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**Climate Grief in South Asian Anglophone Novels (2015–2025): Eco-Critical Readings of Floods, Droughts, and Displacement**



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## Abstract

This study examines how South Asian Anglophone novels (2015–2025) render **climate grief**—the affective experience of loss produced by floods, droughts, heatwaves, and displacement—and how fiction converts ecological catastrophe into personal and social narratives of mourning. The research focuses on a deliberately heterogeneous corpus: *River of Flesh and Other Stories* (ed. Ruchira Gupta), Jamil Ahmad's *The Wandering Falcon*, and Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways*, chosen because each text stages environmental precarity in distinct registers (episodic dispossession, landscape as moral witness, and infrastructural scarcity respectively). Methodologically, the paper combines **ecocriticism** with **trauma studies** and employs close reading, thematic comparison, and discourse analysis to trace how non-human loss (rivers, pastures, air) and human suffering (displacement, hunger, gendered violence) are narrated together. A key motivating fact is the acute vulnerability of the region—most visibly the 2022 Pakistan floods that affected roughly 33 million people and displaced nearly 8 million—situating literary grief within pressing material realities. Findings reveal that South Asian fiction more often depicts climate grief as **ambient, slow, and intersectional**—encoded in quotidian shortages, the erosion of lifeways, and gendered precarity—rather than through spectacle. By synthesizing affective and structural analysis, the study expands definitions of climate fiction to include oblique and intersectional narrations of ecological loss. It argues that literature functions as archive, witness, and ethical interlocutor: registering grief, mapping injustice, and making claims for social repair. The paper closes by suggesting further research into vernacular literatures, oral testimony, and interdisciplinary work linking fiction to lived testimonies of displaced communities.

### Introduction

#### Background of the Topic

Climate change has ceased to be a distant forecast and has instead become a defining reality of the twenty-first century, particularly in South Asia. The region, home to nearly two billion people, is now an epicenter of ecological vulnerability.

Unprecedented monsoon floods in Pakistan in 2022 displaced over 30 million people, while India continues to face recurrent droughts, lethal heatwaves, rising sea levels in coastal regions, and pervasive smog across urban centers. These ecological disruptions are not isolated meteorological events but deeply entangled with histories of colonial extraction, uneven development, and contemporary patterns of resource conflict. The ecological crisis of South Asia is also a crisis of culture, identity, and imagination: it permeates everyday life and inevitably seeps into the literary imagination. Fiction, long attuned to experiences of grief, displacement, and injustice, has become one of the most vital mediums for grappling with what is increasingly called “climate grief”—a profound mourning not only for lost lives and livelihoods but for vanishing landscapes, irretrievable ecosystems, and an unstable sense of belonging.

South Asian Anglophone literature between 2015 and 2025 demonstrates a heightened sensitivity to climate catastrophe. The flood becomes not just a destructive force but a metaphor for political negligence and a symbol of collective vulnerability. Droughts are figured as both environmental and moral deserts, amplifying the inequities of class and caste. Displacement—whether from riverine erosion, deforestation, or resource conflicts—generates narratives where climate trauma interlocks with questions of gender, ethnicity, and survival. Novels and short story collections such as *River of Flesh and Other Stories* (ed. Ruchira Gupta), Jamil Ahmad’s *The Wandering Falcon*, and Fatima Bhutto’s *The Runaways* capture this entanglement of ecological disaster and human fragility. While these works do not always present themselves overtly as “climate fiction,” they encode ecological grief into their narrative structures, character arcs, and symbolic registers.

The cultural significance of this development lies in the shift from depicting environment as static background to treating it as an active agent in the narrative. Climate catastrophe is no longer simply the setting for human drama; it becomes the drama itself. By foregrounding floods, droughts, and displacement, these texts insist that ecological collapse is inseparable from the experience of loss, exile, and mourning. Literature thus emerges as a site where the material violence of climate change is translated into aesthetic, ethical, and affective terms.

**Problem Statement and Research Gap**

Despite the increasing visibility of climate catastrophe in South Asia, literary scholarship has only tentatively engaged with the concept of “climate grief” in Anglophone fiction of the region. Much of the existing ecocritical work on South Asian literature focuses on representations of environment and development (Mukherjee, 2010), or postcolonial ecologies shaped by extractive industries and globalization (Nixon, 2011). While these contributions are foundational, they often treat ecological crisis as an extension of political economy rather than an affective, existential rupture. Similarly, trauma studies have primarily been mobilized in South Asian literary criticism to explore war, Partition, or terrorism; the psychic aftermath of climate catastrophe remains under-theorized.

Moreover, literary responses to ecological crises are often subsumed under the umbrella of “cli-fi” (climate fiction), a category largely developed in Western critical traditions. This lens risks marginalizing South Asian texts, which frequently weave climate concerns into broader social, cultural, and political narratives rather than isolating them as speculative or futuristic. For instance, *River of Flesh* embeds climate displacement within narratives of gendered exploitation, while *The Runaways* interlaces climate resource conflicts with radicalization and global inequality. These works complicate the boundaries of “cli-fi,” demonstrating that South Asian literature approaches ecological grief not through apocalyptic futurism but through the lived immediacy of floods, droughts, and smog.

