

Representing Eco-Anxiety in Contemporary English Fiction: An Ecocritical Study of Novels Published Between 2020 and 2023

Zoha Haseeb^{1,*} and Syd Moin Shah Bukhari²

¹MPhil English Literature, Kinnaird College for Women University, Lahore, Pakistan

²MPhil English Linguistics, The Islamia University, Bahawalpur, Pakistan

*Corresponding author: Zoha Haseeb (zoihaseeb@gmail.com)

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ABSTRACT

The increasing severity of climate change has transformed eco-anxiety into one of the defining emotional and cultural experiences of the twenty-first century. While eco-anxiety has received considerable attention in psychology, environmental studies, and climate communication, its literary representation in contemporary English fiction remains comparatively underexplored. Existing literary scholarship has primarily focused on climate fiction (cli-fi) as a genre, with limited attention to the narrative and aesthetic strategies through which recent novels portray eco-anxiety as an emotional, ethical, and ecological condition.

This study investigates how English novels published between 2020 and 2023 represent eco-anxiety through characterization, narrative voice, symbolism, and depictions of human–nature relationships. Guided by ecocritical theory and affect theory, the study employs qualitative critical analysis of selected contemporary novels to examine the ways climate-related fear, uncertainty, ecological grief, and resilience are constructed within literary narratives. The study further explores how these representations challenge anthropocentric worldviews and encourage ecological consciousness among readers.

The research contributes to contemporary literary and environmental humanities by addressing the limited scholarship on eco-anxiety as a central literary motif in post-2020 English fiction. It also expands current ecocritical discussions by demonstrating how literature not only reflects the psychological consequences of climate change but also imagines alternative ecological futures and forms of environmental hope.

Keywords: Eco-Anxiety; Ecocriticism; Contemporary English Fiction; Climate Fiction (Cli-Fi); Environmental Humanities; Affect Theory; Climate Change Literature

1. Introduction

Climate change is not just a new projection or far-off policy discussion, but a personal emotional state. The awareness that environmental damage creates unique emotional responses has coalesced into the concept of eco-anxiety, which was even coined by the American Psychological Association as "chronic fear of environmental doom". New research on environmental psychology has sought to illuminate and differentiate this affect, suggesting that eco-anxiety is a spectrum of emotions, from worry and dread, to grief and guilt, to motivating concern (Pihkala, 2020; Kurth & Pihkala, 2022). Various instruments have tried to capture its cognitive and functional aspects, such as the Climate Change Anxiety Scale (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020), and environmental philosophy has provided other concepts, including solastalgia, the anguish caused by an unwanted change in an individual's landscape (Albrecht et al., 2007). These changes combined create a new and important frame of feeling, that of eco-anxiety, for the century we're living in.



In his famous essay, Amitav Ghosh (2016) has stated that the realist novel, which is so attached to the individual and the probable, has been unable to portray the improbable violence and immense scales of the Anthropocene. Over the last ten years, however, a proliferation of fiction has tried to do just that, under the loose term of climate fiction (or cli-fi, as Trexler (2015) and Johns-Putra (2016) call it), with this fiction gathered together under the loose umbrella of climate fiction. Much of this fiction doesn't just simply describe floods, droughts and extinctions, it brings them to life with their feeling, their fear and their mourning. The contemporary novel is thus a laboratory for the emotional life of ecological crisis in which it is used.

Yet, in spite of this surge, literary study has tended to focus on the level of genre, plot, and ideology, while still paying less attention to eco-anxiety as a distinct feeling that novels deliberately produce in their formal construction. The freshness of the subject matter intensifies the issue: a recent crop of literary novels from 2020 onward pulls ecological emotion to the fore as its focus, while articles from the previous generation of books like Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* (2012) or Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018) gravitate towards the earlier works. This study aims to fill that gap. The term English fiction, used here in its inclusive, disciplinary sense, namely fiction written in the English language, or Anglophone fiction, should be noted, in contrast to fiction produced only in England; this usage mirrors that of ecocritical and environmental-humanities scholarship and enables the corpus to capture the global, transnational nature of the modern climate novel.

