

Climate Change and Resilience in David Davidar's *The House of Blue Mangoes*

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Abstract

*Climate change poses a significant threat to global sustainability, impacting various aspects of human life, including agriculture, economy, and socio-cultural systems. David Davidar's novel *The House of Blue Mangoes* intricately weaves themes of resilience and adaptation amidst changing environmental conditions, particularly through the lens of the famine experienced by the characters. This research paper explores the parallels between the fictional portrayal of famine in *The House of Blue Mangoes* and the historical account presented in William Digby's *The Famine Campaign*, shedding light on the interconnectedness of climate change, resilience, and socio-political responses. This paper highlights the significance of literary narratives in elucidating the multifaceted impacts of climate change and colonial legacies on human societies, urging for a holistic approach towards environmental stewardship and social justice.*

Keywords: Climate Change, Climate Resilience, David Davidar, William Digby, Famine.

Introduction

Climate change is one of humanity's most pressing challenges in the 21st century, with far-reaching implications for ecosystems, economies, and societies worldwide. The literary realm has often served as a platform to explore and reflect upon these complex issues, offering narratives that delve into the human experience amidst environmental adversity. David Davidar's *The House of Blue Mangoes* is a notable example, wherein the characters navigate the tumultuous landscape of colonial India while grappling with the impacts of climate change, mainly through the lens of famine. This paper aims to analyse the portrayal of climate change and resilience in Davidar's novel, drawing parallels with William Digby's historical account of famine in colonial India as presented in *The Famine Campaign*.

Climate Change and Resilience in *The House of Blue Mangoes*

Climate change is the inadvertent change in the climatic conditions of a specific region, and climate resilience is the capacity

of social, economic and ecosystems to cope with a hazardous event or trend or disturbance caused by climate change(Wikipedia contributors). It involves preparing for, recovering from, and adapting to the impacts of a warmer world(Center for Climate and Energy Solutions). Climate resilience also implies reducing greenhouse gas emissions to prevent the climate crisis from worsening further (“What Is Climate Resilience?”). Resilience is a term that highlights the specific impacts of climate change for individual communities and helps solicit support from politicians (Impakter Limited).

Davidar’s novel is set against the backdrop of the lush landscapes of southern India, where the fictional village of Chevathar grapples with the challenges posed by changing weather patterns and environmental degradation. The protagonist, Solomon Dorai, witnesses firsthand the effects of climate change on agriculture, water resources, and livelihoods, highlighting the vulnerability of rural communities to ecological disruptions. Despite these adversities, the characters in *The House of Blue Mangoes* demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity, adapting traditional knowledge and communal bonds to mitigate the impacts of environmental stressors.

Famine in the House of Blue Mangoes and The Famine Campaign

The famine depicted in Davidar’s novel is a poignant allegory for the historical famines that ravaged colonial India during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Drawing inspiration from William Digby’s seminal work, *The Famine Campaign*, Davidar explores the socio-political dimensions of food scarcity, colonial policies, and grassroots responses in the context of environmental degradation. Through vivid descriptions and poignant narratives, both authors shed light on human suffering and resilience amidst famine, underscoring the interconnectedness of climate change, political economy, and social justice.

Davidar presents the horror of a looming famine in his novel as follows:

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Madras Presidency was visited by famine seven times: in 1853–4, 1865–6, 1876–8, 1888–9, 1891–2, 1896–7 and 1899–1900. The worst of these was the Great Famine of 1876–8 which lasted twenty-two months, affected fifteen of the twenty-two districts of the Presidency (including Kilanad), and caused the death of thirty-five lakh people. It cost the state six hundred and forty lakhs of rupees in famine relief. A substantial portion of government spending was devoted to the building and digging of new tanks and wells and the strengthening of existing ones in the affected areas. (116). Thus, it is evident that resilience is seen in the form of well-building in Davidar’s historical narrative.

On the Other Hand, Digby Notes

Whilst preparations were being made for the proclamation of Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain as Empress of India, and whilst the ceremonies were actually in progress, 65,000 subjects of the Queen-Empress died of starvation and the diseases caused by insufficient nourishment, in the Madras Presidency alone. (46)

The famine takes on a considerable death toll. Even in Davidar’s novel, it is mentioned that the famine caused the death of 11 people in the village in 1896, 16 in 1897, 3 in 1898, and 2 that far in the year 1899, the year in which the novel opens.

Intersections of Climate Change and Colonialism

Central to the analysis of *The House of Blue Mangoes* and *The Famine Campaign* is the intersectionality of climate change and colonialism, wherein environmental exploitation and socio-economic inequalities exacerbate the vulnerability of marginalised communities to ecological crises. Davidar’s portrayal of colonial power dynamics and indigenous resistance resonates with Digby’s critique of British colonial policies, highlighting the role of imperialism in exacerbating

famine conditions and perpetuating social injustice. By contextualising famine within broader systems of power and oppression, both authors challenge dominant narratives and advocate for environmental justice and equitable adaptation strategies.

Conclusion

David Davidar's *The House of Blue Mangoes* offers a compelling narrative that intertwines themes of climate change, resilience, and socio-political struggle in colonial India. Through the lens of famine, Davidar invites readers to reflect on the enduring legacy of environmental exploitation and the imperative of collective action in the face of ecological crises. By juxtaposing the novel with William Digby's historical account in *The Famine Campaign*, this paper underscores the relevance of literature in illuminating the complex intersections of climate change, colonialism, and human resilience.

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