometimes just being outdoors in bad weather was all it took” (FSR 357).

Charlie also witnesses the struggle of humanity all around him. However, he too is helpless like Leo. He lets the impressions of the disaster soak him. His passivity indicates his relative insignificance as that of Leo, in the face of Hypernino: “Out of the window Charlie saw that people were already taking to the streets around them in small watercraft, despite the wind and drizzle. Zodiacs, Kayaks, a waterski boat, canoes, rowboats; he saw examples of them all” (FSR 366).

Khembalis, in the meanwhile, volunteer to the zoo animals who have the danger of drowning in their cages. They set the animals free. In doing so they also reveal their ecomasculinity – being adventurous to save the lives of other species:

The time and vehicles necessary for a proper evacuation were completely lacking, of course, as the superintendent quickly pointed out, but the Khembalis replied that by evacuation they meant opening all the cages and letting the animals escape. The zookeepers were skeptical, but the Khembalis turned out to be experts in flood response, well-acquainted with the routines required in such situations. (FSR 380)

The novel ends with Charlie accidentally meeting Phil Chase while both are trying to survive the deluge. The conversation that follows and which concludes the narrative leads to ray of hope: “So *Phil!* Are you going to do something about global warming now? Phil grinned his beautiful grin. “I’ll see what I can do!” (FSR 393).

*Forty Signs of Rain*, thus takes the readers through the contemporary debates on climate change and familiarizes them with eco-men like Charlie, Frank, and Leo, who believe that the scientists and statesmen should work together to reduce the impact of global warming.

Men in Robinson’s *Forty Signs of Rain* are relentlessly committed to save the earth from life threatening catastrophes like global warming and flood, during which they experiment with various scientific and viable

solutions to bring climate under control. In the process, there is a constructive use of manhood, with characters often engaging in wilderness, adventure sports, athleticism, spirituality, eco-centric lifestyle and sustainable development. Readers also witness a progression of ecomasculinity within male characters, as they reject the hegemonic notion of masculinity by accepting the leadership of the opposite gender. There are also instances of role reversal, where female characters step into male dominated workplace and men indulging in domestic chores and childcare. However, there also instances, where family and health become a constraint for a progressive environmental cause. Even in such cases, the characters hold their earth-first spirit and try utilizing time, space and energy productively for environmental restoration.

### Reference:

Robinson, Kim Stanley. *Forty Signs of Rain*. Bantam Book, 2004.

Allister, Mark. "Introduction" in *Eco-Man: New Perspectives on Masculinity and Nature*. University of Virginia Press, 2004

Hultman, Martin. "Natures of Masculinities: Conceptualizing Industrial, Ecomodern and Ecological Masculinities" in Susan Buckingham and Virginie LeMasson (eds.) *Understanding Climate Change through Gender Relations*. Routledge, 2017

Hultman, Martin. "The Making of an Environmental Hero: A History of Ecomodern Masculinity, Fuel Cell and Arnold Schwarzenegger". *Environmental Humanities*, Vol.2, 2013

Pule, M. Paul. "Caring for Society and Environment: Towards Ecological Masculinism". August 2009

Pule, M. Paul. "Understanding Ecomasculinity-?". August 2009.

[https://www.paulpule.com.au/Understanding\\_Ecomasculinity.PDF](https://www.paulpule.com.au/Understanding_Ecomasculinity.PDF)

Slovic, Scott. "Taken Care: Toward an Ecomasculinist Literary Criticism" in *Eco-Man: New Perspectives on Masculinity and Nature*. University of Virginia Press, 2004