Integral Research
(ISSN: 3048-5991) Coden: IRABCA

Research Article
(Peer-reviewed, Open Access & Indexed Multidisciplinary Journal)
Journal home page: https://integralresearch.in/
Vol. 02, No. 12, December. 2025

Revisiting Ecocriticism and "Cli-Fi": Reading Climate Change through Literature

Dr. G M Murtheppa ✉ **Munianjinappa. K** ✉

Associate Professor of English, Government First Grade College, Yalahanka, Bengaluru.
Assistant Professor and Head, Department of English, IIBS College, Bengaluru.

DOI:

Literature, time and again, penetrates and reflects on the societal issues in terms of culture, politics, economy, philosophy, spirituality, human psyche and unanticipated changes in the ecology. So also, its paradigm shifts on climate issues that effect on human and natural phenomenon. Climate change is no longer a scientific or policy concern, it has become a profound cultural and imaginative challenge. This paper explores the emergence of "climate literature" as a significant area within environmental humanities. It focuses on the shift from early ecocritical writing towards contemporary "cli-fi" (climate fiction) (Johns-Putra, 2016; Slovic, 2014). Drawing on key theoretical interventions and selected literary examples, the paper delves into how literature represents the fierceness of climate change, interrogates human-nature-relationships, reimagines responsibility and hopes in the Anthropocene (Bould, 2021; Ghosh, 2016). The paper further highlights on different dimensions of climate impact on human-nature relationships, firstly, an overview of climate crisis as understood by contemporary science, secondly, the evolution of ecocriticism and the specific turn to climate change, thirdly, the rise of cli-fi as a literary mode and its thematic concerns and lastly, the pedagogical implications of teaching climate literature in the Indian classroom. The paper argues that climate literature helps readers to "feel" climate change as lived experience rather than distant abstraction, and thus functions as a vital cultural response to a global emergency (Slovic, 2014).

Keywords: Climate literature, cli-fi, ecocriticism, Anthropocene, cultural response, environmental humanities, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Introduction

Climate change has become a necessary evil that has been being discussed and debated across the globe by the irrespective disciplines in the present time. Scientific reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) repeatedly warn that human activities have "unequivocally" warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land, leading to more frequent heatwaves, heavy precipitation, sea-level rise and other extreme events (IPCC, 2021). Yet, statistical data that has been collected and framed by a particular discipline in the form of numbers, graphs and probability ranges, however alarming, do not automatically translate into moral urgency or emotional engagement. But, that kind of data would assist the policy makers take a drastic step to manage it by proper evolution of policies. Climate change is experienced unevenly, disproportionately affecting the poor, the global South and future generations, whose voices are often missing from official reports (Bould, 2021). Literature in its true spirit sensitises the so-called policy stake holders who are dumb, deaf, blind and indifferent towards climate change and its impact on environment and ecology. It is here between scientific knowledge and lived experience, literature enters. Stories, poems and novels can slow down our reading, humanise abstract data, and invite us to imagine different futures (Slovic, 2014). Over the last few decades, literary scholars have turned to environmental questions under the broad banner of ecocriticism. More recently, they have focused particularly on climate change and its narrative challenges (Johns-Putra, 2016). Johns-Putra, for example, notes that climate change has moved from the margins to the centre of literary studies, pushing ecocriticism to rethink scale, agency and temporality (Johns-Putra, 2016). This paper traces that movement

Received **09 December 2025**; Accepted **26 December 2025**. Available online: **30 December 2025**. Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

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from ecocriticism to what is now widely called "climate literature," with special attention to climate fiction or "cli-fi." It also considers how such literature can be taught in contexts like India, where climate vulnerability intersects with histories of colonialism and development (Ghosh, 2016).

Climate Crisis, Scientific and Ethical Context of present situation and its effect is quite experienced by everyone. The IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) confirms that global surface temperature for 2011–2020 was about 1.1°C higher than 1850–1900, largely because of greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuels, land-use change and industrial processes (IPCC, 2021). The report warns that every additional fraction of a degree intensifies risks to human and non-human life, including food insecurity, water stress, biodiversity loss and climate-induced displacement (IPCC, 2021). These findings underline two key points relevant for literature-Climate change is anthropogenic. It arises from human activity, yet it exceeds any individual's perception. This tension between human agency and planetary scale is a central concern of climate narratives (Bould, 2021; Johns-Putra, 2016). Climate impacts are uneven and unjust. Countries and communities that have contributed least to emissions often suffer the most. Literature from the global South, Indigenous communities and marginalised groups therefore becomes crucial in representing "climate injustice" (Ghosh, 2016). While science tells us what is happening, it cannot by itself answer questions like: Who is responsible? What futures are desirable? How should we live now? These are ethical and imaginative questions, and they lie at the heart of climate literature (Slovic, 2014).

