



ECOLOGIES OF URBAN DECAY: ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND POST-ANTHROPOCENTRIC IMAGINARIES IN TEA OBREHT'S *THE MORNINGSIDE*

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Abstract

Contemporary climate fiction increasingly foregrounds cities as vulnerable ecological spaces rather than symbols of human mastery. However, urban environments remain underexplored in eco-critical studies that continue to privilege rural or wilderness settings. This article addresses this gap by examining how Téa Obreht's *The Morningside* (2024) conceptualizes urban decay as a form of ecological crisis and critiques anthropocentric assumptions embedded in modern urban life. The central problem investigated is how environmental degradation, infrastructural collapse, and climate-induced displacement reshape human consciousness and urban imaginaries in a near-future dystopian city. The main objectives of this study are threefold: first, to analyze the representation of urban decay as ecological destruction in *The Morningside* (2024); second, to explore how ecological consciousness emerges through lived urban experiences, memory, and displacement; and third, to examine how the novel challenges human-centered worldviews by imagining post-anthropocentric relationships between humans, non-human life, and deteriorating urban spaces. The study employs eco-criticism as its primary theoretical framework, drawing on the foundational insights of Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell, alongside contemporary concepts such as the Anthropocene, environmental justice, slow violence (Rob Nixon), and post-humanism. Through this framework, the article argues that *The Morningside* (2024) reconfigures the city as an ecological agent and a site of environmental memory, thereby contributing to post-anthropocentric imaginaries in climate fiction. Ultimately, the study highlights literature's critical role in fostering ecological awareness by situating the environmental crisis at the heart of urban existence.

Keywords: *Climate Fiction, Ecological Consciousness, Eco-Criticism, Environmental Collapse, Urban Decay*

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1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, climate change has shifted from a distant scientific projection to an immediate and lived reality for billions of people worldwide. Rapid urbanization, once celebrated as a marker of economic development and modern progress, has become deeply entangled with ecological crisis. Cities today concentrate populations, infrastructures, and resources in ways that intensify environmental vulnerability. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), urban areas currently house more than half of the global population, a figure projected to exceed two-thirds by 2050, thereby increasing exposure to climate-related hazards such as sea-level rise, flooding, heatwaves, and water scarcity (IPCC, 2022). As climate risks converge with economic inequality and infrastructural fragility, urban spaces emerge as critical sites where environmental degradation is both produced and experienced.

Urbanization not only magnifies vulnerability but also contributes significantly to climate change itself. Cities account for approximately 70% of global carbon dioxide emissions and consume nearly three-quarters of the world's energy supply (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2023). This dual role, as both contributors to and victims of climate change, positions cities at the center of the global environmental crisis. The World Bank underscores that climate mitigation and adaptation efforts will largely succeed or fail in urban contexts, where governance, infrastructure, and social inequality intersect most intensely (World Bank, 2023). Similarly, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) warns that climate change is already altering local climates in hundreds of cities worldwide, placing millions of urban residents at risk of displacement, economic instability, and environmental injustice (UN-Habitat, 2024).

Despite the urgency of these realities, environmental humanities and literary studies have historically privileged non-urban landscapes, particularly wilderness and pastoral spaces, as primary sites of ecological meaning. Early eco-critical scholarship often positioned nature as external to urban life, reinforcing a binary between the natural and the built environment. As Lawrence Buell (2005) argues, such frameworks risk overlooking how environmental crisis unfolds within everyday human habitats, particularly cities

where environmental harm is gradual, normalized, and structurally embedded. This scholarly tendency has contributed to an anthropocentric bias that frames ecological degradation as something occurring “elsewhere,” rather than within the urban spaces most people inhabit.

In response to this limitation, contemporary eco-criticism calls for a reconceptualization of cities as ecological systems rather than environmental voids. Rob Nixon’s (2011) concept of “slow violence” is particularly relevant here, as it draws attention to forms of environmental destruction that are incremental, delayed, and often invisible, conditions that characterize urban decay under climate stress. Rising waters, deteriorating infrastructure, and environmental toxicity rarely appear as spectacular catastrophes; instead, they erode urban life gradually, disproportionately affecting marginalized populations. Literature, as a cultural form attuned to temporal depth and affective experience, offers a vital medium for representing these slow, uneven ecological transformations.

