

Slow Violence, Climate Anxiety, and More-Than-Human Agency in Contemporary Anglophone Climate Fiction

Benazir Larik¹, Shah Nawaz Barich², Marvi Mastoi³

¹ Lecturer, GC University Hyderabad. benazir.larik@gcu.edu.pk

² PhD Researcher at Institute of English Language & Literature, University of Sindh Jamshoro
ali.shahnawaz1235@gmail.com

³ Assistant Professor, Govt. Girls Degree College, Larkana & M.Phil (English Literature), University of Sindh, Jamshoro. marviaahmad2@gmail.com

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Abstract

It argues that recent English-language fiction has begun to answer the representational challenge posed by climate change not simply by adding environmental themes to conventional plots, but by altering narrative form itself. Against the background of escalating planetary warming recorded by the World Meteorological Organization[1] and the risk assessments synthesized by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change[2], the paper examines how literature translates distributed, delayed, and often invisible environmental harm into emotionally legible experience. The study focuses on *The Overstory*[3] by Richard Powers[4], *Gun Island*[5] by Amitav Ghosh[6], and *Weather*[7] by Jenny Offill[8]. Using qualitative close reading and reflexive thematic analysis, the paper proposes an original concept, distributed witness, to describe a narrative mode in which climate crisis is apprehended through dispersed scenes, transnational routes, fragmentary consciousness, and more-than-human signs rather than through one singular revelation or catastrophe. The argument is that *The Overstory* foregrounds arboreal temporality and interspecies agency, *Gun Island* links climate change to migration, myth, and hydrocolonial history, and *Weather* renders climate anxiety through domestic fragmentation and informational overload. The paper concludes that contemporary climate fiction is most powerful when it connects intimate feeling to planetary systems without collapsing environmental crisis into spectacle. In doing so, it offers a new way of understanding the ethical work of literature in an age of ecological precarity: not as simple awareness-raising, but as the formal redistribution of perception, responsibility, and relation. [9]

Keywords: Climate Fiction, Ecocriticism, Slow Violence, Eco-Anxiety, Contemporary Anglophone Fiction, Environmental Humanities, Distributed Witness

1. Introduction

Climate change is no longer a distant horizon in literary studies; it is a structuring pressure on the present. The WMO's *State of the Global Climate 2024* identifies 2024 as the warmest year in the 175-year observational record, with a global mean near-surface temperature about 1.55°C above the 1850–1900 average, while the IPCC's 2023 synthesis report reiterates that climate impacts are already widespread across ecosystems and human societies. At the same time, the UNHCR[10] continues to frame climate change as a major force intensifying vulnerability and displacement, especially where conflict, poverty, and environmental instability converge. These developments matter for literary criticism because climate crisis

is not only scientific data or policy urgency; it is also a crisis of perception, scale, feeling, and representation. Literature becomes crucial precisely because it can translate systemic abstraction into lived experience. [11]

Within criticism, Adeline Johns-Putra[12] has shown that climate change has become a major concern in literature and literary studies, extending from cli-fi to ecopoetry and climate criticism. Her later monograph argues that climate change challenges the novel at the level of time, agency, and ethical relation, not merely at the level of subject matter. This is a decisive shift. Climate fiction is not most interesting when it simply “includes” storms, extinctions, or collapse; it becomes most significant when it reworks how narrative itself organizes causality, duration, and moral attention. In this sense, the climate novel is a formal as much as a thematic development in contemporary English literature. [13]

This research begins from a question sharpened by *The Great Derangement*[14]. There, Ghosh argues that literature, history, and politics have long struggled to imagine the scale and violence of global warming. His core claim is not that fiction is irrelevant, but that inherited conventions of literary realism have often been poorly equipped to register the improbable, the planetary, and the nonhuman. Yet the period after that intervention has produced a substantial body of scholarship showing that fiction has been changing in response. Scholars such as Sherif H. Ismail, Erin James, Eric Morel, and Katrina Persinger suggest that climate fiction now works through multiple forms: epic, fragment, uncanny realism, posthuman narrative, and environmentally scaled storytelling. [15]

This paper therefore undertakes a comparative study of *The Overstory*, *Gun Island*, and *Weather*. These texts were selected because each addresses climate crisis through a distinct formal logic. *The Overstory* uses an arboreal structure to decenter human exceptionalism; *Gun Island* links ecological disturbance to migration, colonial history, and oceanic circulation; *Weather* renders environmental dread through domestic, fragmentary, and psychologically saturated prose. The central argument is that these novels exemplify what I call distributed witness: a narrative mode in which climate crisis is perceived through dispersed scenes, layered scales, fragmentary affects, and more-than-human agencies rather than through one linear apocalypse. This concept is the paper’s original contribution. It offers a way to explain how contemporary climate fiction converts delayed and distributed environmental harm into aesthetic and ethical relation. [16]

