

# **Ecocriticism and Climate Fiction in Contemporary Anglophone Literature: Narrative, Ethics, and the Anthropocene**

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## **Abstract**

The accelerating ecological crises of the twenty-first century have transformed climate change from a scientific concern into a central cultural and literary problem. Contemporary Anglophone literature increasingly addresses this crisis through climate fiction (cli-fi), a genre that foregrounds environmental catastrophe, ecological precarity, and the entanglement of human and nonhuman life. This article examines the intersection between ecocriticism and climate fiction in selected works by Margaret Atwood, Amitav Ghosh, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Barbara Kingsolver. Drawing upon ecocritical theory, postcolonial environmentalism, ecofeminism, and narrative studies, the paper argues that contemporary climate fiction not only represents ecological crisis but also reshapes ethical consciousness in the Anthropocene. Through close textual analysis of *Oryx and Crake*, *MaddAddam*, *Gun Island*, *New York 2140*, and *Flight Behavior*, the study demonstrates how these texts transform abstract environmental data into lived experience, dramatize climate-induced displacement and extinction, and challenge anthropocentric assumptions. The article further contends that climate fiction functions as a form of cultural activism by cultivating ecological literacy, encouraging transnational awareness, and envisioning alternative futures beyond ecological collapse. Ultimately, the convergence of ecocriticism and climate fiction reveals literature to be a crucial

medium through which contemporary societies negotiate environmental anxiety, ethical responsibility, and the possibility of ecological resilience.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, Climate Fiction, Anthropocene, Anglophone Literature, Ecological Consciousness, Cli-Fi, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Environmental Humanities

## **Introduction**

The twenty-first century has been marked by an unprecedented awareness of environmental degradation. Rising global temperatures, species extinction, ecological displacement, floods, droughts, and resource scarcity have become defining features of the Anthropocene, a term used to describe the epoch in which human activity has become a dominant geological force. While scientific reports and policy frameworks document these crises through statistics and projections, literature offers an alternative mode of engagement by translating environmental change into affective, ethical, and imaginative experience.

In this context, ecocriticism has emerged as one of the most influential critical approaches in contemporary literary studies. Ecocriticism examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment, challenging the long-standing anthropocentric assumption that nature exists merely as a passive background to human action. Instead, ecocritical scholarship foregrounds the agency of landscapes, animals, ecosystems, and climate, emphasizing the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman worlds.

The rise of climate fiction, commonly referred to as “cli-fi,” has significantly expanded the scope of ecocritical inquiry. Climate fiction encompasses novels and narratives that imagine the social, political, and emotional consequences of climate change. Unlike earlier environmental writing, which frequently idealized nature through pastoral or Romantic frameworks, contemporary climate fiction presents ecological crisis as an immediate and lived reality. Such texts depict submerged cities, environmental refugees,

species extinction, food scarcity, and the collapse of social institutions, while also imagining possibilities for adaptation and resilience.

This article investigates how contemporary Anglophone climate fiction engages ecocritical concerns through the works of Margaret Atwood, Amitav Ghosh, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Barbara Kingsolver. These authors have been selected because their works represent diverse geographical, cultural, and ideological perspectives on climate change. Whereas Atwood and Robinson focus largely on technological modernity and dystopian futures, Ghosh and Kingsolver emphasize ecological vulnerability, migration, and local experience. By placing these texts in comparative dialogue, the study demonstrates how climate fiction redefines literature as a form of ecological witnessing and activism.

The article addresses the following research questions:

1. How does contemporary climate fiction represent ecological crisis as lived experience?
2. In what ways do narrative strategies shape ecological consciousness?
3. How do these texts challenge anthropocentric assumptions and articulate new ethical relationships between humans and the environment?
4. To what extent can climate fiction function as a form of environmental activism?

## **Literature Review**

### **The Emergence of Ecocriticism**

Ecocriticism developed as a formal field in the late twentieth century, although its intellectual roots can be traced to Romantic poetry, American transcendentalism, and nature writing. Early literary traditions often represented nature as a source of beauty, spiritual renewal, or sublime power. However, such representations frequently remained human-

centered, treating the environment as an object of contemplation rather than an active presence.