Within this evolving critical landscape, climate fiction (cli-fi) has emerged as a significant genre that grapples with the social, ethical, and psychological consequences of climate change. Yet, much cli-fi continues to emphasize remote or post-apocalyptic settings, often sidelining the city as a site of sustained ecological inquiry. This gap is striking given that urban environments are central to contemporary climate debates and policy frameworks. There remains a pressing need for literary analyses that foreground urban decay as an ecological condition and examine how environmental consciousness emerges within deteriorating cityscapes.

Téa Obreht’s *The Morningside* (2024) offers a powerful intervention into this critical niche. Set in a near-future, partially flooded American city, the novel centers on Silvia, a young girl living with her mother in a decaying high-rise apartment building known as the Morningside. The building shelters a community of displaced and economically precarious residents, many of whom are climate migrants navigating the aftermath of environmental and social collapse. Rather than depicting climate catastrophe as a sudden apocalyptic rupture, Obreht presents it as a persistent condition of urban existence, one marked by infrastructural deterioration, environmental uncertainty, and fractured social relations (Obreht, 2024).

The urban setting of *The Morningside* closely mirrors the conditions outlined in international climate assessments. The IPCC (2022) identifies coastal flooding, urban heat stress, and infrastructure failure as some of the most significant risks facing cities in the coming decades. Obreht’s fictional city embodies these risks, transforming the urban environment into an ecological agent that shapes memory, identity, and survival. Water intrusion, abandoned spaces, and decaying structures function not merely as background

elements but as active forces that condition human and non-human interactions within the narrative.

By centering a child's perspective, *The Morningside* also foregrounds the affective dimensions of environmental decline. Silvia's sensory engagement with her surroundings, waterlogged streets, deteriorating buildings, and fragile ecosystems, cultivates a form of environmental consciousness rooted in intimacy rather than abstraction. This narrative strategy aligns with eco-critical calls to decenter human exceptionalism and recognize the entangled relationships between humans, non-human life, and material environments (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). The city, in Obrecht's novel, becomes a multispecies habitat shaped by climate, history, and neglect.

This article situates *The Morningside* at the intersection of eco-criticism, urban ecology, and post-anthropocentric theory. Post-anthropocentric imaginaries challenge human-centered hierarchies by emphasizing relationality, vulnerability, and ecological interdependence. Through its portrayal of urban decay, Obrecht's novel dismantles narratives of human mastery over the built environment and instead exposes the fragility of anthropocentric urbanism in the age of climate crisis. This approach resonates with contemporary environmental justice frameworks, which highlight how climate change disproportionately impacts urban poor and displaced communities (UNEP, 2023; UN-Habitat, 2024).

By placing *The Morningside* in dialogue with international climate reports and eco-critical theory, this study addresses a significant gap in climate fiction scholarship. It argues that urban decay in the novel functions as both an ecological condition and a conceptual lens through which environmental consciousness is reimagined. In doing so, the article demonstrates how literature can illuminate the lived realities of climate change, challenge anthropocentric assumptions, and contribute to the development of ethical and imaginative responses to planetary crisis. Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of urban ecologies in contemporary environmental discourse and affirms climate fiction's capacity to reshape how cities, and their futures, are understood.

1.1. Literature Review

Environmental crises and climate change have become central concerns in contemporary literary scholarship, particularly within the field of eco-criticism. Eco-criticism examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment and explores how literary texts represent ecological issues, environmental degradation, and human interaction with nature. According to Glotfelty (1996), eco-criticism is fundamentally concerned with studying the relationship between literature and the natural world, encouraging scholars to analyze how cultural narratives shape environmental attitudes and responsibilities.

