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**ECO-ANXIETY AND CLIMATE COLONIALISM IN FATIMA BHUTTO'S
THE RUNAWAYS (2019)**



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Abstract

This paper examines the entwined themes of eco-anxiety and climate colonialism in Fatima Bhutto's 2019 novel *The Runaways*. Using ecocriticism and postcolonial theory as analytical frameworks, the study explores how the novel positions environmental degradation as both a lived reality and a structural legacy of colonial and capitalist exploitation. The psychological states of the protagonists—Anita, Monty, and Sunny—mirror the collective anxieties of societies in the Global South, grappling with ecological collapse and geopolitical marginalization. This research contends that *The Runaways* represents eco-anxiety not as a personal neurosis but as an embedded condition shaped by histories of imperial extraction and modern inequalities. Through metaphor, setting, and character development, Bhutto articulates a powerful literary indictment of climate injustice and the burdens of postcolonial environmental trauma.

Keywords: Fatima Bhutto, eco-anxiety, climate colonialism, ecocriticism, postcolonialism, Global South, solastalgia, slow violence, environmental trauma

Introduction

The accelerating pace of environmental collapse in the 21st century has compelled scholars across disciplines to reconsider the global power dynamics underpinning ecological degradation. Within this scholarly turn, the convergence of **ecocriticism** and **postcolonial theory** has emerged as a critical lens through which to examine the **asymmetrical impacts of climate change**—a phenomenon increasingly recognized as not just ecological, but deeply **political, historical, and ideological**. Concepts such as *eco-anxiety*, *solastalgia*, and *climate colonialism* have gained traction as tools to understand the psychological and structural burdens of the climate crisis, particularly in the **Global South**, where former colonies continue to suffer the environmental consequences of imperial and capitalist extraction.

Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways* (2019), though often read through the prism of radicalization and youth disillusionment, offers a rich, underexplored terrain for environmental and postcolonial inquiry. Set across urban Pakistan, the Middle East, and the United Kingdom, the novel follows three young protagonists—Anita, Monty,

and Sunny—as they navigate ideological fragmentation, moral confusion, and systemic alienation. While Bhutto does not foreground environmental themes in an overtly ecological register, the **narrative is saturated with the sensory and affective markers of ecological collapse**: polluted cityscapes, suffocating heat, water scarcity, spiritual emptiness, and disconnection from land. These environmental backdrops do more than set the scene; they inform the very **emotional and ideological trajectories** of the characters.

This paper argues that *The Runaways* constructs a narrative of **eco-anxiety**—a psychological and emotional response to environmental decline—framed within the broader structures of **climate colonialism**. The novel suggests that for youth in postcolonial contexts, the climate crisis is not only a scientific or existential dilemma but a deeply embedded material and geopolitical reality. Using a theoretical framework that combines **ecocriticism, postcolonial theory, and environmental justice**, this study explores how Bhutto's characters embody the emotional toll of ecological devastation and reveal the global inequalities that shape their responses.

In doing so, this paper positions *The Runaways* as a literary intervention in the discourse on **climate justice**, demonstrating how fiction from the Global South can articulate forms of environmental trauma that are both local and planetary. Through its language, setting, and characterization, Bhutto's novel reflects the **invisible violence and uneven burdens** of climate change, illuminating how the postcolonial condition is inseparable from the ecological one.

Research Questions

1. How does *The Runaways* depict eco-anxiety as a product of postcolonial and environmental conditions in the Global South?
2. In what ways does the novel reflect the mechanisms and legacies of climate colonialism?
3. How are language, imagery, and narrative structure employed to signify ecological and psychological disintegration?
4. What broader discourses of environmental justice and postcolonial resistance are suggested through the novel's transnational setting and characters?

Research Objectives

- To critically analyze *The Runaways* using ecocritical and postcolonial theoretical

lenses.

- To investigate how the novel dramatizes the psychological consequences of environmental degradation.
- To highlight the structural inequalities—rooted in colonial and capitalist histories—that underlie ecological crises in the Global South.
- To contribute to the growing body of scholarship at the intersection of environmental humanities and postcolonial literature.

Literature Review

The intersection of environmental degradation and postcolonial critique has generated vibrant academic debate. Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) introduces the concept of "slow violence"—a form of environmental harm that is gradual, invisible, and disproportionately suffered by marginalized populations. His work provides a foundational lens for understanding Bhutto's indirect yet potent critique of environmental injustice.

Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) has challenged traditional dichotomies between human and natural history in the Anthropocene, arguing that climate change collapses these separations. His thesis is critical in situating the characters of *The Runaways* within a broader framework where personal fate and planetary crisis intersect.

Sultana (2022) advances the notion of **climate coloniality**, arguing that the Global South remains disproportionately vulnerable to climate change due to enduring systems of racial capitalism and historical dispossession. This aligns with the global hierarchies presented in Bhutto's novel, where characters from South Asia carry the burdens of ecological degradation shaped elsewhere.

Stacy Alaimo's posthumanist ecocriticism (*Exposed*, 2016) emphasizes the porosity of human bodies and environments, suggesting that environmental politics are intimately entangled with lived embodiment. This framework helps interpret the bodily and emotional symptoms of Bhutto's characters as signs of ecological trauma. Glenn Albrecht (2011) coined the term *solastalgia* to describe the psychic distress caused by environmental loss. This is echoed in the emotional barrenness and displaced yearning that pervade Bhutto's narrative, particularly in the characters' alienation from land and place.

Finally, Huggan and Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2010) provides an essential

bridge between ecological thought and imperial critique, demonstrating how environmental discourse can mask or perpetuate colonial structures. Bhutto's critique in *The Runaways* aligns with this approach, illustrating how environmental decay is shaped by—and reinforces—postcolonial marginality.

Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative, interpretive methodology** grounded in **textual analysis** and **theoretical criticism**, drawing from ecocriticism and postcolonial studies. The methodological approach focuses on how language, imagery, and narrative structure in Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways* (2019) illuminate the intertwined themes of eco-anxiety and climate colonialism.

Research Design

The research is **analytical and descriptive** in nature, based on **close reading** of the novel as the primary text. The study investigates how environmental degradation and postcolonial power asymmetries are reflected through character psychology, setting, metaphor, and plot development. This design enables the identification of patterns, symbols, and thematic recurrences that relate to ecological and colonial discourses.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis is framed through an **interdisciplinary critical lens**, combining:

- **Ecocriticism** (as informed by scholars like Rob Nixon, Stacy Alaimo, and Lawrence Buell), which allows for the exploration of the environmental dimensions of the text, particularly how climate crisis is represented through metaphor and atmosphere.
- **Postcolonial theory** (drawing from Dipesh Chakrabarty, Fatima Sultana, and Graham Huggan), which supports the interpretation of global environmental injustice and neocolonial structures embedded in climate discourse.
- **Environmental justice** and **affect theory** are also integrated to analyze the emotional and psychological states of characters, especially in the context of eco-anxiety and solastalgia.

Data Collection

The **primary source** for this study is:

- Bhutto, Fatima. *The Runaways* (2019)

Secondary sources include:

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- Peer-reviewed journal articles and books on ecocriticism, postcolonialism, environmental humanities, and affect theory.
- Scholarly discussions of eco-anxiety and climate colonialism.
- Empirical data on climate injustice (to contextualize the fiction within real-world geopolitics when necessary).

Analytical Tools and Techniques

The core method is **close textual analysis**, involving:

- Thematic coding of ecological imagery, metaphors, and lexical fields related to nature, environment, and decay.
- Character and setting analysis to trace patterns of ecological and psychological distress.
- Intertextual comparison with theoretical sources to anchor textual observations in academic discourse.
- Discourse analysis to uncover underlying ideologies in how environmental and postcolonial conditions are framed in the narrative.

Scope and Delimitations

This study is limited to **literary and theoretical analysis** and does not engage in empirical environmental science or fieldwork. The scope is confined to *The Runaways*, although contextual comparisons with real-world issues of climate colonialism and eco-anxiety in the Global South inform the interpretation.