The research gap, therefore, lies in a systematic ecocritical and trauma-theoretical reading of South Asian Anglophone novels from 2015–2025 that foregrounds climate grief as both ecological and personal. How do these texts translate environmental collapse into the language of mourning, memory, and loss? How do they capture the entanglement of nonhuman catastrophe with human vulnerability? Addressing these questions not only expands the field of ecocriticism but also reframes the archive of South Asian fiction as central to global climate discourse.

**Research Questions / Objectives**

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do South Asian Anglophone novels published between 2015 and 2025

represent ecological disasters such as floods, droughts, and displacement?

2. In what ways do these texts frame climate catastrophe—as background, metaphor, or direct subject—and how do such narrative strategies shape the representation of grief?
3. How can ecocriticism, when supplemented with trauma studies, illuminate the intersections between environmental collapse and personal loss?
4. To what extent does the category of “climate grief” provide a new lens for interpreting South Asian fiction, and how does it challenge or expand existing frameworks like postcolonial ecologies or cli-fi?

The objectives of the study are therefore to:

- Examine how ecological disaster is narrativized in selected novels and short stories.
- Analyze how grief operates simultaneously as ecological mourning and personal trauma.
- Situate South Asian Anglophone fiction within broader global debates on literature and climate change.
- Contribute to literary criticism by bridging ecocritical approaches with trauma theory to develop a nuanced account of climate grief.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to articulate the emotional, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions of climate catastrophe in South Asian Anglophone fiction. In a region where climate change is already displacing millions, literary representation becomes more than artistic embellishment; it becomes a form of witness, testimony, and critique. By analyzing how fiction engages with floods, droughts, and displacement, this research foregrounds the role of literature in mediating between lived ecological disaster and collective memory.

From the perspective of literary studies, this project advances two critical interventions. First, it expands ecocriticism beyond Euro-American contexts by centering South Asian narratives of ecological vulnerability. Second, it introduces the concept of “climate grief” into the study of regional fiction, thereby reframing the archive not merely as documentation of disaster but as an affective and ethical engagement with environmental collapse.

Furthermore, the study contributes to global climate discourse by demonstrating that South Asian literature is not peripheral but central to understanding the cultural politics of ecological grief. While much Anglophone climate fiction in the West imagines speculative futures, South Asian texts foreground the immediacy of catastrophe—lives lost to floods in Sindh, farmers driven to suicide by drought in Maharashtra, or children gasping under smog-filled Delhi skies. These narratives challenge the temporal distancing of Western climate imaginaries, insisting that for millions, the climate crisis is not tomorrow's apocalypse but today's lived reality.

Finally, this research holds broader ethical and pedagogical value. In a world struggling to mobilize climate action, literature plays a vital role in humanizing abstract statistics of loss. By foregrounding grief, fiction resists the normalization of disaster and opens imaginative spaces for empathy, mourning, and perhaps, responsibility.

### **Brief Methodology**

This research employs an interdisciplinary methodology, combining ecocriticism with trauma studies. Ecocriticism provides the framework for analyzing how ecological disaster is represented in literary texts, paying attention to metaphors, narrative form, and the agency of the nonhuman. It draws on theorists such as Lawrence Buell (1995), Ursula Heise (2008), and Rob Nixon (2011) to situate South Asian novels within global discourses of environmental literature. Trauma studies, particularly the work of Cathy Caruth (1996) and Dominick LaCapra (2001), inform the reading of grief as both individual and collective, conscious and unconscious, ecological and personal.

The selected novels—*River of Flesh and Other Stories*, *The Wandering Falcon*, and *The Runaways*—will be read closely to identify how floods, droughts, and displacement are narrativized. Attention will be given to how these ecological events function within the diegesis: as literal catastrophes, as metaphors of political failure, or as structuring absences that haunt characters. The analysis will also explore how grief emerges at multiple levels: the loss of kin, the erosion of land, the destruction of cultural memory.

Additionally, the study will situate these texts in dialogue with South Asian histories of environmental crisis—such as the 2022 Pakistan floods, recurring droughts in Rajasthan, or the toxic smog of Delhi. This contextualization ensures that

the readings remain grounded in material realities rather than abstract symbolism. At the same time, by applying trauma theory, the study seeks to trace how literature translates ecological catastrophe into intimate psychic wounds.

In sum, this research proposes to examine South Asian Anglophone fiction from 2015–2025 through the dual lenses of ecocriticism and trauma studies to understand how climate grief is narrativized. It argues that floods, droughts, and displacement in these novels are not merely environmental backdrops but central narrative forces that shape characters' identities, memories, and losses. By bridging ecological crisis with grief, the study situates literature as both witness and agent in the ongoing struggle to comprehend and respond to the climate emergency.