Scholars have expanded eco-critical discussions by emphasizing the role of literature in developing environmental awareness and ethical responsibility toward the planet. Buell (2005) argues that environmentally oriented texts portray nature not merely as a passive backdrop but as an active presence influencing human life and cultural values. In such texts, environmental crises become central narrative concerns that reveal the consequences of human exploitation of natural systems. Similarly, Garrard (2012) identifies several recurring tropes in eco-critical literature, including pollution, wilderness, dwelling, and apocalypse, which help readers understand how literary texts construct ecological consciousness.

More recent eco-critical scholarship has increasingly focused on the concept of environmental violence and ecological injustice. Nixon (2011) introduces the concept of “slow violence,” which refers to gradual and often invisible environmental destruction that unfolds over long periods of time. Unlike sudden disasters, slow violence manifests through processes such as climate change, pollution, and ecological neglect. These environmental processes disproportionately affect marginalized communities, making the study of environmental justice an essential component of contemporary eco-criticism.

Another important development in eco-critical studies is the recognition of urban environments as ecological systems. Earlier eco-critical research largely focused on wilderness and rural landscapes, but scholars now emphasize that cities are also complex ecological spaces. Pickett et al. (2011) argue that urban areas function as dynamic ecosystems where human infrastructure, social structures, and environmental processes interact. This perspective allows literary scholars to examine how environmental degradation, pollution, and climate change reshape urban life and influence human experiences in modern cities.

Climate fiction has emerged as a significant literary genre that addresses these ecological concerns. According to Heise (2016), climate fiction plays a crucial role in translating abstract environmental problems into emotionally engaging narratives that help readers imagine the long-term consequences of climate change. Through storytelling, such narratives encourage readers to reflect on ecological responsibility and the interconnectedness of human and natural systems.

Several literary works have explored environmental collapse and urban transformation within the framework of climate fiction. Robinson (2017), for instance, depicts a future New York City partially submerged by rising sea levels, presenting a transformed urban landscape shaped by climate change. The novel highlights how environmental disasters challenge existing economic and social structures while also encouraging new forms of ecological adaptation and collective resilience.

Similarly, Atwood (2009) examines ecological collapse in *The Year of the Flood*, where environmental degradation results from unchecked corporate power and

technological exploitation of nature. The novel portrays alternative ecological philosophies that emphasize sustainability and respect for nonhuman life. These narratives demonstrate how climate fiction critiques modern capitalist systems while imagining possible ecological futures.

Together, these scholarly perspectives highlight the growing importance of eco-critical and climate-fiction studies in contemporary literary research. While significant attention has been given to environmental disasters and ecological ethics, relatively limited scholarship has focused specifically on urban ecological decline in contemporary climate fiction. Therefore, examining literary representations of deteriorating urban environments provides an important contribution to eco-critical discourse by exploring how environmental crises reshape urban spaces, social relations, and human identities.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the theoretical framework of ecocriticism, an interdisciplinary field that examines the relationship between literature and the natural environment. Ecocriticism investigates how literary texts represent ecological systems, environmental degradation, and the complex interactions between humans and the nonhuman world. As environmental crises such as climate change, ecological destruction, and environmental injustice have become pressing global concerns, ecocriticism has emerged as a significant critical approach within literary studies. The framework of this study draws particularly on the contributions of Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Greg Garrard, Rob Nixon, and Ursula Heise, whose theoretical insights provide the conceptual foundation for analyzing environmental representation in literature.

1.3. Ecocriticism: Literature and the Environment

Ecocriticism first emerged as a recognizable field in the late twentieth century, particularly with the publication of *The Ecocriticism Reader* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Glotfelty (1996) defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (p. xviii). This definition emphasizes that literary texts are not isolated cultural products but are embedded within broader ecological systems and environmental realities. Ecocritical scholarship therefore seeks to explore how literature reflects, critiques, and reshapes human attitudes toward nature and the environment.