2. Review of Literature

The literature on climate fiction is now large enough to require internal differentiation. One major strand concerns field formation. Johns-Putra’s 2016 overview shows that climate change criticism has expanded well beyond a narrow definition of cli-fi and now includes theater, poetry, and broader ecocritical debates. Her 2019 book then reframes the issue by arguing that climate change pressures foundational assumptions of the novel itself, especially around futurity, agency, and ethical obligation. Persinger’s review of science fiction in the Anthropocene similarly notes that recent fiction increasingly grapples with collapse, technocratic solutionism, intergenerational conflict, and colonial histories embedded in environmental crisis. Together, these scholars establish that climate literature is not a passing trend but a major organizing problem for contemporary literary study. [17]

A second strand centers on narrative form. Erin James[18] and Eric Morel[19] argue that ecocriticism gains force when it enters dialogue with narrative theory, because ecological meaning is generated not only by setting or message but by focalization, temporal layering, and scale. Ismail extends this insight by warning against the assumption that climate fiction must always be maximalist, apocalyptic, or spectacular. His “less is more” thesis is especially important for reading smaller or quieter novels, because it suggests that subdued or domestic forms may render climate pressures more effectively than overt catastrophe. This argument is indispensable for placing Offill alongside Powers and Ghosh without forcing all three into the same aesthetic mold. [20]

A third strand concerns environmental justice and postcoloniality. Rob Nixon[21] defines slow violence as

harm that unfolds gradually, remains dispersed across time and space, and is often not recognized as violence at all. This concept has become foundational because climate crisis is frequently attritional rather than spectacular. Graham Huggan[22] and Helen Tiffin[23] deepen this perspective by insisting that environmental representation cannot be separated from empire, extraction, animalization, and the unequal distribution of vulnerability. Ursula K. Heise[24], in turn, argues for an environmental imagination capable of holding place and planet together. These three lines of thought underpin the present study's insistence that climate fiction must be read through injustice, scale, and relationality rather than universalized "humanity." [25]

A fourth strand addresses climate affect, especially eco-anxiety. Recent work by Boehme et al., Boivin et al., and Samarawickrama et al. shows that climate anxiety is now understood as a heterogeneous psychological and cultural condition rather than a single symptom. Literary critics have begun to connect this work to fiction. Diletta De Cristofaro reads contemporary literature, including *Weather*, through sleep disturbance and extractive capitalism; Clare Fisher argues that Offill's interest in the trivial is formally central rather than incidental; and Hazha Salih Hassan and Chinar Kamal Tayib explicitly analyze emotional geography and climate anxiety in *Weather*. This scholarship matters because it demonstrates that affect is not a secondary decorative layer in climate fiction; it is one of the principal ways climate reality is made narratable. [26]

Scholarship on the three primary texts confirms their importance but also reveals a comparative gap. On *The Overstory*, Hedwig Fraunhofer, Stephen O'Neill, Grant McMillan, and Kathie Birat all stress nonhuman agency, arboreal form, multispecies translation, and activist politics. On *Gun Island*, Lava Asaad, Rakibul Hasan Khan, Nobonita Rakshit and Rashmi Gaur, and Mohammad Rahmatullah with Muhammad Tofazzel Hossain emphasize ethnographic surrealism, planetary environmentalism, peripheral aesthetics, water, migration, and hydrocoloniality. On *Weather*, Fisher, De Cristofaro, and Hassan and Tayib foreground fragmentation, ordinariness, anxiety, and emotional saturation. What is missing in much of this criticism is a framework that explains how these formally different novels nonetheless share a climate-narrative logic. [27]

The present paper addresses that gap through a distributed witness framework. The framework joins three coordinates: slow violence (Nixon), scalar relationality (Heise; Johns-Putra; James and Morel), and climate affect (Boehme; Boivin; De Cristofaro). It proposes that contemporary climate fiction often operates by distributing perception across humans and nonhumans, across planetary and domestic scales, and across fragmentary emotional intensities rather than locating climate meaning in a single event or consciousness. This framework provides the conceptual basis for the comparative analysis that follows. [28]

3. Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative comparative method grounded in close reading and reflexive thematic analysis. The choice is deliberate. In literary studies, climate meaning is rarely exhausted by plot summary or thematic labeling; it emerges through form, rhythm, image systems, narrative perspective, and scalar shifts. James and Morel's work on ecocriticism and narrative theory supports this emphasis on form, while Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's account of good thematic analysis offers a transparent way to describe interpretive coding without reducing literary reading to crude quantification. The method therefore remains humanistic and interpretive, but it is also systematic. [29]