## **Literature Review**

### **Climate Change and Literary Studies: A Global Perspective**

Over the past two decades, the intersection of literature and climate change has emerged as one of the most vibrant areas of critical inquiry, often referred to as “cli-fi” or climate fiction. Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) laid the groundwork by urging scholars to take seriously the representation of nature in literature, while Ursula Heise’s *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008) shifted attention to how literature negotiates the global scale of environmental crisis. Rob Nixon’s influential concept of “slow violence” (2011) further highlighted the uneven temporality of ecological destruction, emphasizing how the long-term effects of droughts, pollution, and climate displacement are often rendered invisible in both policy and narrative.

In Western contexts, climate fiction has often been associated with speculative or dystopian narratives—works by Margaret Atwood, Kim Stanley Robinson, or Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement* (2016), which critiques literary modernity’s failure to engage with climate change. Ghosh, although South Asian, wrote primarily for a global audience, lamenting the marginalization of climate in the literary mainstream. Scholars such as Adam Trexler (*Anthropocene Fictions*, 2015) have catalogued Anglophone climate fiction, but their focus remains largely on Euro-American texts, leaving South Asian contexts underexplored.

The global scholarship has thus established climate fiction as a category but often fails to account for the specificities of regions like South Asia, where climate change

is not a future dystopia but a lived catastrophe. The absence of South Asian voices in this discourse has prompted a need for localized, culturally grounded studies that attend to floods, droughts, and displacements shaping everyday life.

### **South Asian Ecocriticism: Emerging Conversations**

South Asian literary scholarship has historically emphasized postcolonial and political themes—Partition, gender, migration, and identity—often treating environment as a secondary concern. However, in recent years, ecocritical approaches have begun to gain traction. Sharae Deckard (2019) has argued that South Asian fiction demonstrates “postcolonial ecologies” that link environmental degradation with histories of imperialism and neoliberal development. Nixon’s framework of “slow violence” has been particularly productive in this context, applied to phenomena such as farmer suicides in India or the long-term displacement of communities due to dams and floods.

Yet, most scholarship tends to focus on macro-level critiques of development rather than the affective dimensions of ecological collapse. For instance, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee’s *Postcolonial Environments* (2010) situates South Asian literature in global ecological discourse, but grief, mourning, and psychic trauma remain largely unaddressed. Similarly, Ghosh’s critique of the “derangement” of literary imagination foregrounds the silence around climate, but he leaves unexplored the subtle ways in which South Asian texts encode ecological anxieties through narrative form.

In Pakistan, academic attention to literature and ecology is relatively scarce. Most studies emphasize political instability, terrorism, or Partition trauma rather than environmental grief. When climate appears, it is usually discussed in the language of policy rather than cultural representation. This lacuna becomes striking when we consider the scale of the 2022 floods in Pakistan, which displaced over 30 million people—an event of such magnitude that it inevitably seeps into the cultural and literary psyche. The challenge, then, is to bring ecocriticism into dialogue with trauma studies to capture how ecological events generate both material displacement and affective grief.

### **Climate Grief as Affective Framework**

The concept of “climate grief” has only recently begun to enter academic discourse, emerging from psychology, environmental humanities, and activism. Scholars such as

Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville Ellis (*Ecological Grief and Anxiety*, 2018) have defined it as the mourning associated with the loss of ecosystems, species, and ways of life. Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone (2012) describe it as an existential grief that arises from the awareness of planetary decline. In literary studies, however, the application of “climate grief” remains sparse, with most analyses still privileging themes of apocalypse or resilience.

Climate grief offers a particularly productive framework for South Asian literature because it bridges ecological and personal trauma. Floods are not just infrastructural disasters; they are intimate ruptures—loss of homes, family graves, ancestral lands. Droughts are not abstract meteorological phenomena but lived experiences of hunger, debt, and despair that drive farmers to suicide. Smog in Delhi is not merely pollution statistics but the suffocation of children’s lungs, altering their everyday existence. By analyzing fiction through the lens of climate grief, we can see how novels register both the material and emotional consequences of ecological collapse.

### **The Texts Under Study: Critical Reception**

#### **1. *River of Flesh and Other Stories* (ed. Ruchira Gupta)**

This anthology is primarily recognized as a collection about gender, prostitution, and marginality, yet it includes narratives that implicitly or explicitly engage with displacement caused by ecological crises. Scholars such as Vrinda Marwah (2016) have analyzed the anthology in terms of feminist resistance, but its environmental subtexts remain unexamined. Stories of migration, exploitation, and survival often hinge on ecological precarity—floods displacing communities, droughts forcing rural populations into urban vulnerability. The absence of ecocritical readings here signals a key research gap: how gendered exploitation intersects with environmental displacement to produce layered grief.

#### **2. *The Wandering Falcon* (Jamil Ahmad)**

Although published earlier (2011) but gaining renewed relevance in the 2015–2025 frame due to ecological readings, Ahmad’s novel is often situated within discussions of tribal identity, borders, and cultural liminality (Ahmed, 2012; Shamsie, 2015). Critics emphasize its anthropological lens on the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan. However, few scholars have foregrounded its ecological

dimensions: the harsh landscapes, nomadic displacement, and the fragility of human life in extreme climates. Reading the novel through ecocriticism reveals how the environment is not a passive backdrop but an active force shaping community survival and grief.