The institutional emergence of ecocriticism is generally associated with the formation of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in 1992 and the publication of foundational works such as Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* and Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader*. Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment," emphasizing that literary texts participate in broader ecological discourses.

Buell argues that literature can shape environmental consciousness by altering the ways readers imagine the natural world. For Buell, environmentally oriented texts are characterized by an awareness that the nonhuman environment is not merely a framing device but a presence that actively influences human history and experience.

Over time, ecocriticism expanded beyond its initial emphasis on wilderness and pastoral traditions. Contemporary ecocritical scholarship includes:

- Postcolonial ecocriticism, which examines how colonialism and globalization contribute to ecological degradation.
- Ecofeminism, which links the exploitation of nature with the oppression of women and other marginalized groups.
- Material ecocriticism, which recognizes the agency of matter, objects, and ecological systems.
- Animal studies and multispecies criticism, which explore human relationships with animals and nonhuman life.

This broadening of the field has enabled scholars to address the complexities of climate change in a globalized world.

## **Climate Fiction and the Environmental Imagination**

Climate fiction emerged in the early twenty-first century as a response to the increasing visibility of environmental crisis. Although earlier dystopian and speculative narratives addressed ecological themes, cli-fi is distinguished by its explicit engagement with anthropogenic climate change.

The genre encompasses a wide range of narrative forms, including dystopian futures, speculative realism, science fiction, and literary fiction. Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy imagines a future devastated by corporate greed, genetic engineering, and environmental collapse. Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* portrays a partially submerged New York City, exploring both the catastrophic effects of rising sea levels and the resilience of urban communities. Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* depicts climate change through the unexpected migration of monarch butterflies, connecting global ecological transformation to the everyday lives of rural communities. Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* combines myth, migration, and environmental disaster, illustrating the transnational dimensions of climate displacement.

Scholars such as Adam Trexler and Amitav Ghosh argue that climate fiction plays an important role in making climate change narratively intelligible. Because global warming often appears abstract, slow, and difficult to perceive directly, literature helps transform environmental crisis into emotionally and culturally meaningful experience.

### **Gaps in Existing Scholarship**

Although scholarship on ecocriticism and climate fiction has grown rapidly, several limitations remain. Much existing research focuses either on theoretical ecocriticism or on individual climate fiction texts in isolation. Comparative studies across diverse Anglophone contexts remain relatively limited. Furthermore, insufficient attention has been given to the relationship between narrative form and ecological ethics. Existing scholarship also tends to

privilege Western texts, thereby overlooking the significance of postcolonial and Global South perspectives.

This article addresses these gaps by undertaking a comparative analysis of both Western and postcolonial climate fiction and by integrating ecocritical theory with narrative analysis.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework combining ecocriticism, postcolonial ecocriticism, and ecofeminism. Ecocriticism provides the central framework for understanding how literary texts represent environmental crisis and challenge anthropocentric worldviews. Lawrence Buell's concept of environmental imagination is particularly useful because it emphasizes literature's capacity to make readers aware of the interconnectedness of ecological systems.

Postcolonial ecocriticism is employed to analyze how climate change disproportionately affects vulnerable populations in the Global South. Scholars such as Rob Nixon have argued that environmental destruction frequently takes the form of "slow violence," a gradual and often invisible process that disproportionately impacts marginalized communities.

Ecofeminism further enriches the analysis by demonstrating the connections between ecological exploitation and systems of patriarchy, capitalism, and domination. Ecofeminist thinkers such as Vandana Shiva and Val Plumwood argue that modernity often relies on binary oppositions between human and nature, male and female, civilization and wilderness. Climate fiction frequently destabilizes these binaries by foregrounding interdependence.