Unlike traditional literary criticism, which often focuses primarily on textual structures, language, or cultural ideology, ecocriticism expands the scope of analysis by considering the material environment as an active and influential component in literary representation. According to Glotfelty (1996), ecocriticism asks questions such as: How is nature represented in literary texts? What role does the physical environment play in shaping narrative structures? How do literary works contribute to ecological awareness

and environmental ethics? These questions allow scholars to investigate how literature participates in the cultural construction of environmental meaning.

Ecocriticism also challenges the anthropocentric worldview that has traditionally dominated Western thought. Anthropocentrism places human beings at the center of the universe and views nature primarily as a resource for human exploitation. Ecocritical scholars argue that such perspectives contribute to environmental degradation and ecological crises. Instead, ecocriticism promotes an ecocentric perspective, which recognizes the intrinsic value of nonhuman life and ecological systems (Garrard, 2012).

1.4. Lawrence Buell and Environmental Imagination

One of the most influential theorists in ecocritical scholarship is Lawrence Buell, whose work significantly expanded the theoretical scope of environmental literary studies. Buell (2005) argues that literature plays a crucial role in shaping the environmental imagination, which refers to the ways in which individuals and societies perceive, interpret, and relate to the natural world. According to Buell, literary texts have the power to influence environmental consciousness by presenting narratives that reveal the consequences of ecological destruction and the interconnectedness of human and natural systems.

Buell proposes several characteristics of what he calls an “environmentally oriented text.” First, the nonhuman environment must be present not merely as a background setting but as a significant presence that affects human actions and experiences. Second, the human interest should not be understood as the only legitimate focus of narrative attention; instead, the text should acknowledge the broader ecological context in which human life exists. Third, the text should demonstrate some degree of environmental accountability, highlighting the ethical implications of human interaction with nature (Buell, 2005).

These theoretical principles are particularly relevant for analyzing contemporary climate fiction, where environmental crises often shape narrative structures and character experiences. Buell’s framework allows scholars to examine how literature portrays ecological transformation and how environmental conditions influence social and cultural dynamics.

1.5. Greg Garrard and Ecocritical Tropes

Another significant contribution to ecocritical theory comes from Greg Garrard, who systematized the field by identifying key thematic categories that frequently appear in environmental literature. In his influential work *Ecocriticism*, Garrard (2012) outlines several recurring ecocritical tropes, including wilderness, pollution, dwelling, animals, apocalypse, and earth.

The trope of pollution, for instance, explores how industrialization and human activities contaminate natural environments and disrupt ecological balance. Literary

representations of pollution often reveal the social and ethical consequences of environmental destruction. Similarly, the concept of apocalypse is frequently used in climate fiction to depict catastrophic environmental scenarios that highlight the urgency of ecological crisis.

Another important trope identified by Garrard is dwelling, which examines the relationship between human communities and the environments they inhabit. The concept of dwelling emphasizes the importance of sustainable living practices and ecological awareness. In literary narratives, dwelling often reflects the tension between human development and environmental preservation.

Garrard's framework provides a useful analytical tool for examining how literary texts construct environmental meaning through recurring ecological themes. By identifying these tropes, scholars can better understand how literature contributes to cultural debates about environmental responsibility and sustainability.

1.6. Rob Nixon and the Concept of Slow Violence

While earlier ecocritical scholarship often focused on wilderness and natural landscapes, more recent theorists have emphasized the political and social dimensions of environmental crises. One of the most influential concepts in this regard is Rob Nixon's theory of "slow violence."

In his groundbreaking work *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Nixon (2011) argues that environmental destruction often occurs gradually and invisibly, making it difficult to recognize and address. Unlike spectacular disasters such as earthquakes or hurricanes, slow violence unfolds over long periods of time through processes such as pollution, climate change, deforestation, and ecological neglect.

Nixon (2011) defines slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a delayed destruction dispersed across time and space" (p. 2). This form of environmental harm disproportionately affects marginalized and vulnerable populations, particularly in developing countries and economically disadvantaged communities.