Therefore, the present article examines the emergence of novels published between the years 2020–2023, addressing two main goals: first, understanding the manifestation of eco-anxiety in novels; second, examining how novels in this timeframe represent eco-anxiety. The first aim is to explore the role of these novels in making eco-anxiety apparent in terms of characters, narrative voice, symbolism, and the portrayal of human–nature relation in these texts, while looking for narrative and aesthetic strategies that render such affect. The second goal is to examine the ways in which this literary engagement is questioning anthropocentric worldviews and transcending fear to ecological awareness, resilience, and environmental hope.

The study is guided by three research questions which are aimed at achieving these objectives. First, how do these novels build eco-anxiety in terms of the techniques of characterization, narration, and symbolism, in addition to the portrayal of human–nature relationships? Second, how is this affect mediated by the narrative and aesthetic means employed, and what does it do in response to the representational challenges Ghosh mentioned? Third, how do the texts transcend fear for ecological awareness, resilience, or environmental hope? A qualitative, ecocritical close reading of eight contemporary novels is used to answer these questions in the study.

This enquiry has two important implications. It is a book that expands the limited amount of criticism available for very new literary fiction, and that provides long-term readings of works never fully examined from an ecocritical perspective. In theory, it puts the new and ever more precise vocabulary of eco-emotion research into conversation with affective ecocriticism, demonstrating the ways in which literary form does emotional as well as representational work. In the remainder of the article, the review section places the study in context, the methodology section outlines the design of the corpus, the framework of the study and the procedure used for analysing the patterns, and the results section presents the patterns found in the corpus, while the discussion and conclusion section outlines the implication and limitation of the results.

2. Literature Review

The studies on ecoanxiety have evolved significantly from 2019 to 2026. Panu Pihkala (2020) analysed the definitions of eco-anxiety and climate anxiety that came from various disciplines, and concluded that uncertainty, unpredictability and uncontrollability play a key role in the experience. On this, Pihkala (2022) developed a taxonomy of climate emotions that pinpoints dozens of interconnected emotions such as anxiety, grief, guilt, anger, and hope, and Kurth and Pihkala (2022) argued that eco-anxiety is not a single diagnosis, but rather a cluster of overlapping emotions. Empirical psychology has also continued to develop and validate new instruments for assessing climate change anxiety, such as the Climate Change Anxiety Scale (CCAS) developed and validated by Clayton and Karazsia (2020), which distinguishes between cognitive-emotional impairment and functional impairment, and later, the reviews consolidated the concept of eco-anxiety as a valid and multidimensional field of study (Orrù & Mannarini, 2024). This compendium provides much more specific language to the literary scholar than the more simplistic idea of climate fear that was around earlier.

The second, coming to ecocriticism, is the affective turn in ecocriticism. Early ecocriticism had focused on representation of place and nonhuman nature, whereas more recent work has centered on the role of emotion and embodiment in environmental meaning-making. In *Affective Ecocriticism* (Bladow & Ladino, 2018), we extended affect theory, which is thematized in Sara Ahmed's (2014) discussion of the cultural and political work done by emotions, into environmental studies to account for the affective dimensions of environmental texts and how they work on the reader. This affective ecocriticism is important because it offers the necessary link for the current research, by viewing eco-anxiety as a feeling that a novel creates and molds in their formal decisions.