The corpus consists of *The Overstory* (2018), *Gun Island* (2019), and *Weather* (2020). These novels were selected purposively rather than randomly because each belongs to contemporary Anglophone literary fiction, each has generated substantial critical discussion, and each stages climate crisis through a distinct narrative strategy: forest-network epic, transoceanic migration novel, and fragmentary domestic realism. Publisher descriptions also confirm their recognizable climate orientation: *The Overstory* centers human lives brought together by the destruction of forests; *Gun Island* is explicitly described as a story of a world

on the brink shaped by displacement and transition; *Weather* presents a nation and a family in crisis through a narrator increasingly consumed by disaster psychology and end-of-world thinking. [30]

For the purposes of analysis, the study identifies thirty focal passages, ten from each novel. A focal passage is any scene, descriptive unit, narrative fragment, or recurrent motif cluster in which climate-linked significance becomes formally prominent. Five interpretive codes organize the reading: slow violence, scalar movement, more-than-human agency, affective weather, and collective action. These categories were derived from the literature review and then refined through iterative reading. The study also uses a heuristic salience scale to compare how forcefully each code operates in each novel. That scale is interpretive, not statistical; its purpose is clarification, not numerical proof. [31]

The methodology has clear limits. A three-text corpus cannot represent the full diversity of contemporary climate fiction, and the paper does not include reader-response research or corpus linguistics. Its claims are therefore comparative and conceptual rather than universal. Still, the narrow corpus allows close attention to form, and that close attention is precisely what the research question requires. The method is appropriate because climate fiction often works through accumulation, latency, and formal pressure rather than through singular declarative statements. [32]

4. Data Collection and Analysis

The analysis shows that all three novels render climate crisis through distributed witness, but they do so with different emphases. *The Overstory* scores highest in more-than-human agency and scalar breadth; *Gun Island* scores highest in migration, historical layering, and hydrocolonial circulation; *Weather* scores highest in affective weather, domestic saturation, and fragmentary crisis consciousness. None of the novels depends on simple spectacle. Instead, each translates climate force into formally dispersed signs that readers must learn to connect. [33]

In *The Overstory*, distributed witness begins with form. O'Neill argues that arboreal structure can decenter the human by reorganizing narrative itself around tree life, and Fraunhofer shows that the novel pursues a multispecies logic of relation and translation. Birat likewise notes that the novel mobilizes contemporary understandings of tree behavior while testing narrative's capacity to represent complex ecological realities. These insights illuminate why Powers's novel feels so different from conventional environmental storytelling. Trees are not backdrop. They operate as presences that reorganize time, attention, and moral scale. Human biographies no longer stand alone; they are folded into forest duration and interdependence. [34]

The novel's most powerful climate work lies in how it renders slow violence. Deforestation, extraction, and legal-bureaucratic destruction appear not as one apocalyptic event but as cumulative harm normalized by institutions and habits of perception. That logic aligns closely with Nixon's formulation of violence that is attritional and difficult to recognize. McMillan's discussion of eco-activist archetypes in the novel clarifies the stakes: activism emerges because ordinary legal and social frames have already failed to acknowledge the scale of damage. Thus *The Overstory* witnesses climate crisis by refusing to isolate emotion from structure or activism from ecological time. [35]

Gun Island organizes climate reading differently. If *The Overstory* is rooted and branching, *Gun Island* is tidal and itinerant. Asaad reads the novel through ethnographic surrealism, while Khan interprets it as a form of planetary environmentalism. Rahmatullah and Hossain's phrase "hydrocolonial currents" is especially useful because it captures how water in the novel functions as history, route, medium, and danger at once. Migration in *Gun Island* is not merely a "social issue" added onto climate change; it is one of the novel's main ways of making climate crisis legible. Environmental stress, labor precarity, border regimes, and colonial afterlives are braided together. [36]

Rakshit and Gaur help explain the novel's aesthetics by emphasizing postcolonial modernity and peripheral vision. The climate-signs of *Gun Island*—animal disturbances, atmospheric anomalies, mythical

reverberations, changing routes—push against the narrow plausibility of conventional realism. Forter’s reading of the novel as climate-historical fiction likewise suggests that Ghosh uses uncanniness to denaturalize the social present and expose its buried pasts and implied futures. In this way, *Gun Island* turns distributed witness into a postcolonial method: no one character can contain the crisis, so the novel disperses perception across archives, legends, seas, migrants, and ecological disruptions. [37]

Weather, by contrast, works through scale reduction and fragmentation. Fisher argues that the novel’s interest in the trivial is structurally central, not superficial. De Cristofaro shows that Offill’s climate fiction links insomnia, extractive capitalism, and eco-anxiety, while Hassan and Tayib explicitly frame the novel through emotional geography and climate distress. These readings are persuasive because Offill’s form reproduces what climate crisis often feels like under digital late capitalism: not one overwhelming revelation, but a relentless stream of fretting, guilt, information, anticipation, and partial collapse. The novel distributes witness through snippets, emails, side-thoughts, domestic interruptions, and bodily unease. [38]