The concept of slow violence is particularly relevant for analyzing literary representations of climate change and environmental degradation. Climate fiction often depicts the gradual transformation of landscapes and ecosystems, illustrating how environmental crises accumulate over time. By highlighting the long-term consequences of ecological neglect, such narratives reveal the hidden forms of violence embedded within modern industrial and economic systems.

1.7. Ursula Heise and Global Environmental Imagination

Another key theorist in contemporary eco-critical scholarship is Ursula K. Heise, who emphasizes the importance of understanding environmental issues within a global context. Heise (2016) argues that ecological problems such as climate change, species

extinction, and environmental pollution transcend national boundaries and must therefore be analyzed through a global environmental perspective.

Heise introduces the concept of eco-cosmopolitanism, which encourages individuals to develop a sense of ecological responsibility that extends beyond local or national contexts. According to Heise (2016), literature plays a crucial role in fostering this global environmental awareness by connecting local experiences of environmental change with broader planetary concerns.

Climate fiction, in particular, often portrays global ecological crises that affect multiple regions and communities. These narratives highlight the interconnected nature of environmental systems and emphasize the need for collective action in addressing ecological challenges. Heise's theoretical framework therefore allows scholars to explore how literary texts represent the global dimensions of environmental crisis and ecological interdependence.

1.8. Climate Fiction and Environmental Narratives

Within the broader framework of ecocriticism, climate fiction (cli-fi) has emerged as a significant literary genre that explores the cultural and social implications of climate change. Climate fiction typically depicts near-future or speculative scenarios in which environmental crises reshape human societies and ecosystems. These narratives often explore themes such as environmental displacement, ecological collapse, technological adaptation, and social inequality.

Scholars argue that climate fiction serves as a powerful cultural tool for communicating the urgency of climate change. By translating complex scientific realities into emotionally engaging narratives, climate fiction helps readers imagine the potential consequences of environmental degradation. As Heise (2016) suggests, literature can transform abstract ecological issues into concrete human experiences, thereby fostering greater public awareness and environmental responsibility.

Climate fiction also frequently explores the transformation of urban environments under conditions of ecological crisis. Rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and infrastructural collapse often reshape cities, turning them into sites of environmental vulnerability. Literary representations of deteriorating urban spaces highlight the complex relationship between human development, environmental exploitation, and ecological sustainability.

The theoretical concepts outlined above provide the foundation for analyzing environmental representation in contemporary climate fiction. Ecocriticism offers a critical lens through which literary texts can be examined in relation to ecological systems and environmental crises. Glotfelty's definition establishes the basic premise of ecocritical analysis, while Buell's theory of environmental imagination emphasizes the role of literature in shaping ecological awareness.

Garrard's ecocritical tropes provide a thematic framework for identifying recurring environmental motifs within literary narratives, while Nixon's concept of slow violence highlights the gradual and often invisible nature of ecological destruction. Finally, Heise's theory of eco-cosmopolitanism situates environmental narratives within a broader global context, emphasizing the interconnectedness of ecological systems.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this study examines how contemporary climate fiction represents environmental degradation, urban decay, and ecological transformation. The framework allows for a comprehensive analysis of how literary narratives depict the complex relationship between humans and the environment while also highlighting the social and ethical implications of ecological crisis.

Ultimately, the theoretical framework of ecocriticism enables this research to explore how literature not only reflects environmental realities but also contributes to the development of ecological consciousness. Through its representation of environmental change, climate fiction invites readers to reconsider their relationship with the natural world and to imagine more sustainable futures.

2. Analysis

The novel presents urban decay not simply as a material deterioration of space but as an ecological condition in which environmental instability, infrastructural collapse, and human vulnerability converge to reshape the very meaning of urban life. From the opening depiction of the city, ecological precarity is embedded within the architecture itself, suggesting that the built environment is neither stable nor autonomous but deeply dependent on fragile natural systems. This is articulated through the observation that "The Morningside had not been built to withstand hurricanes, nor a soil base that was disintegrating, however gradually, into the bay" (Obreht, 2023, p. 10). The phrase "disintegrating... into the bay" signals the erosion of the boundary between land and water, emphasizing the encroachment of ecological forces into human-designed spaces. The city, therefore, ceases to function as a site of mastery over nature and instead becomes a terrain where environmental processes actively undo human structures. This aligns with eco-critical arguments that challenge anthropocentric assumptions by foregrounding the agency of the nonhuman world in shaping human destinies.