Ecocriticism: Brief Overview

Like other critical approaches to literature, Ecocriticism also emerged in the late twentieth century as an approach that studies the relationship between literature and the environment (Slovic, 2014). It asks how texts represent nature, land, animals and ecological crisis and how such representations shape cultural attitudes. Early ecocriticism often focused on nature writing, Romantic poetry and American pastoral traditions, celebrating wilderness and critiquing industrialisation. However, as environmental problems became more global and complex such as pollution, deforestation, species extinction and climate change, ecocritics gradually expanded their focus. They began to examine urban ecologies, environmental justice, and the links between environment, race, class, gender and colonialism (Johns-Putra, 2016). In the 20s many scholars recognised that climate change required specific attention. Climate operates at a planetary scale, unfolds over long time frames and is entangled with energy systems and capitalist modernity. These approaches deviate from conventional narrative forms that tend to focus on individual lives and short time spans (Bould, 2021). Johns-Putra argues that ecocriticism had to "take seriously the relationship between climate change and literature" as a distinctive topic, rethinking representation itself (Johns-Putra, 2016). Mark Bould's notion of the "Anthropocene unconscious" suggests that much

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contemporary culture already reflects climate anxiety even when it is not explicitly about climate change (Bould, 2021). Situating texts within this unconscious helps readers perceive buried ecological anxieties and structural violence, such as slow sea-level rise or desertification, that are otherwise hard to narrate.

Amitav Ghosh's influential work The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable (2016), goes further by directly criticising the literary mainstream for failing to address climate crisis. He contends that serious, realist fiction has largely avoided depicting extreme weather events, treating them as too improbable for the modern novel's logic of everyday life (Ghosh, 2016). The absence of climate change from literature is, for Ghosh, a symptom of a deeper cultural derangement.

The Rise of Climate Fiction (Cli-Fi)

"Cli-fi" is a popular term for climate fiction, originally coined by Dan Bloom around 2007–2008 to describe narrative works in which climate change is central to the setting, plot or conflict. Unlike general disaster stories, "cli-fi" typically foregrounds anthropogenic climate change and its social implications (Johns-Putra, 2016; Slovic, 2014). It often overlaps with science fiction, dystopian fiction and speculative realism, but can also appear in realist or even romantic modes. Universities across the world now include "cli-fi" in literature and environmental studies syllabi, recognising its potential to enhance climate awareness and critical thinking (Johns-Putra, 2016; Slovic, 2014). "Cli-fi" makes it base on Apocalyptic or dystopian framework for understanding the lives that are affected by climate change. Early examples include J. G. Ballard's The Drowned World and Cormac McCarthy's The Road, which depict drowned cities or scorched landscapes. Such narratives dramatize worst-case scenarios, compelling readers to confront the consequences of inaction (Johns-Putra, 2016). Kim Stanley Robinson's works, including Science in the Capital trilogy, New York 2140 and The Ministry for the Future, explore plausible futures shaped by climate policy, geoengineering and global governance (Robinson, 2017; Robinson, 2020). These novels combine scientific detail with human stories, inviting readers to imagine both catastrophe and collective solutions.

Then, the shift is on Environmental justice and intersectionality that assess the life pattern affected by climate change. Recent climate fiction highlights how climate crisis intersects with gender, race, class and colonial histories. The African and African-diaspora climate narratives, such as Nnedi Okorafor's Noor and Abi Daré's award-winning And So I Roar, foreground environmental injustice in the global South, showing how droughts, floods and resource extraction intensify existing social inequalities (Daré, 2025; Tsamaase, 2020). The other outlook by the writers on climate impact is multispecies perspectives and more-than-human worlds. Novels like Barbara Kingsolver's Flight Behaviour, which focuses on displaced monarch butterflies, or Richard Powers's The Overstory with its tree-centred narratives, ask readers to decentre the human and attend to

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non-human agency (Kingsolver, 2012; Powers, 2018). Such works resonate with ecocritical efforts to reimagine humans as part of larger ecosystems. Climate literature also focus on Hope, resilience and alternative futures like dystopian, there is a growing body of hopeful or "solarpunk" narratives that imagine sustainable communities, mitigation and adaptation. Recent criticism notes that hopeful climate fiction can inspire engagement rather than paralysis, offering models of resilience and collaboration (Slovic, 2014; Johns-Putra, 2016).

The other approach to climate life is Non-Fiction and Literary essays. In other words, beyond novels, climate literature also includes essays, memoirs and reportage. Ghosh's The Great Derangement is a key example of literary non-fiction that examines the cultural politics of climate change (Ghosh, 2016). In the same way, writing about nature has progressed to revisit climate realities, blending personal narrative with ecological observation and scientific reflection (Slovic, 2014).

At this point, one needs to have a clear demarcation between Climate Literature and Anthropocene. The term Anthropocene is widely used to denote a new geological epoch in which humans have become a dominant force shaping Earth systems (Bould, 2021). Although the term is debated, it has stimulated rich conversations in the humanities about responsibility, agency and representation (Johns-Putra, 2016). Of course, Climate literature often grapples with the following Anthropocene paradoxes. Firstly, the paradox of scale in which individual actions seem insignificant compared to planetary change, yet collectively they matter. Narrative strategies such as multiple perspectives, interlinked stories or long historical curves attempt to capture this scale (Bould, 2021). Secondly, the paradox of agency where the humans are powerful enough to alter the climate but often feels powerless to stop it. Characters in "cli-fi" frequently oscillate between despair and activism, reflecting our ambivalent agency (Robinson, 2020; Slovic, 2014). Thirdly, the paradox of time where climate change unfolds over decades and centuries, while human lives are relatively short sees both human and nature's limitations in a different perspective. This case, a few texts respond by using non-linear timelines, generational sagas or speculative futures to bridge temporal gaps (Johns-Putra, 2016; Bould, 2021). By engaging these paradoxes, climate literature helps readers situate their personal stories within larger planetary narratives, fostering what some critics call "earth-systems consciousness" (Bould, 2021).