### **3. *The Runaways* (Fatima Bhutto)**

Bhutto's novel has been primarily studied in terms of radicalization, globalization, and youth alienation (Bhattacharya, 2019; Zaidi, 2020). Yet, beneath these themes run ecological undercurrents: resource conflicts, dispossession, and the climate-induced precarity that drives disillusionment. The desert landscapes, migration patterns, and scarcity of water in the narrative encode a subtle but potent ecological grief. Critics have so far overlooked these undercurrents, treating the novel solely as a political or social commentary. An ecocritical lens would illuminate how climate anxieties are entangled with broader questions of belonging and violence.

### **Identifying the Research Gap**

From this survey, several gaps become evident:

- 1. Absence of climate grief in South Asian literary criticism.** While ecocriticism is growing, most work emphasizes political economy and postcolonial development rather than affective grief or trauma.
- 2. Limited attention to South Asian Anglophone fiction (2015–2025).** The novels under study remain underexplored in ecocritical frameworks, especially regarding floods, droughts, and displacement.
- 3. Neglect of interdisciplinary frameworks.** Trauma theory, widely applied to war and Partition, has not been mobilized to read ecological trauma, despite its relevance in capturing grief and displacement.
- 4. Peripheral positioning of South Asian texts.** In global climate fiction studies, South Asian novels are either marginalized or treated as supplementary rather than central to the discourse.

This research fills these gaps by foregrounding climate grief as an analytical category, situating South Asian fiction not as peripheral but as central to understanding the lived experience of the climate crisis.

### **Theoretical / Conceptual Framework**

The study adopts an interdisciplinary framework combining **ecocriticism** and **trauma**

studies.

- **Ecocriticism** provides tools to analyze the representation of ecological catastrophe, drawing on Buell's concept of "toxic discourse," Heise's attention to planetary scale, and Nixon's "slow violence." It allows us to see how floods, droughts, and displacement are narrativized not only as events but as structural conditions shaping human and nonhuman lives.
- **Trauma studies** complements this by theorizing grief as both personal and collective. Cathy Caruth's (1996) notion of trauma as an unclaimed experience, and Dominick LaCapra's (2001) distinction between "acting out" and "working through," help trace how climate grief manifests in fiction—not always directly articulated but often embedded in silences, absences, or fragmented narratives.

By combining these frameworks, the study proposes that climate grief in South Asian fiction is both ecological (loss of land, ecosystems, and resources) and personal (mourning, displacement, psychic rupture). This dual approach avoids the pitfalls of treating ecological disaster as mere metaphor or reducing it to policy critique, instead capturing its affective depth.

In short, existing scholarship has laid the groundwork for understanding South Asian literature through ecocriticism and postcolonial theory but has not sufficiently addressed the emotional and existential dimensions of climate catastrophe. Global studies on climate fiction often marginalize South Asian texts, while local scholarship rarely foregrounds climate grief as an interpretive framework. By bringing together ecocriticism and trauma studies, this research addresses these gaps, offering an original contribution to both literary and environmental humanities. It positions South Asian Anglophone novels from 2015–2025 as crucial cultural texts that translate ecological disaster into narratives of grief, displacement, and survival, thereby reshaping how we read both literature and the climate crisis.

### **Research Methodology**

The methodological framework for this study is designed to interrogate how South Asian Anglophone novels (2015–2025) represent climate grief through depictions of floods, droughts, and displacement. The intention is not only to map the narrative strategies by which writers transform ecological catastrophe into personal loss, but

also to assess the larger cultural work such fiction performs within societies where climate change is an immediate, lived reality. Methodology in literary research is as much about the lens as the object: the study draws from **ecocriticism**, to foreground the entanglement of human and non-human systems, and **trauma studies**, to examine grief as both an ecological and a personal phenomenon. The following sections clarify the nature of the study, justify text selection, outline the analytical approach, and articulate the critical frameworks employed.

### **Nature of the Study**

This study is qualitative, interpretive, and comparative. It does not seek to quantify literary representations but rather to examine how they signify, resist, and reshape meanings around ecological disaster. Climate grief in literature cannot be measured through statistics but must be understood through texture, metaphor, and affect—qualities that demand a close textual engagement.

At the same time, the study acknowledges that climate fiction in South Asia is not monolithic. Novels produced in Pakistan and India over the past decade vary significantly in tone, genre, and focus: some foreground environmental catastrophe explicitly, others treat it obliquely as background or allegory. Hence, a comparative dimension is essential, allowing the research to track convergences (shared anxieties about floods, water scarcity, and displacement) and divergences (national, regional, or cultural inflections in grief).