Where *The Overstory* gives climate crisis a forest network and *Gun Island* gives it migratory circulation, *Weather* gives it cognitive atmosphere. More-than-human agency is less explicit here than in the other two novels, but that relative weakness is itself meaningful. Offill shows how thoroughly climate systems have entered interior life. The weather of the title is both meteorological and mental. Crisis is not only outside the home; it saturates domestic speech, maternal attention, media consumption, and bodily tension. That is why a short, fragmented novel can sit productively beside larger texts: as Ismail suggests, climate fiction does not need spectacle to generate ethical force. [39]

Across the corpus, then, the most important shared feature is not genre but formal distribution. *The Overstory* distributes witness through interspecies networks and activist convergence; *Gun Island* through oceanic routes, migration, and historical displacement; *Weather* through intimate fragmentation, anxiety, and informational overload. In every case, climate crisis becomes perceptible not as one self-contained incident but as a braided field of relation. This is the evidence for the paper’s main conceptual intervention. Distributed witness is not a metaphor for “many themes”; it is a description of how climate fiction now often works. [40]

5. Discussion

The findings suggest that contemporary climate fiction is moving from revelation to relation. Much earlier commentary on cli-fi assumed that fiction’s main task was to raise awareness of global warming. That remains important, but the novels studied here do more than inform. They reconfigure how crisis is sensed. This matters because awareness by itself is politically thin. Schneider-Mayerson’s empirical work on climate fiction shows that readers can indeed be affected by such literature, while later experimental work suggests that narrative climate texts can produce small but measurable positive shifts in beliefs and attitudes, even if those shifts are not always durable. The literary implication is that fiction’s force lies not only in information transfer but in affective and formal mediation. [41]

The paper’s concept of distributed witness refines Ghosh’s account of imaginative failure. Ghosh was right to argue that inherited literary realism was often unequal to climate scale. But the evidence of recent fiction suggests that the novel has been adapting. Powers reshapes narrative around arboreal temporality; Ghosh threads myth, history, and migration into climate perception; Offill fragments domestic realism until crisis becomes atmospheric rather than episodic. These are not merely examples of “fiction about climate change.” They are experiments in what the novel must become when the background world is no longer stable. [42]

The concept also sharpens debates about realism and scale. Ismail’s insistence that “less is more” helps explain why Offill’s small-scale form is not weaker than Powers’s or Ghosh’s. Rather than ranking climate novels by magnitude, distributed witness allows us to ask what kind of relation each text builds between the intimate and the planetary. In this respect, the three novels collectively produce what may be called an

intimate planetary realism: a realism that no longer confines itself to individualized causality but still remains anchored in embodied life, emotional weather, and particular scenes of vulnerability. [43]

Finally, the argument has implications for English literature as a discipline. Climate fiction should not be treated as a niche subgenre or a pedagogical supplement to environmental science. The evidence here suggests that it is one of the places where contemporary literature most ambitiously rethinks agency, temporality, and ethical attention. If literature in the Anthropocene matters, it matters because it can stage distributed crisis without falsely simplifying it. That is the core value of distributed witness: it names a literary capacity to hold partiality, interdependence, and delayed harm together without surrendering to either abstraction or spectacle. [44]

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that recent Anglophone climate fiction is best understood not simply as a thematic response to environmental emergency but as a formal reorganization of witness. Through a comparative reading of *The Overstory*, *Gun Island*, and *Weather*, it has shown that contemporary novels are increasingly able to represent climate crisis by dispersing perception across more-than-human systems, colonial histories, migratory routes, domestic fragments, and affective atmospheres. The study's original contribution is the concept of distributed witness, which explains why these formally different texts nonetheless share common climate logic. [45]

The comparative findings can be stated clearly. *The Overstory* renders ecological interdependence and activism through arboreal time and vegetal agency. *Gun Island* links climate instability to migration, myth, and postcolonial circulation. *Weather* reveals that climate crisis is also lived as ordinary anxiety, broken attention, and intimate saturation. In combination, these novels demonstrate that the most powerful climate fiction may be the fiction that refuses to isolate environment from history, feeling, or form. It is this refusal that gives contemporary English literature one of its most urgent new directions. [46]

The main limitation of the study is corpus size. Three novels cannot represent the full diversity of climate writing across regions, genres, and media. Even so, the analysis establishes a strong conceptual claim: literature remains indispensable to climate culture because it does not merely repeat scientific facts. It models how crisis is felt, misrecognized, shared, and narrated. That is why climate fiction belongs at the center of current English literary scholarship rather than at its margins. [47]

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