There has also been some progress in scholarship regarding climate fiction. In 2018, Schneider-Mayerson's empirical survey of cli-fi readers showed that this fiction can raise concerns but can also be a source of despair, while Johns-Putra (2016) charted the rise of cli-fi, climate theatre and ecopoetry as subjects of literary research. This sector has grown and evolved in the 2020s. In her book *Ecoprecarity in Speculative Fiction: Narrative and the Uneven Vulnerability of Environmental Collapse*, Höglund (2020) studied ecoprecarity in speculative fiction, with a particular focus on the role of narrative in signaling the uneven vulnerability that stems from environmental collapse. Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr (2023) summarized the field of climate-change literacy and its interdisciplinary nature, bringing together narrative, emotion and environmental education, while Hoydis (2024) read Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) as a storytelling and a multispecies migration. The most recent work to be introduced here is Bartosch (2025), who claimed that the usefulness of cli-fi is not so much in direct persuasion as in its ability to engage in 'cultural future-making' and called for a transmedial, non-Western approach to overcome the representational limitations of the previous research.

In sum, this recent scholarship clarifies three points: eco-anxiety is a different, measurable, and culturally consequential emotion; ecocriticism has newly acquired the theoretical resources to engage emotion as formally produced; and cli-fi is a rich and dynamic literary field. What is relatively scarce, though, is sustained analysis which combines the fine-grained taxonomies of eco-emotions with close reading of very recent literary fiction. Previous literary research on cli-fi has focused on genre definition, narrative form, eco-anxieties' ethics and political agency, while eco-anxiety studies have been confined to the social sciences, mostly investigating populations instead of texts. The two dialogues haven't yet been fully connected at the point of the individual literary work.

This difference is most noticeable for novels published since 2020. A fairly consistent group of books—*The Overstory* (Powers), *Flight Behavior* (Kingsolver), *Gun Island* (Ghosh)—continues to circle the orbit of criticism, while the unique group of books that has emerged since 2020 are, as of this writing, far less explored due to their novelty. Of these more recent novels, several stand out for explicitly placing eco-anxiety at the heart of the narrative, and for the experimentation with form, whether Offill's is fragmentary or Beuman's is satirical or Nagamatsu's is a story-cycle. Any criticism to them needs to be able to identify which sorts of ecological feeling they enact, and how they enact it.

This research falls right at that crossroads. It combines and stretches the differentiated eco-emotion lexicon of Pihkala, Clayton and Albrecht with the interpretive commitments of affective ecocriticism and uses the new lexicon to analyse eight novels from 2020 to 2023. In this way it does not supplant social-scientific descriptions of eco-anxiety but does demonstrate its literary contribution to an understanding of ecological emotion, in terms of the shape of literary voice, structure and symbol.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study uses qualitative research methodology in an interpretive approach with a focus on ecocriticism and applying the concept of affect theory. The study is non-empirical in the social-scientific sense since it does not instrument nor collect data from the reader, but instead conducts systematic close reading with thematic analysis, focusing on meaning and emotion of literary texts. In this way, the research questions can be taken up: What is constructed in the narrative of eco-anxiety? This is a question that can only be answered by careful reading of language, form, and figuration. The design is relatively hermeneutic in that it aims to explore the process of interpretation as a grounded, evidence-based and iterative practice, not an impressionistic one.

3.2 Corpus Selection

Eight novels were selected using purposive sampling based on four criteria: a first novel published between 2020 and 2023, as per the study window; written in the English language (Anglophone fiction); the importance of the

climate crisis and/or the emotion of the environment to the novel, not just as backdrop; and breadth in terms of narrative form, geography, and tone to capture a range of strategies rather than a template. It's the work of Jenny Offill (*Weather*, 2020), Lydia Millet (*A Children's Bible*, 2020), Diane Cook (*The New Wilderness*, 2020), Kim Stanley Robinson (*The Ministry for the Future*, 2020), Richard Powers (*Bewilderment*, 2021), Sequoia Nagamatsu (*How High We Go in the Dark*, 2022), Ned Beaman (*Venomous Lumpsucker*, 2022), and Eleanor Catton (*Birnam Wood*, 2023). The corpus was deliberately structured to combine fragmentary literary realism, near-future extrapolation, satire and eco-thriller, and a range of writers from across the U.S., U.K. and New Zealand, in order that findings would not be an artefact of a single mode or national tradition.