This approach situates the research at the intersection of literary studies, environmental humanities, and cultural analysis. The study is not purely ecocritical, nor exclusively trauma-centered, but attempts a dialogic methodology that attends to the inseparability of ecological collapse and affective experience.

### **Selection of Texts**

The chosen texts reflect both **temporal relevance** (novels published or circulated between 2015–2025) and **regional specificity** (Pakistan and India as epicenters of climate vulnerability). Three works are central:

1. **River of Flesh and Other Stories**, edited by Ruchira Gupta – While primarily a collection addressing gender and marginality, several stories gesture toward ecological displacement. This text highlights how climate change intersects with social inequities such as caste, class, and gender, foregrounding the

multidimensionality of grief.

2. **The Wandering Falcon** by Jamil Ahmad – Though peripheral to climate fiction in a narrow sense, this novel's rendering of fragile ecological landscapes and nomadic displacements provides a valuable counterpoint. Its engagement with borders, drought-prone terrains, and precarious livelihoods makes it a precursor to contemporary narratives of ecological loss.
3. **The Runaways** by Fatima Bhutto – A novel where climate catastrophe is not overt but encoded in resource conflicts, urban suffocation, and the dislocation of youth. Its subtle ecological undertones are instructive in exploring how climate grief often functions as an undercurrent rather than a headline.

The selection is therefore deliberately heterogeneous. Rather than choosing only “climate novels,” the corpus demonstrates the varied ways in which ecological crises are absorbed into fiction: as background atmosphere, metaphorical register, or direct thematic concern. This variety also prevents the study from collapsing into environmental determinism, instead emphasizing literature's complex mediation of climate realities.

### **Analytical Approach**

The analysis will employ **close reading** as the primary method, attending to imagery, metaphors, narrative voice, and plot structures that reveal how grief and ecological catastrophe are framed. For instance, floods may be represented as natural inevitabilities or as man-made disasters exacerbated by governance failures; the narrative positioning of such events alters how grief is articulated.

Alongside close reading, **thematic analysis** will identify recurrent motifs across texts—water as both life and destruction, drought as both absence and silence, displacement as both exile and survival. These themes will be compared across novels to assess how different writers negotiate shared climate anxieties.

**Discourse analysis** will also be employed, situating literary narratives within larger cultural and political discourses about climate change in South Asia. For instance, how does the 2022 Pakistan flood echo within fictional depictions of watery devastation? How do Indian narratives of drought or smog echo governmental or media framings of crisis? Literature here is not isolated but dialogic, engaging with policy debates, public memory, and activist discourses.

Finally, **intertextuality** will be considered, particularly how South Asian novels resonate with global climate fiction while also resisting its tropes. The study will explore whether South Asian writers challenge the dystopian clichés prevalent in Western climate fiction, instead crafting narratives grounded in lived, historical, and cultural contexts.

### **Justification for Framework**

The adoption of **ecocriticism** is central because it shifts analysis from purely anthropocentric grief to an ecological grief that recognizes the loss of landscapes, non-human actors, and collective habitats. Climate change in South Asia is not just about human suffering but about rivers altering courses, species disappearing, and agriculture collapsing. Ecocriticism allows these dimensions to surface within literary interpretation.

However, ecocriticism alone risks flattening grief into abstract “environmental concern.” Hence the integration of **trauma studies**, which interprets grief as embodied, affective, and historically situated. Trauma studies foregrounds the psychic dimensions of ecological loss—how floods become narratives of mourning, how drought manifests as silence, how displacement ruptures identity. This dual lens ensures the research captures both the structural (ecological collapse) and the intimate (personal sorrow).

The justification also lies in the urgency of the South Asian context. Pakistan’s 2022 floods displaced over 30 million people; India faces recurrent droughts, deadly heatwaves, and toxic air crises. These events demand critical engagement not only from environmental sciences but from literature, which provides unique access to the affective registers of climate crisis. The chosen framework positions literature as both archive and witness, a medium that translates catastrophe into human and cultural meaning.

### **Reflexivity and Limitations**

The methodology recognizes its limitations. It privileges Anglophone fiction, which may underrepresent vernacular responses to climate grief. It focuses on a limited set of novels, meaning its findings are illustrative rather than exhaustive. Moreover, the integration of ecocriticism and trauma studies risks stretching both frameworks; ecocriticism may not always account for psychological nuance, while trauma theory is

not inherently ecological. Nevertheless, the synthesis is necessary to illuminate the complex entanglement of grief, ecology, and narrative in South Asian fiction.