The fragility of infrastructure further reinforces this ecological vulnerability, demonstrating how environmental decline infiltrates everyday life in subtle yet pervasive ways. The malfunctioning elevator, described as getting stuck "at least once a week... Minds had been lost this way" (Obreht, 2023, p. 10), becomes a potent symbol of systemic failure. While seemingly a minor detail, it encapsulates the psychological toll of living within a deteriorating environment. The repetition of breakdowns suggests a normalization of dysfunction, where instability is no longer exceptional but routine. From an eco-critical perspective, this reflects the logic of slow violence, in which environmental harm unfolds

gradually and becomes embedded in the rhythms of daily existence. The loss of “minds” points to the cognitive and emotional strain produced by ecological insecurity, indicating that environmental collapse is not only material but also deeply psychological.

The narrative further expands this ecological condition through its portrayal of displacement and environmental migration. The city is depicted as a space from which people are compelled to flee, as “most people... had fled the privation and the rot and the rising tide and gone upriver to scattered little freshwater townships” (Obrecht, 2023, p. 14). The accumulation of terms, “privation,” “rot,” and “rising tide”, captures the multifaceted nature of ecological crisis, where economic deprivation, environmental decay, and climate change converge to render urban life untenable. The movement “upriver” signifies not only physical relocation but also a search for ecological stability, suggesting that access to viable environments becomes a defining factor of survival. This representation foregrounds environmental injustice, as those who remain in the city are often those with limited means to escape, thereby exposing the uneven distribution of ecological risk.

The Morningside building itself operates as a central ecological metaphor, encapsulating the transformation of urban space under conditions of environmental stress. Once described as “the jewel of an upper-city neighborhood,” it is now reduced to a structure with “just a few lighted windows skittering up its black edifice” (Obrecht, 2023, p. 1). This stark contrast between past grandeur and present decay illustrates the collapse of urban modernity, where progress is revealed to be both temporary and unsustainable. The imagery of scattered lights against a dark facade conveys a sense of fragmentation, suggesting that life persists only in isolated pockets within an otherwise failing system. From an eco-critical standpoint, the building becomes a microcosm of ecological collapse, reflecting the broader disintegration of the urban environment and the fragility of human habitation within it.

Silvia’s perspective plays a crucial role in articulating ecological consciousness as an experiential and evolving process. Her observations of the building reveal an acute sensitivity to environmental instability, as she notices how “unfamiliar lights rove the ceiling” and hears unsettling noises that disrupt her sense of security (Obrecht, 2023, p. 9). These sensory details create an atmosphere of unease, indicating that ecological disruption manifests not only in visible destruction but also in altered perceptions of space. Silvia’s consciousness is shaped by a heightened awareness of uncertainty, where even the most mundane aspects of life become unpredictable. This aligns with eco-critical notions of disorientation, where environmental instability destabilizes established relationships between humans and their surroundings.

Memory functions as a crucial counterpoint to this instability, preserving traces of a past that contrasts sharply with the degraded present. Silvia recalls a time when “neighbors laughed, quarreled, or tromped up and down the old-fashioned stairs” (Obrecht,

2023, p. 9), evoking a sense of community and vitality that has since disappeared. This recollection highlights the social consequences of ecological decline, where the breakdown of environmental conditions leads to the erosion of communal bonds. The absence of such interactions in the present underscores the isolation and fragmentation produced by urban decay, suggesting that ecological collapse extends beyond physical space to encompass the dissolution of social life.