3.3 Theoretical and Analytical Framework

The analytical framework relies on triangulation of three lines of thinking. It carries with it a commitment to reading texts in relation to the nonhuman world, and to questioning anthropocentrism, as well as the particular problem of representing planetary scale processes in narrative, as begins to be the case in ecocriticism (Ghosh, 2016; Trexler, 2015; Johns-Putra, 2016). The idea that emotional experiences are culturally constructed and that literary form is active in producing feeling is borrowed from affect theory and affective ecocriticism (Ahmed, 2014; Bladow & Ladino, 2018). It is an ecological vocabulary of eco-emotion, derived from eco-emotion research (Pihkala, 2020; Clayton & Karazsia 2020; Albrecht et al., 2007). These were combined to formulate a coding rubric of six recurring dimensions of eco-anxiety: anticipatory dread, or future-oriented fear; ecological grief, mourning of species, places, and futures; solastalgia, distress at the transformation of cherished home environment; guilt and complicity, moral dimension of the sense of responsibility; intimations of meaninglessness, the existential dimension of anxiety; and resilience and hope, the adaptive dimension in which anxiety is turned into care and action.

3.4 Coding and Analytic Procedure

The analysis went through the following stages summarized in Fig. 1. The novels were initially read carefully in order to examine the narrative voice, structure, symbolism and human-nature relationship found in each. Those passages that evoked or enacted ecological emotion were then coded within the six dimensions rubric, as to the emotion and as to how form created emotion. The iterative nature of coding was reflected in the rereading and recoding of previous texts, where emerging patterns were read and recoded to ensure consistency, as can be seen in the feedback loop in the diagram. The coded material was then compared across the corpus, in a stage of cross-textual synthesis, leading to the identification of dominant and secondary dimensions for each work, and the identification of shared strategies. A final interpretive stage related these patterns back to the research questions and to the theoretical framework.

3.5 Scope and Limitations

There are several restrictions on this design and it is recognized explicitly. The corpus is limited and selected; therefore the results are not statistically generalisable, but represent tendencies within a set of important texts not the entire text field of post-2020 fiction. It is a study in and of interpretation, and other readers may have given different readings to the passages, but the explicit rubric and the cross-textual procedure is designed to discipline that subjectivity. A study of Anglophone fiction, as stated in the scope of the study, does not include the many climate novels that were written in other languages, and the study does not include any direct evidence of how readers in reality react to the novels, which would require the empirical reader-response methods used elsewhere in the field. These boundaries not only do not threaten the study but also provide clear directions to future research.

4. Results and Findings

When applied to the corpus, the six-dimensional rubric was able to provide a clear picture: eco-anxiety in these novels is always multidimensional, is seldomly monodimensional, and is always performed rather than simply declared. All texts interacted with at least two of the six dimensions, and the specific interaction of each text with these dimensions was tightly connected to the text's specific narrative strategy. The dominant dimensions and the main aesthetic strategy revealed in each novel are summarised in Table 1, while the paragraphs that follow outline the cross-cutting patterns.