### **Methodology**

The study employs qualitative textual analysis and comparative literary methodology. Primary texts include Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *MaddAddam*, Amitav

Ghosh's *Gun Island*, Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140*, and Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*. These works were selected because they represent different modes of climate fiction and diverse cultural contexts within Anglophone literature.

The research process involved close reading of the selected texts in order to identify recurring ecological themes, narrative strategies, and ethical concerns. Particular attention was given to:

- Representations of climate catastrophe and ecological disruption.
- Depictions of displacement, migration, and vulnerability.
- Narrative techniques such as polyphony, fragmentation, symbolism, and nonlinearity.
- Human relationships with animals, landscapes, and nonhuman systems.
- The ideological implications of environmental crisis.

Secondary sources in ecocriticism, environmental humanities, postcolonial studies, and ecofeminism were used to contextualize the primary texts.

### **Climate Change as Lived Experience**

One of the defining features of contemporary climate fiction is its capacity to transform climate change from an abstract scientific phenomenon into a concrete human experience. Rather than merely presenting data or prediction, these texts dramatize how ecological crisis affects everyday life.

In Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*, climate change is represented through the altered migration of monarch butterflies. The sudden appearance of the butterflies in rural Tennessee initially seems miraculous, yet it gradually becomes clear that the phenomenon is a symptom of ecological disruption. Kingsolver situates global warming within the context of poverty, religion, and local community, thereby demonstrating that climate change is not only a scientific issue but also a social and cultural one.

Similarly, Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* portrays environmental crisis through migration and displacement. The novel connects rising sea levels, storms, and forced migration across

India, Venice, and the Mediterranean. Ghosh suggests that climate change cannot be understood solely within national boundaries because its effects are transnational and unevenly distributed. The novel therefore foregrounds the experiences of refugees and marginalized populations, revealing the intimate relationship between ecological catastrophe and human suffering.

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *MaddAddam* intensify this logic by depicting a future in which ecological devastation has become normalized. Corporate biotechnology, genetic manipulation, and environmental destruction culminate in social collapse. Atwood's dystopian vision exposes the consequences of treating both nature and human beings as commodities.

### **Narrative Form and Ecological Consciousness**

Climate fiction does not merely address ecological crisis through subject matter; it also uses innovative narrative forms to shape ecological consciousness. Narrative structure becomes a means of representing the complexity, uncertainty, and interconnectedness of climate change.

Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* employs a polyphonic structure that moves between multiple characters and social groups. This multiplicity reflects the collective nature of environmental crisis. No single individual can fully comprehend or resolve climate change; rather, ecological survival depends upon networks of cooperation and shared responsibility.

Atwood's fiction often relies on fragmentation and nonlinear chronology. In *Oryx and Crake*, the narrative shifts between the protagonist's memories of the past and his survival in a devastated future. This fractured structure mirrors the disintegration of ecological and social order. The reader experiences environmental catastrophe not as a single event but as an accumulation of interconnected failures.

Symbolism also plays a crucial role in climate fiction. Water frequently appears as a symbol of both destruction and renewal. In *New York 2140*, the flooded city becomes a visual

metaphor for the consequences of unchecked capitalism and environmental neglect. In *Flight Behavior*, the monarch butterflies symbolize ecological fragility while simultaneously suggesting the possibility of adaptation and transformation.

The use of myth and folklore in *Gun Island* further illustrates the role of narrative in shaping ecological understanding. Ghosh blends traditional stories with contemporary climate realities, suggesting that ecological crisis cannot be understood solely through scientific discourse. Myth becomes a way of imagining relationships between past and present, local and global, human and nonhuman.

### **Challenging Anthropocentrism**

A central concern of ecocriticism is the critique of anthropocentrism, the belief that humans occupy a privileged and separate position in relation to the natural world. Contemporary climate fiction repeatedly challenges this assumption by emphasizing the agency of nonhuman life and the interdependence of ecosystems.

In Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*, the monarch butterflies are not passive objects but active participants in the narrative. Their altered migration patterns reshape the lives and beliefs of the human characters. Likewise, Atwood's genetically modified species disrupt conventional distinctions between natural and artificial life.