The methodological choices—qualitative design, selective corpus, and dual critical frameworks—are guided by the belief that climate grief is not only an ecological reality but also a cultural and literary construction. By reading South Asian Anglophone novels through ecocritical and trauma-oriented lenses, the study seeks to capture the layered ways fiction encodes floods, droughts, and displacement. Ultimately, this methodology treats literature not as a passive reflection of climate disaster but as an active participant in shaping how societies imagine, grieve, and survive ecological collapse.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

This section applies an ecocritical + trauma-studies lens to the selected South Asian Anglophone texts (2015–2025) to show how fiction translates environmental catastrophe into affective and social narratives of loss. I read these novels together as narratively and ethically engaged responses to material precarity: *The Wandering Falcon* frames ecological vulnerability through the slow erosion of nomadic lifeways and landscape, *The Runaways* encodes scarcity and displacement as structuring social anxieties that ease paths toward radical responses, and *River of Flesh and Other Stories* (the anthology) offers episodic, intimate accounts of dispossession that—when read ecocritically—reveal the social infrastructures that magnify climate suffering. This comparative reading treats climate grief both as **situated feeling** (eco-grief, solastalgia) and as **narrative practice** (how texts make loss legible through image, voice, and form). The argument proceeds through close readings, supported by short quotations and by placing the books in conversation with recent scholarship on ecological grief and the concrete record of climate catastrophe in Pakistan and India.

#### **1. Landscape as witness and slow grief: *The Wandering Falcon***

Jamil Ahmad's *The Wandering Falcon* repeatedly stages environment not as inert backdrop but as moral and material interlocutor. Critics have long noticed Ahmad's attention to “austere beauty and harshness” of the borderlands; the book's tonal insistence is on endurance under environmental strictures rather than spectacular catastrophe.

Two formal features of Ahmad's storytelling are crucial for an ecocritical reading.

First, his prose often naturalizes loss through simile and vegetal temporality: “Hope does not die like an animal – quick and sudden. It is more like a plant, which slowly withers away.” That withering metaphor reframes grief as a time-thick process, not a single trauma event; environmental damage and social impoverishment are co-temporal—slow, cumulative, and assimilated into everyday life.

Second, Ahmad’s narrative disperses agency across humans, livestock, and terrain. Scenes where a family’s survival depends on “good weather” or where a shepherd’s fate is determined by the thinness of soil register climate vulnerability as livelihood fragility. In such moments the text enacts ecological grief by focusing on the gradual erosion of practices and knowledges—the loss of a way of living that cannot be replaced by relief packages or rhetoric. Critics who treat *Wandering Falcon* primarily as ethnographic storytelling (the “tribal chronicle”) miss how this ethnography is also a mourning: the book documents cultural forms being undermined by structural pressures (state encroachment, market forces, environmental precarity). My contention extends these readings: Ahmad’s landscape passages instantiate a melancholic witnessing—characters register the ineffable thinning of their world through small but accumulating losses (a dry well, a pasture reduced). In formal terms, the novel’s episodic structure—fragmented lives, sudden absences—mimics the psychodynamics of ecological grief, where loss is often sensed indirectly, as a decline in possible futures rather than as one headline event.

## **2. Everyday scarcity, eco-anxiety, and social collapse: *The Runaways***

Fatima Bhutto’s *The Runaways* is most commonly read as a novel about radicalization and social exclusion, but recent scholarship persuasively argues that the book also performs an **eco-anxious diagnosis**—environmental scarcity and infrastructural precarity are woven through the social conditions that produce despair and dislocation. A 2025 ecocritical study frames Bhutto’s novel precisely as a text where “eco-anxiety” and climate colonial legacies shape subjectivity; this reading helps us see how material scarcity (water, fuel, safe housing) appears as a recurring background factor that conditions choices and emotional states.

Bhutto’s prose gestures to quotidian shortages with striking economy: short lines such as “We need some gas to cook with” condense political economy into a domestic sentence. That sentence indexes how ecological scarcity is lived in the

kitchen, not only in policy reports—the intimate spatiality of deprivation is crucial for understanding climate grief as an intergenerational affect. Likewise, lines like “I don’t belong anywhere” register psychic displacement not merely as nationalism’s failure but as an embodied response to place-loss and dispossession. These moments highlight Bhutto’s technique: she makes structural scarcity legible through interiority and quotidian detail, turning macro-ecological failures into micro-narratives of grief and longing.

Where Bhutto’s novel contributes beyond most Western climate fiction is in the linkage between *infrastructural injustice* and psychological breakdown. The protagonists’ disaffection is not merely existential; it is routed through material infrastructures—dilapidated housing, contaminated air, depleted resources—that make certain futures unlivable. Such depiction aligns with theories of ecological grief that stress the psycho-social consequences of experienced loss as much as anticipatory anxiety. Reading *The Runaways* through trauma studies highlights narrative features such as fragmentation, repetitive dreams, and moral numbing—symptoms that map onto both personal grief and collective eco-trauma. Engaging with Bhutto’s critics, I agree with readings that emphasize social causes of radicalization; I add that climate-inflected scarcity is a structural layer that makes social breakdown narratively plausible and affectively legible.

### **3. Episodic dispossession and intersectional vulnerability: *River of Flesh and Other Stories***

Ruchira Gupta’s *River of Flesh* is an anthology focused on trafficked and prostituted women. At first glance its connection to climate themes is indirect. But read ecocritically, the stories reveal how social marginality and environmental precarity form compounding vectors of loss. The anthology’s recurring tableau—women compelled by hunger, migration, family collapse—maps onto conditions that climate disasters exacerbate: loss of crops, broken livelihoods, forced mobility. The book’s insistence on the body as repository of experience (“The mother in her was eager to share her grief...”) links personal sorrow to socio-ecological contexts.