The novel further reinforces this temporal dimension through its repeated evocation of the city's former vibrancy. Silvia remembers "the city of fanfare, lamplit streets and music and dazzling marquees" (Obreht, 2023, p. 2), an image that stands in stark contrast to the current state of darkness and abandonment. The repetition of this imagery later in the narrative, "lamplit streets and music and dazzling marquees" (Obreht, 2023, p. 15), emphasizes the persistence of memory even as the physical environment deteriorates. This juxtaposition between past and present illustrates the extent of ecological loss, where not only material structures but also cultural and sensory experiences are erased. From an eco-critical perspective, this reflects the concept of environmental mourning, where the loss of place is experienced as both a physical and emotional rupture.

The notion of slow violence is further articulated through the cumulative depiction of environmental decline, as the city is characterized by "the privation and the rot and the rising tide" (Obreht, 2023, p. 3). This triadic formulation captures the interconnectedness of ecological, economic, and social crises, suggesting that environmental degradation cannot be understood in isolation. The gradual nature of this process renders it less visible yet more pervasive, embedding itself into the fabric of everyday life. The normalization of such conditions highlights the insidious nature of ecological collapse, where destruction becomes an accepted reality rather than an exceptional event.

Bezi Duras's presence introduces a complex dimension of ecological awareness shaped by privilege, distance, and myth. Her penthouse, which "blazed, day and night" (Obreht, 2023, p. 1), stands in stark contrast to the darkness enveloping the rest of the building. This vertical separation signifies a hierarchy of ecological exposure, where those positioned at higher levels are able to maintain a semblance of stability despite the surrounding decay. The persistent illumination of her space suggests both resilience and detachment, indicating that ecological crisis is experienced unevenly across social strata. From an eco-critical perspective, this spatial arrangement reflects environmental inequality, where access to resources mediates the impact of ecological degradation.

The building itself is again described as "standing with just a few lighted windows skittering up its black edifice" (Obreht, 2023, p. 17), reinforcing the image of isolated survival within a collapsing system. The repetition of this imagery underscores the persistence of decay, suggesting that the conditions of ecological decline are both enduring and inescapable. Bezi's characterization further complicates this dynamic, as she is

perceived as a figure who transcends ordinary temporality. The suggestion that “people like that... do not simply die... and continue to live on and on” (Obreht, 2023, p. 45) imbues her with a mythic quality, linking her existence to broader ecological cycles of endurance and adaptation.

Her relationship with animals and her ambiguous status within the narrative challenge conventional distinctions between human and nonhuman realms. This blurring of boundaries aligns with eco-critical critiques of anthropocentrism, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all forms of life within ecological systems. By situating Bezi at the intersection of myth and reality, the novel expands the scope of ecological consciousness beyond scientific discourse, incorporating cultural and imaginative dimensions that enrich the understanding of environmental crisis.

The psychological impact of ecological collapse is a recurring theme throughout the narrative, manifesting in a pervasive sense of anxiety and disorientation. The instability of the environment creates a condition in which certainty is constantly undermined, forcing individuals to adapt to unpredictable circumstances. The recurring failures of infrastructure, the encroachment of environmental forces, and the absence of stable social structures all contribute to a sense of existential precarity. This reflects eco-critical arguments that emphasize the need to reconceptualize human identity in relation to ecological systems, recognizing vulnerability as a fundamental aspect of existence.

Ultimately, the novel presents urban decay as both a manifestation of ecological crisis and a site of emerging ecological consciousness. The collapse of the city reveals the limitations of human control over the environment, exposing the interconnectedness of natural and built systems. At the same time, it creates conditions in which new forms of awareness and adaptation can emerge. The persistence of life within the deteriorating environment suggests that ecological consciousness is not merely a theoretical construct but a lived reality shaped by experience, memory, and survival.

The narrative does not offer a resolution to this crisis but instead portrays a world in which decline is ongoing and adaptation is necessary. By foregrounding the entanglement of environmental, social, and psychological dimensions, the novel challenges readers to reconsider their relationship with the environment and to recognize the profound implications of ecological collapse. In doing so, it contributes to eco-critical discourse by illustrating how literature can serve as a powerful medium for exploring the complexities of environmental crisis and the possibilities of ecological awareness within an increasingly unstable world.

3. