

Ecology, Migration and Displacement: Environmental Refugees in Literature

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Abstract: *This research paper examines the intersection of ecology, migration and displacement through the lens of environmental refugees in contemporary literature. As climate change and environmental degradation increasingly force populations to migrate, the figure of the environmental refugee has become a critical subject in literary narratives. Drawing from genres such as climate fiction (Cli-Fi) and postcolonial literature, this paper explores how authors portray the lived experiences of those displaced by ecological crises. It delves into the socio-political dimensions of environmental displacement, particularly the unequal impacts of climate change on marginalized communities. Works by authors such as Amitav Ghosh, Octavia Butler, and Barbara Kingsolver are analyzed for their treatment of environmental refugees, revealing the ways in which literature critiques global systems that exacerbate environmental injustice. By focusing on themes of migration, identity, and survival, the paper highlights how literature humanizes the environmental refugee crisis and calls for greater global awareness and action. Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of literature in shaping public discourse on the ethical responsibilities of addressing climate-induced displacement in the Anthropocene.*

Keywords: Anthropocene, Climate Fiction, Ecological Disasters, Environmental Refugees, Postcolonialism

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Introduction

Environmental displacement is an increasingly urgent issue in today's world, where climate change and ecological disasters are driving unprecedented levels of migration. The term "environmental refugee" refers to individuals and communities forced to leave their homes due to environmental factors such as floods, droughts, desertification, and rising sea levels. While legal definitions surrounding environmental refugees remain contested, their representation in literature provides valuable insights into the human impact of environmental crises.

In literature, environmental refugees are individuals or groups forced to migrate due to ecological disasters or gradual environmental changes, such as rising sea levels, droughts, floods, and deforestation. These characters often symbolize the broader impacts of climate change and environmental degradation on vulnerable populations. Through their experiences, literary works explore the intersections of displacement, survival, identity, and justice.

Environmental refugees in literature frequently serve as a critique of global inequalities. Authors use their narratives to highlight how marginalized communities, often least responsible for climate change, suffer its worst consequences. This is particularly evident in postcolonial and indigenous literature, where environmental degradation is tied to histories of colonial exploitation and systemic inequity. For example, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* addresses the displacement of local populations in the Sundarbans, where rising sea levels and storms create a backdrop for exploring both historical and environmental injustices.

In the genre of climate fiction (Cli-Fi), environmental refugees often appear in speculative or dystopian narratives, where ecological disasters have led to societal breakdown and forced migrations. Novels like Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy depict future worlds where climate-induced displacement is a norm, illustrating how environmental crises fracture communities and challenge social structures. In these works, environmental refugees represent both the human cost of climate change and a critique of inadequate political responses to such crises.

Overall, environmental refugees in literature encapsulate the human dimension of ecological crises, offering readers a deeper understanding of the emotional, social, and political complexities of forced migration caused by environmental factors. Literature not only raises awareness of the plight of these displaced individuals but also urges readers to consider the broader ethical implications of climate change and environmental justice.

This paper will explore the intersection of ecology, migration and displacement by analyzing the depiction of environmental refugees in contemporary literature. Through eco-critical and postcolonial lenses, this research seeks to understand how literature portrays the experiences of those displaced by environmental degradation, the socio-political implications of climate-induced migration, and the global response to the crisis.

Defining Environmental Refugees

The concept of environmental refugees emerged in the latter half of the 20th century as environmental degradation began to drive forced migrations. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), environmental refugees are people displaced by "climate change or natural disasters" (UNHCR 2019). These individuals do not fit neatly into the legal category of "refugees" as defined by the 1951 Refugee Convention, which primarily covers those fleeing persecution based on race, religion, nationality, or political opinion. As a result, environmental refugees often fall into legal limbo, with limited protection under international law. Literature, however, offers a space to explore their lived experiences and the systemic failures that contribute to their displacement.

Through fiction, poetry, and narrative nonfiction, literature humanizes the abstract concept of environmental displacement. Many authors who write about environmental refugees combine ecological concerns with broader themes of migration, identity, and survival. Literature not only provides a voice to those displaced but also critiques the global systems that exacerbate environmental injustice.