Robinson's *New York 2140* similarly depicts the city itself as an ecological system in which water, infrastructure, weather, and human activity are inseparable. The novel thus undermines the idea that human beings can control or dominate nature.

Amitav Ghosh extends this critique by arguing that modern literary realism has often excluded the nonhuman from serious consideration. In *The Great Derangement*, he contends that the climate crisis exposes the limitations of literary forms that privilege individual psychology over collective ecological processes. *Gun Island* responds to this challenge by incorporating animals, storms, and landscapes into the narrative as active agents.

## **Climate Fiction as Ethical and Political Intervention**

Climate fiction performs an ethical function by compelling readers to confront questions of responsibility, justice, and survival. These texts ask who is most vulnerable to ecological crisis, who benefits from environmental exploitation, and what forms of action remain possible.

Postcolonial climate fiction frequently emphasizes environmental injustice. The communities most affected by climate change are often those least responsible for it. In *Gun Island*, displaced migrants and coastal populations bear the burden of ecological destruction. Ghosh therefore exposes the unequal distribution of environmental risk.

Ecofeminist concerns are also evident in many climate fiction narratives. Women often emerge as figures of ecological knowledge and resistance. In *Flight Behavior*, Dellarobia's growing awareness of climate change parallels her rejection of restrictive social norms. Her transformation suggests that ecological consciousness can also become a form of personal and political liberation.

Robinson's *New York 2140* foregrounds the possibility of collective action. Although the novel portrays ecological disaster, it does not succumb entirely to despair. Instead, it imagines new forms of economic and social organization capable of responding to environmental crisis. The novel thus resists fatalism and emphasizes resilience.

In this sense, climate fiction functions as a form of cultural activism. By shaping public imagination, literature can influence social attitudes and inspire environmental engagement. Climate fiction is therefore not simply descriptive but performative: it seeks to produce ecological awareness and ethical transformation.

## **Comparative Analysis: Western and Global South Perspectives**

A comparison of Western and Global South climate fiction reveals both common concerns and important differences. Western texts such as Atwood's and Robinson's novels

often focus on technological innovation, scientific experimentation, and urban futures. These works tend to imagine climate change through large-scale systems and institutional collapse.

By contrast, Ghosh's *Gun Island* and Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* foreground local experience, cultural memory, and ecological vulnerability. Rather than emphasizing technological solutions, these texts explore the social and emotional dimensions of climate change. They also pay greater attention to migration, inequality, and the experiences of marginalized communities.

Nevertheless, these texts share an awareness that environmental crisis is fundamentally interconnected. Climate change transcends national, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries. Consequently, contemporary climate fiction constitutes a transnational dialogue in which diverse literary traditions contribute to a shared ecological imagination.

## **Conclusion**

The convergence of ecocriticism and climate fiction demonstrates that literature occupies a crucial place in contemporary responses to environmental crisis. Through the works of Margaret Atwood, Amitav Ghosh, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Barbara Kingsolver, climate fiction transforms climate change from an abstract scientific phenomenon into an immediate and lived experience. These narratives reveal the human consequences of floods, migration, ecological collapse, and extinction while also imagining possibilities for resilience and transformation.

The study has shown that climate fiction challenges anthropocentric assumptions, foregrounds the agency of nonhuman life, and redefines the ethical relationship between humans and the environment. Narrative strategies such as fragmentation, polyphony, symbolism, and myth are essential to this process because they enable literature to represent the complexity of the Anthropocene.

Furthermore, climate fiction functions as a form of cultural activism. By shaping ecological consciousness, exposing environmental injustice, and encouraging transnational solidarity, literature becomes an indispensable medium for confronting climate change. The future of ecocritical scholarship lies in continuing to expand beyond Eurocentric frameworks, incorporating Global South perspectives, and engaging more fully with the ethical and political dimensions of environmental crisis. In the Anthropocene, storytelling is no longer a luxury or a diversion. It is a necessary mode of survival.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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