Climate Literature in the Indian context particularly in the postcolonial India, climate change is inseparable from histories of empire, extraction and development (Ghosh, 2016). More focus is on Rising temperatures, erratic monsoons, glacial melt in the Himalayas and increasing floods affect millions, often in rural and coastal areas with limited resources. At the same time, India is also pursuing rapid economic growth, heavily reliant on fossil fuels in the backdrop of Liberalization, Privatisation and Globalisation where the nature has been looted in the name of development through displacement,

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demolition, destruction and construction that naturally affects age old human practices. Amitav Ghosh has argued that the climate crisis is "entangled with the history of empire," noting that colonial plantations, resource extraction and trade routes laid the foundations of today's carbon economy (Ghosh, 2016). His own novels, such as The Hungry Tide and Gun Island, weave together stories of migration, myth and environmental vulnerability in the Sundarbans and beyond, highlighting how climate risk is distributed along lines of class, caste and geography (Ghosh, 2016). Similarly, South Asian and African writers increasingly produce climate-inflected narratives where environmental change is not an isolated theme but part of everyday struggles over land, water, labour and gender (Daré, 2025; Tsamaase, 2020). These texts challenge Western narratives that portray the global South merely as a victim or backdrop, instead foregrounding local knowledge, resistance and creativity. For Indian readership, such literature can be a torch bearing and may ignite many minds too. It situates climate change not in distant Arctic ice or abstract "global temperature," but in the native landscapes such as villages affected by drought, fishermen facing cyclone-intensified storms, or urban migrants seeking work after crop failure (Ghosh, 2016).

Pedagogical Implications: Teaching Climate Literature

Teaching climate literature, especially in undergraduate classrooms, offers both opportunities and challenges. The new windows like interdisciplinary learning that leads to climate texts naturally invite dialogue with science, geography, economics and ethics. Assignments can ask students to relate a novel's setting to real climate data or policy debates, fostering holistic understanding (IPCC, 2021; Slovic, 2014). This also paves ways to critical thinking and empathy by entering into characters' experiences of flood, heat or displacement, students may develop empathy for climate-vulnerable communities. Discussion can then move from empathy to structural analysis, identifying the political and economic causes of vulnerability (Johns-Putra, 2016; Ghosh, 2016). Moreover, the notion of local engagement can be inculcated among the students. Teachers can encourage students to connect texts with local case studies—such as changing rainfall in Karnataka, urban heat in Bengaluru, or air pollution episodes. Short field visits, interviews or small research projects can complement classroom reading (Slovic, 2014). Through teaching and learning Climate fiction in academia, climate anxiety and fatigue in the community or in a region may be reduced. Constant exposure to crisis narratives may lead to either despair or passiveness. Educators need to balance dystopian texts with stories of resilience, community action and alternative futures. Hopeful "cli-fi" and non-fiction accounts of successful mitigation or adaptation can be useful here (Slovic, 2014; Robinson, 2020). Added to this, the language of a particular region and their emotions may also find voice in the climate narratives. Many climate texts are written in English and set in Western contexts. Incorporating translations from Indian languages and regional writing about environmental issues can make the

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syllabus more inclusive and relatable (Ghosh, 2016). But the other constraint in Indian Academia is that limited contact hours and exam-oriented syllabi may make it difficult to introduce new texts. One practical strategy is to use shorter forms-poems, short stories, essays or selected chapters that still engage climate themes (Johns-Putra, 2016). Despite these challenges, the inclusion of climate literature in curricula is both timely and necessary. It allows education to respond responsibly to the lived realities of students who will face intensifying climate impacts in their lifetimes (IPCC, 2021).

Climate change confronts humanity not only with technical and political questions, but with a deep crisis of imagination. One must learn to see oneself as part of a planetary system, to acknowledge historical injustices and to envision futures beyond fossil-fuelled growth (Ghosh, 2016; Bould, 2021). To sum up, the paper has outlined how ecocriticism has evolved into climate-focused literary studies, traced the emergence of "cli-fi" as a prominent genre and highlighted the significance of climate narratives in global India (Johns-Putra, 2016; Ghosh, 2016). It has argued that climate literature helps bridge the gap between scientific abstraction and lived experience, inviting readers to feel, reflect and respond (Slovic, 2014). To quote what Robinson said, "… for teachers, writers and students, engaging with climate literature is not a luxury but an ethical responsibility" is very opt. By reading and discussing such texts, one must cultivate the imaginative resources needed to face the climate crisis-not with denial or paralysis, but with critical awareness and hopeful creativity (Robinson, 2020; Bould, 2021).

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