Climate Fiction (Cli-Fi) and the Environmental Refugee

Climate fiction, commonly known as Cli-Fi, is a genre that focuses on the impact of climate change on human societies, ecosystems, and the future of the planet. Within this genre, the figure of the environmental refugee often takes center stage, representing individuals or groups displaced by ecological disasters such as rising sea levels, droughts, floods, and other extreme climate events. These stories explore the human consequences of environmental crises, using speculative or dystopian settings to reflect current global anxieties about the future.

In Cli-Fi, environmental refugees frequently embody the vulnerabilities and injustices inherent in climate change. Novels such as Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* imagine near-future worlds where ecological collapse forces people to migrate in search of safety, resources, and stability. These displaced characters serve as a poignant reminder of the unequal burden climate change places on marginalized and poor communities—those who contribute the least to environmental degradation yet suffer the most from its consequences.

Authors of climate fiction often use environmental refugees as a means to critique political inaction, economic inequalities, and the global response to climate change. In these narratives, governments and institutions are frequently depicted as either indifferent or hostile to the plight of displaced populations. This is exemplified in John Lanchester's *The Wall*, where society builds barriers to keep out climate refugees, symbolizing the increasing securitization of borders in response to ecological displacement.

Environmental refugees in Cli-Fi also provide a platform for exploring themes of survival, adaptation, and human resilience. Characters in these stories must not only contend with the immediate challenges of displacement but also navigate new social, political, and environmental landscapes. This struggle for survival often reflects broader existential questions about humanity's place in nature and the ethics of environmental stewardship.

Ultimately, climate fiction's depiction of environmental refugees serves as a powerful narrative tool to raise awareness about the human toll of climate change. By putting a human face on the abstract idea of environmental crisis, these works invite readers to engage emotionally with the realities of climate-induced displacement and to consider the urgent need for global action on environmental justice and policy reform.

Also, writers of Cli-Fi often depict dystopian or speculative futures where ecological disasters force large-scale migrations. Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy is a key example of this genre. In her series, Atwood portrays a future world ravaged by environmental collapse, where populations are displaced by pandemics and climate-related disasters. The characters in the novel grapple with displacement, loss of

identity, and the breakdown of societal structures—all central themes when considering the experience of environmental refugees.

Similarly, Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* addresses environmental degradation and its impact on marginalized communities. Butler envisions a future California where climate change leads to widespread resource scarcity, compelling survivors to form new migratory communities. This speculative narrative reflects real-world concerns about the increasing frequency of climate-induced migration, particularly in regions where poor and marginalized communities are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation (Butler 1993).

Postcolonial Perspectives on Environmental Refugees

From a postcolonial perspective, environmental refugees are often seen as the product of historical and systemic inequalities that date back to colonialism. In literature, postcolonial authors highlight how the exploitation of land, resources and people during colonial times have left many formerly colonized nations vulnerable to the impacts of environmental degradation and climate change. This vulnerability often manifests in the forced displacement of communities due to ecological disasters, creating what we now understand as environmental refugees.

During the colonial era, European powers exploited the natural resources of their colonies to fuel industrial growth and economic expansion. This often led to significant environmental degradation—deforestation, soil depletion, water contamination, and loss of biodiversity. Colonial economies were designed to extract as much value from the land as possible, with little regard for sustainability or the long-term well-being of indigenous populations. After the end of colonial rule, many of these nations were left with weakened ecosystems, depleted resources, and economic systems still dependent on unsustainable practices.

In postcolonial literature, these historical legacies of exploitation are often portrayed as directly contributing to modern environmental crises and the displacement of people. Environmental refugees in postcolonial narratives represent not only the victims of climate change but also the victims of a historical trajectory that began with colonization.

Environmental Refugees and Historical Injustice

Postcolonial authors frequently draw connections between the displacement of people due to environmental degradation and the legacies of colonial injustice. One of the central themes in postcolonial literature is how former colonies have been left particularly vulnerable to climate change due to the environmental degradation inflicted during the colonial period. This vulnerability is compounded by the fact that many postcolonial nations lack the infrastructure and resources to adequately address the impacts of climate change, making environmental displacement even more likely.

Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* is a powerful example of how postcolonial literature deals with environmental refugees. Set in the Sundarbans, a fragile delta region in India and Bangladesh, the novel explores the experiences of local communities who face frequent natural disasters such as cyclones and flooding. These ecological challenges, exacerbated by rising sea levels, displace people from their homes and livelihoods. The novel subtly links the environmental vulnerabilities of this region to its colonial past, where the land was exploited for resources, leaving it ecologically fragile. Through the story of displaced refugees in the Sundarbans, Ghosh illustrates how colonial histories of exploitation continue to shape patterns of migration and displacement in the present.

Indigenous Knowledge and Ecological Wisdom

Postcolonial literature often highlights the contrast between indigenous knowledge systems and Western approaches to environmental management. Indigenous communities frequently have a deep connection to their land and a long history of sustainable practices that were disrupted or erased by colonial intervention. In many postcolonial narratives, environmental refugees are portrayed as people who not only lose their homes but also their cultural and spiritual connection to the land.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a renowned Kenyan writer, frequently addresses the theme of land and displacement in his works. While his focus is often on the political displacement caused by colonialism, his literature also touches on the environmental degradation that disrupts the lives of rural communities. In postcolonial

literature like Ngũgĩ's, the displacement of indigenous people due to environmental factors often serves as a metaphor for the broader disruption of their way of life caused by colonialism. These narratives suggest that the displacement of people from their lands—whether through environmental degradation or colonial land seizures—results in cultural, social, and spiritual loss that is often irreparable.

Climate Change as a New Form of Colonialism

Many postcolonial critics argue that climate change itself can be viewed as a new form of colonialism, sometimes referred to as "climate colonialism." While wealthier nations in the Global North are the primary contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, the effects of climate change disproportionately affect poorer nations in the Global South, many of which are former colonies. In postcolonial literature, environmental refugees are often depicted as the victims of this new form of inequality. These refugees are displaced not only by natural disasters but also by a global economic system that continues to prioritize the interests of wealthier nations at the expense of vulnerable populations.

For example, in *Oil on Water* by Nigerian author Helon Habila, the environmental degradation caused by oil extraction in the Niger Delta is portrayed as a continuation of the colonial exploitation of African resources. The local population is displaced due to the pollution of their land and water, creating environmental refugees within their own country. The novel critiques both the multinational corporations responsible for the environmental damage and the Nigerian government's complicity in allowing foreign interests to profit from local resources while leaving the local population impoverished and displaced. In postcolonial literature like this, environmental refugees are depicted as living on the margins of a global system that privileges economic growth over ecological sustainability.

Environmental Justice and Global Responsibility

Postcolonial literature often raises questions of environmental justice, asking who is responsible for the displacement of people due to climate change and environmental degradation. Many postcolonial authors argue that wealthy nations, whose industrial activities have contributed the most to climate change, have a moral responsibility to assist those displaced by environmental crises in poorer countries. These works emphasize the inequities in how climate change impacts different regions and the lack of accountability from nations that benefit economically from the exploitation of natural resources.

In Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, the displacement of people due to environmental degradation is linked to the global economic system that prioritizes profit over sustainability. The novel critiques how capitalist ventures in developing countries lead to environmental destruction and displacement, with local communities bearing the brunt of the damage. In this sense, environmental refugees in postcolonial literature often symbolize the broader injustices of globalization and climate change, calling attention to the need for global cooperation and environmental justice.

From a postcolonial perspective, environmental refugees are not just individuals displaced by natural disasters; they are the product of a long history of colonial exploitation, environmental injustice, and global inequality. Postcolonial literature provides a critical space to explore these themes, highlighting the historical roots of environmental degradation and the continued vulnerability of formerly colonized nations to climate change. Through the experiences of environmental refugees, postcolonial authors call for a re-examination of global responsibility, urging readers to consider the ethical and political implications of environmental displacement in a world still shaped by the legacies of colonialism. In doing so, these works not only humanize the abstract concept of environmental refugees but also advocate for a more just and equitable response to the global environmental crisis.

Postcolonial literature provides another lens through which to examine the experiences of environmental refugees. In many cases, environmental degradation and displacement are linked to colonial histories of resource exploitation and land degradation. The legacies of colonialism often manifest in unequal access to resources, leaving formerly colonized populations more vulnerable to climate change and its effects. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is a prime example of postcolonial literature that addresses the intersection of environmental displacement and historical injustice.

Environmental Refugees and the Anthropocene

The Anthropocene—a proposed epoch that marks the significant impact of human activity on Earth’s ecosystems—provides a framework for understanding the global scope of environmental displacement. Writers and theorists argue that the Anthropocene is characterized by mass displacements resulting from anthropogenic environmental changes, including deforestation, desertification, and sea-level rise. In this context, environmental refugees become a symbol of the unequal distribution of environmental burdens.

The novel *Flight Behavior* by Barbara Kingsolver addresses this concept directly. Set in rural Tennessee, *Flight Behavior* tells the story of a community grappling with the effects of climate change, particularly through the lens of a displaced population of monarch butterflies. While the novel centers on ecological change, it also metaphorically explores human displacement, as characters face economic uncertainty and environmental instability. Kingsolver’s work reflects broader concerns about the Anthropocene, where environmental degradation disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, often leading to forced migration (Kingsolver 2012).

Socio-Political Implications of Environmental Displacement

Literature that explores the plight of environmental refugees often serves as a critique of the socio-political systems that fail to address the root causes of environmental displacement. Novels like *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, a film and novel adaptation by Lucy Alibar, portray how governments and international institutions are ill-equipped to deal with the complex intersection of poverty, climate change, and displacement. Set in a fictionalized bayou community in Louisiana, the story presents a community on the brink of being submerged by rising sea levels. The characters, like many real-world environmental refugees, struggle to navigate a world where political systems fail to provide adequate support for displaced populations.

In addition to highlighting governmental failure, literature on environmental refugees often addresses the intersections of race, class, and environmental justice. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Jesmyn Ward’s novel *Salvage the Bones* captures the experience of environmental displacement in a poor, African-American community. The novel offers a powerful critique of the systemic racism and economic inequality that exacerbate the vulnerability of certain populations to climate disasters. Ward’s portrayal of environmental refugees in her novel reflects the broader reality of how marginalized communities are often the most affected by climate change, yet the least responsible for its causes (Ward 2011).

Global Response and the Future of Environmental Refugees in Literature

As the climate crisis intensifies, so too does the urgency for a global response to environmental refugees. Yet, international legal frameworks remain insufficient, with little progress toward recognizing environmental refugees as a protected category under international law. Literature, however, continues to play an important role in raising awareness about this growing crisis.

Writers like John Lanchester, in his novel *The Wall*, envision futures where migration, climate change, and geopolitics converge to create starkly divided worlds. In Lanchester’s dystopia, climate refugees are a central concern, and nations build walls to protect themselves from the masses displaced by rising sea levels. *The Wall* reflects contemporary fears about the increasing securitization of borders in response to environmental displacement, offering a chilling vision of how societies might respond to the climate refugee crisis in the future (Lanchester 2019).

As the global community grapples with the effects of climate change, it is likely that the figure of the environmental refugee will continue to be a prominent subject in literature. These works offer not only a reflection of the real-world consequences of environmental degradation but also a call to action, urging readers to engage with the moral and ethical dimensions of environmental justice.

Conclusion

The portrayal of environmental refugees in literature provides a valuable lens through which to understand the human impact of climate change and environmental degradation. Through genres like climate fiction and postcolonial literature, authors offer critical insights into the lived experiences of those displaced by ecological crises, while also critiquing the socio-political systems that perpetuate environmental injustice. As climate-induced migration becomes an increasingly pressing global issue, literature’s role in shaping public discourse and advocating for environmental justice will only become more vital. By examining the

intersection of ecology, migration, and displacement, literary works challenge readers to confront the complexities of the environmental refugee crisis and consider the ethical responsibilities of a world facing the Anthropocene.

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