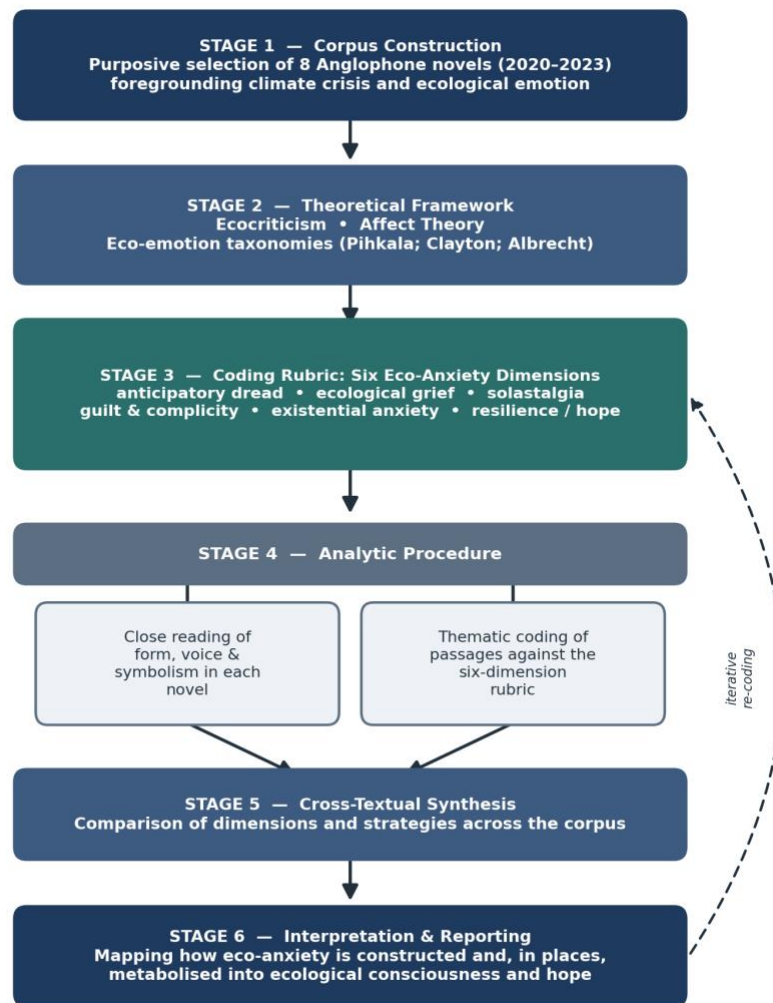


Figure 1. Flowchart of the qualitative ecocritical research design.

Table 1. Dominant eco-anxiety dimensions and narrative strategies across the corpus.

Author	Novel (year)	Dominant dimension(s)	eco-anxiety	Key narrative / aesthetic strategy
Jenny Offill	Weather (2020)	Anticipatory dread; existential anxiety		Fragmented, aphoristic first-person notation
Lydia Millet	A Children's Bible (2020)	Guilt and complicity; intergenerational anger		Biblical allegory; ironic child narration
Diane Cook	The New Wilderness (2020)	Solastalgia; ecological grief		Speculative realism; maternal focalisation
Kim Stanley Robinson	The Ministry for the Future (2020)	Anticipatory dread; resilience and hope		Polyphonic, multi-genre documentary form
Richard Powers	Bewilderment (2021)	Ecological grief; existential anxiety		Intimate father–son dyad; cosmic scaling
Sequoia Nagamatsu	How High We Go in the Dark (2022)	Ecological grief; anticipatory dread		Interlinked story-cycle; deep-time perspective
Ned Beaman	Venomous Lumpsucker (2022)	Guilt and complicity; existential anxiety		Satire and irony; systems-novel plotting
Eleanor Catton	Birnam Wood (2023)	Solastalgia; resilience and hope		Realist eco-thriller; multiple perspectives