Several stories in the collection foreground rivers, migration routes, and marketplaces—spaces that become more precarious in flood or drought. When a woman is forced to sell her labour or her freedom, that coercion often occurs against a

backdrop of poverty produced in part by environmental stress. Thus, the anthology helps us see climate grief as intersectional: it compounds gendered violence and economic exploitation. By attending to these intersections, readers can trace how ecological shocks are redistributed along existing hierarchies—an insight that expands trauma studies' focus beyond individual PTSD toward structural and collective forms of sorrow. I therefore interpret *River of Flesh* as an important counter-archive: it records how environmental precarity intensifies intimate tragedies and how grief circulates through bodies, communities, and institutions.

4. Comparative patterns: framing, temporality, and the conversion of catastrophe into personal loss

Across the three texts, three comparative patterns surface that illuminate how fiction converts ecological disaster into personal and social grief.

**a. Framing: background, metaphor, and direct subject.**

- *Wandering Falcon* treats environmental change as background that gradually undermines way of life—landscape functions as witness and slow antagonist.
- *The Runaways* uses ecological scarcity as a metaphor and structural condition that intensifies social precarity; while it rarely stages a named climate event, it renders environment as a formative logic of deprivation.
- *River of Flesh* contains episodic scenes where ecological precarity is tacit—climate does not dominate plots but shapes the socioeconomic field in which violence and trafficking occur.

**b. Temporality: slow withering vs abrupt rupture.**

Ahmad's "plant" metaphor (slow withering) contrasts with the sudden, catastrophic temporality associated with floods and cyclones. Bhutto's novel mediates both: chronic deprivation punctuated by eruptive social breakdowns. The anthology's episodic time maps a recurring, normalized loss—grief as continuing condition.

**c. The narrative mechanics of grief (how disaster becomes personal).**

Concretely, novels convert ecological collapse into personal loss through: (1) bodily imagery (malnutrition, disease, exhausted animals), (2) memory and repetition (dream sequences, returned motifs of ruined homesteads), (3) displaced focalization (narrators who report loss from outside the disaster zone), and (4) social relational breakdown (family migration, neighbor antagonism). Trauma studies help explain

why stylistic fragmentation—chopped chronology, abrupt sentence endings, repeated images—feels like grief on the page: such techniques simulate the intrusion of irrecoverable loss into language and identity. Ecocritical readings show that when non-human losses (rivers, animals, fields) are narrated alongside human suffering, the text expands grief’s referent beyond individual bereavement to include collective and habitat-scale mourning.

### **5. Engagement with Critics and Contribution to Scholarship**

Existing criticism of these texts rightly situates them in political and social registers—Ahmad for borderland ethnography, Bhutto for radicalization narratives, Gupta’s anthology for gendered violence. Recent ecocritical work (e.g., studies that specifically read *The Runaways* through eco-anxiety and climate colonialism) pushes these readings forward by foregrounding environmental structurality. I align with those scholars and argue further: attending to *narrative affect* (how grief is felt on the page) reveals that South Asian Anglophone fiction often represents climate loss not as spectacle (apocalyptic set-pieces) but as *ambient precarity*—a slow, infrastructural degradation that reorganizes intimate life. This reframing matters because it captures how most people around the world actually experience climate change: as compounded scarcity, displacement risk, and identity erosion rather than as cinematic disaster.

At the same time, I push back against a teleological account that would label every instance of poverty in fiction as “climate fiction.” Not all social suffering is reducible to environmental causality; the methodological move here is to **trace interaction**—how climate stressors intensify existing harms and become narratively legible as grief. This avoids environmental determinism while insisting on the real ways climate phenomena reconfigure social worlds.

### **6. Significance, Limitations, and Directions**

This analysis suggests a set of modest but concrete interventions for climate and literary studies. First, it demonstrates that **climate grief in South Asian Anglophone fiction (2015–2025)** often appears indirectly—encoded in scarcity, displacement, and landscape erosion—rather than as overt catastrophe. Second, it proposes that trauma studies and ecocriticism produce complementary diagnostic tools: trauma theory maps affective structures; ecocriticism attends to non-human loss and material causality.

Third, by linking textual strategies (fragmentation, vegetal temporality, quotidian scarcity) to social histories (colonial extraction, infrastructural neglect) the analysis provides a vocabulary—*ambient ecological melancholia, dispositional displacement*—for future work.

**Limitations:** The corpus is Anglophone and selective; vernacular literatures, visual cultures, and oral testimonies will have distinct ways of registering climate grief. Empirical linkage between particular climate events (e.g., Pakistan's 2022 floods, which affected some 33 million people and displaced nearly 8 million) and fictional production remains a promising but methodologically delicate area: correlation does not imply direct causation, but such events create cultural conditions that shape narrative possibility.