Findings / Discussion

1. Eco-Anxiety in *The Runaways*: A Condition of the Global South

Eco-anxiety, in the context of *The Runaways*, emerges not as a pathology of hyper-awareness, but as a lived affect of material crisis and systemic abandonment. Bhutto's characters embody different registers of this condition. Anita's poverty-stricken life in Karachi is marked by exposure to environmental toxicity—polluted air, unsafe water, unbearable heat. For her, ecological stress is not theoretical but viscerally immediate, inseparable from social and gendered oppression. Her decision to flee reflects not only economic and emotional desperation but also an unconscious response to environmental hostility.

Monty, though shielded from material deprivation, represents the existential alienation of the elite. His emotional detachment and spiritual void—compensated by

consumer excess—symbolize the denial mechanisms common in affluent societies. His climate privilege enables avoidance but not immunity from the moral and psychological cost of ecological crisis.

Sunny's diasporic position adds another layer. His detachment from cultural roots and ecological belonging reflects the displacement central to postcolonial identity. The sterile, grey urbanity of London contrasts sharply with the chaotic yet sensorial intensity of Karachi and Basra. His turn toward radical ideology may be read as an attempt to re-anchor himself amid cultural and environmental homelessness—a solastalgic search for rootedness in a deracinated world.

2. Climate Colonialism: Structural Exploitation and Geopolitical Borders

Bhutto's novel refrains from didactic exposition, yet climate colonialism lurks beneath its narrative surface. Karachi becomes a symbol of exhausted postcolonial ecology—a space choked by unregulated development, waste, and infrastructural decay. These are not merely urban issues; they are symptoms of global economic asymmetries rooted in imperial history.

The novel illustrates that ecological suffering is not evenly distributed. Sunny's encounters with the sanitized landscapes of Europe and the Middle East highlight the unequal geographies of climate vulnerability. The West's environmental cleanliness is achieved through outsourced pollution, resource extraction, and climate migration controls—features that sustain a neocolonial global order.

Borders, too, are climate instruments. Sunny and Anita's criminalization as migrants reflects a world order that protects the perpetrators of environmental destruction while punishing its victims. Bhutto's characters are rendered disposable by the same regimes that commodify their lands and destabilize their climates.

3. Narrative Symbolism and Environmental Affect

The symbolic language of *The Runaways* intensifies the reader's sense of environmental despair. Bhutto's persistent use of heat, dust, and pollution is not merely descriptive—it evokes the slow suffocation of ecological and existential life. These elements shape not only the physical spaces but also the interior landscapes of her characters.

The rare appearance of water in the text is especially telling. Its absence marks a deep ecological crisis; its presence—often in memory or dream—symbolizes

longing for nourishment, spiritual and physical. The scarcity of greenery and moments of natural beauty enhances the atmosphere of loss. Nature becomes a ghost, a memory, or a vanishing dream rather than a living presence.

Each character's journey is thus paralleled by environmental conditions—dryness reflects emotional depletion, heat mirrors rage and restlessness, and pollution signifies moral decay. These metaphors underscore the entanglement of ecological and psychological trauma in a climate-colonial world.

Conclusion

The Runaways presents a compelling case for viewing eco-anxiety as a political and structural condition. Bhutto's literary strategy—quiet, affective, and metaphor-laden—conveys the psychological toll of climate collapse in societies marked by colonial legacies and capitalist extraction. The novel reframes environmental trauma not as isolated despair but as a shared fate, disproportionately shouldered by those in the Global South.

By integrating themes of migration, identity, faith, and ecology, *The Runaways* demonstrates that environmental literature need not revolve around wilderness or conservation. Instead, it can tell stories of urban decay, human displacement, and psychic loss—all of which constitute the frontlines of the climate crisis. Bhutto's work invites us to rethink both the subjects and stakes of environmental fiction in an age of planetary breakdown and postcolonial reckoning.

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