The most common dimension was anticipatory fear, that is, the feeling of a future threat to the present. Representing a voice that never settles, Offill's *Weather* stages this unease with precise delineations: The narrator, a librarian who starts processing the mail for a climate pod, captures the world in brief and disconnected paragraphs, whose form mirrors the mind racing between planetary crisis and day-to-day routine. The novel's opening scene is a deadly heat wave that claims the lives of millions, and it is the reader's duty to work through hundreds of pages to find the answers. In neither is the anxiety externalised, but rather created structurally, in Offill by fragmentation, in Robinson by an overwhelming scalar accumulation. The second dominant axis was ecological grief, a sense of the loss of the past and/or what has been, or certainly will be, lost. Powers's *Bewilderment* is about a grieving child, Robin, who is agonizing about the rapid extinction of his world and yearning for his deceased mother, who was a nature activist. The personal loss and the loss of the planet are intertwined so inextricably that one cannot be mourned without the other. How *High We Go in the Dark* is a cycle of linked stories and narratives, all united by loss, wherein Nagamatsu's mosaic structure documents grief not as a tragedy or singular individual's experience, but as something that spans time and is shared by many. In this place, deep time is a method of experiencing losses that are too great for any one storyteller. Those novels that are particularly focused on place were organised into a distressing response to the loss of a familiar environment: solastalgia. Cook's *The New Wilderness* is about the conflict between a poisoned and overcrowded City and the final remnants of wild land, and through a mother/daughter story portrays the anguish of existing in a land that is also under threat. Catton's *Biram Wood* sets a similar sentiment in the contested space of New Zealand's rural landscape, where a group of idealistic guerrilla-gardeners and a billionaire monitoring capitalist vie for the same vulnerable valley, and the land's beauty is inextricably bound up in its threatened depredation, while the characters' relationship to it is shaped by its threatened destruction. The moral aspect—guilt and complicity—came most clearly to the fore in the instances of the novels' allusions to satire and to the young. Located in an imagined near-future world where extinction credits, the business of killing off species, are traded, sold, and bought, Beauman's *Venomous Lumpsucker* is mordant comedy made of a grieving animal-cognition scientist and a deranged extinction-industry executive, delivering a book that makes the reader laughed in the face of what is supposed to be too much. Millet's *A Children's Bible* expresses the same critique with generational rage, when a group of children hates the complacency of their parents as a climate crisis grows worse and worse; the ironic and allegorical storytelling allows for the sense that blame will settle, but without sentimentality. Underlying these was a sense of dread and worry that current paradigms of meaning are failing us when it comes to a crisis of such magnitude. This reappeared in the return of children as focalising characters (Robin in *Bewilderment*, the child narrators of *A Children's Bible*) whose innocent suffering reveals adult concealments and questions the nature of inheritance: what does it signify? In both Beauman and Offill, characters are faced with an emptiness of normal purpose stemming from ecological knowledge, which is what the existential register of eco-anxiety consists of, according to the research in eco-emotion. Last, but not least, the body was not left to despair. A new aspect of resilience and hope emerged, most clearly in Robinson, whose novel is remarkable for its vision of institutional and collective efforts, economic change, co-operation, and persistent political effort, which slowly turn the wheel of survival. The rest of the narrative is more ambivalent: *Biram Wood* is both a place of collective ecological practice and a place that, though it battles for survival in a thriller, nonetheless absorbs energy in its attempt to do so; several novels find hope not in resolution, but in attention, care, and the refusal to look away. The affective space of eco-anxiety, in the corpus, was seldom an end point, but rather the affective space from which some form of ecological consciousness was made to grow.

5. Discussion

The results provide direct answers to the first question of the study: these novels develop their eco-anxiety in a broad range of formal techniques that involve the fragmentation of notation, polyphonic accumulation, the story-cycle, satire, allegory, and the thriller, and through recurring motifs like the grieving child and the compromised professional. Importantly, eco-anxiety is not a theme overlaid on otherwise conventional narratives, rather it is created through the form of narratives. In Offill's gaps, anxiety isn't so much described as induced; in Nagamatsu's mosaic, grief isn't so much reported as distributed. It confirms the central tenets of affective ecocriticism, which considers literary emotion a formal accomplishment rather than a paraphrasable content (Bladow & Ladino 2018; Ahmed 2014), and it illustrates the analytical potential of the combinative use of the premise of affective ecocriticism and a differentiated eco-emotion vocabulary (Pihkala, 2022).