In short, reading *The Wandering Falcon*, *The Runaways*, and *River of Flesh* together through ecocritical and trauma lenses reveals a pattern: South Asian Anglophone fiction often stages climate grief as an ambient, intersectional condition—less as dramatic apocalypse than as slow dispossession that reorganizes bodies, families, and moral worlds. Literature does two things particularly well here: it makes visible the interior textures of loss (how people feel and remember) and it maps how structural forces—state neglect, economic extraction, historical inequalities—mediate both environmental harm and emotional response. Recognizing these narrative strategies helps scholars and readers appreciate how novels can witness, archive, and sometimes even mobilize grief in contexts where ecological collapse is already a lived, daily reality. If climate grief in literature is to be taken seriously, literary criticism must continue to combine affective attention with structural analysis—reading bodies and landscapes together, and allowing grief to be a lens onto injustice as well as an emotion to be registered.

### **Conclusion**

This study set out to examine how South Asian Anglophone novels published between 2015 and 2025 frame ecological disasters—whether as background, metaphor, or direct subject—and how such fiction translates climate catastrophe into personal and collective grief. Through ecocritical and trauma studies approaches, the analysis focused on Jamil Ahmad's *The Wandering Falcon*, Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways*, and the anthology *River of Flesh and Other Stories* edited by Ruchira Gupta.

Together, these texts illuminate the manifold ways in which climate change is imagined and mourned in contemporary South Asian literature.

The findings suggest that **climate grief in South Asian fiction is rarely dramatized through spectacular apocalyptic events**—a common trope in Western climate fiction—but rather is depicted as **ambient, slow-moving, and intersectional**. In Ahmad’s *The Wandering Falcon*, grief is rendered through the gradual erosion of nomadic cultures and landscapes, where environmental hardship appears not as a sudden catastrophe but as a long withering away of hope and livelihood. Bhutto’s *The Runaways* encodes ecological anxiety in the quotidian details of urban scarcity—shortages of fuel, clean air, and safe housing—that corrode belonging and push characters toward despair and radicalization. Meanwhile, *River of Flesh* demonstrates how ecological precarity amplifies existing vulnerabilities, particularly for women and marginalized communities, showing how floods, droughts, and displacement intersect with structures of gendered violence and poverty.

These readings answer the central research questions by demonstrating that ecological disasters in South Asian Anglophone fiction function simultaneously as **background conditions, narrative metaphors, and direct subjects**, depending on the text. Crucially, the novels translate catastrophe into **personal and affective registers**: grief becomes legible through fractured families, dislocated identities, and disrupted lifeways. In this sense, fiction offers an archive of what it means to live amid climate change—not only in the statistical scale of disaster reports, but in the intimate texture of everyday sorrow and survival.

The originality of this study lies in its dual-framework approach. By integrating **ecocriticism** with **trauma studies**, the research illuminates how climate grief is both ecological (loss of landscapes, habitats, and infrastructures) and psychological (disorientation, mourning, and despair). This synthesis allows us to see climate grief not only as a matter of environmental consciousness but also as a lived affective condition that shapes identities, relationships, and communities. Furthermore, by reading texts not usually categorized as “climate fiction”—such as Ahmad’s borderland narratives or Gupta’s gendered stories—this study expands the boundaries of what counts as climate literature, showing that ecological grief often circulates in oblique or intersecting forms rather than as explicit environmental

narrative.

The contribution of this study is therefore twofold: it demonstrates the distinctive ways South Asian fiction represents climate grief, and it provides a critical vocabulary for understanding grief as an ecological as well as personal phenomenon. In doing so, it challenges the dominance of Western apocalyptic imaginaries in climate fiction and foregrounds the more diffuse, uneven, and socially embedded ways climate change is experienced in Pakistan and India. At the same time, the research acknowledges its limitations. By focusing on Anglophone fiction, it excludes the rich archive of vernacular literatures that may register climate grief in different idioms. Moreover, while the chosen texts highlight important narrative strategies, a broader corpus would further clarify whether these patterns recur across the region's literary output.

Future research might therefore expand the scope by examining vernacular literatures, oral traditions, or visual narratives (such as film or graphic fiction) to trace how climate grief circulates beyond Anglophone forms. Comparative studies across South Asia—bringing together Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, and Sri Lankan texts—would also enrich understanding of how regional variations in climate vulnerability shape literary responses. Finally, further work could integrate empirical perspectives from anthropology or sociology to examine how fictional grief resonates with lived testimonies of displaced and marginalized communities.

In conclusion, South Asian Anglophone fiction between 2015 and 2025 offers a powerful, affectively charged record of what it means to live through climate collapse. By narrating grief as both ecological and personal, these novels help us grasp not only the enormity of climate change but also its intimate, human scale—how floods, droughts, and displacement are experienced as sorrow, dislocation, and the slow erosion of home. In giving form to grief, literature does not merely reflect catastrophe; it humanizes it, rendering ecological loss legible as cultural memory, collective mourning, and a call for justice.

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