The second question related to the representational challenges Ghosh (2016) highlighted. The corpus indicates that modern novelists now have just the methods that Ghosh believed that the realist tradition was missing. Here, where these writers have identified a failure to cope with unlikely, massive, disorganized events, he has

responded with scalar strategies that move between a domestic world and a planetary one, with structures that spread experience over numerous lives and extended time, and with tonal registers—irony, satire, allegory—that accept the improbability as well as the horror. Beauden's satire and Robinson's documentary polyphony are, in different keys, formal answers to the derangement Ghosh has mentioned. The novel of the post-2020 era seems less crazy than creative, generating shapes that are adequate to the thing.

The third question, which asked about the transition from anxiety to consciousness and hope, was the most suggestive of the study. The argument, that eco-anxiety is not a pathological state but can also be adaptive (i.e. it can draw attention and trigger action) is well supported by the corpus (Kurth & Pihkala, 2022). The novels represent this ambivalence, with fear and sorrow often moving back and forth between themselves and care or responsibility or community, as in Robinson's reformist optimism, or in Offill's and Powers's and Catton's more muted refusal to avert their gaze. The fiction – in this sense – has an emotional effect on what the psychology has described conceptually – the transition from fear to what can be termed ecological consciousness.

It is also to these readings that we can turn for a discussion of the problem of anthropocentrism. There are some novels, with their more-than-human time(s) of Nagamatsu, the endangered species of Powers, the intelligent fish of Beauden, that decentralize the human and redirect moral and affective focus to nonhuman life, thus displacing grief and responsibility away from the human subject. It brings the corpus into line with the moral agenda of ecocriticism, and demonstrates how this can be done in an affective way, where readers feel the claim of the nonhuman as opposed to just hearing it. However, the results of the study are limited by the fact that they only reflect a purposive sample of literary fiction, and not the reactions of empirical readers, who may have variable reactions to literary texts (as demonstrated by Schneider-Mayerson, 2018), nor other languages or genres of text.

Overall, the discussion is convincing of the study's overarching argument that literature performs distinctive service in the ecology of climate emotion. It does not simply reflect psychological findings, it does not just provide information, but it is a shaping, a rhythm and a direction that participates in the cultural endeavor of future making that Bartosch (2025) calls future-making. These novels are more than just about what they are, and more than just about what they can do for readers' feelings and imaginations of futures for their environment.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate what kinds of responses to eco-anxiety are found in the contemporary Anglophone novel between 2020 and 2023, and to examine that with the help of the differentiated vocabulary of eco-emotion studies alongside the interpretive commitments of affective ecocriticism. It identified from a close reading and thematic analysis of eight novels that eco-anxiety in fiction was consistently multidimensional with elements of anticipatory fears, ecological grief, solastalgia, guilt and complicity, existential anxieties and an adaptive register of resilience and hope. It also determined that these impacts operate in the form: in the fragmentation, in the polyphony, in the story-cycle, in the satire, in the allegory, in the eco-thriller: and that the novels in many places go beyond fear to ecological consciousness, making it clear that eco-anxiety can be productive, not only destructive.

Its value lies in both filling in a gap, by providing ongoing ecocritical readings of very recent literary fiction about which nothing like this has been written, and as a model of an integrative approach in which the capacity of literature to evoke emotion is regarded as a formal achievement that can be analyzed in a precise affective vocabulary. It thereby validates the initial argument that literature is not only a reflection of the psychological impacts of climate change, but it also anticipates alternative futures involving the environment and a different kind of environmental hope. The limitations of these claims, in terms of a small purposive corpus, an interpretive method, an Anglophone focus and the lack of direct reader data, suggest boundaries for future research, such as empirical studies on how readers react to the post-2020 climate fiction, comparative analysis across languages and popular genres, and deeper investigation of non-Western Anglophone writing. The present study shows that the novel in the present day has become an unreplaceable instrument of feeling and thinking about the emotional condition of warming up the world.

Declarations

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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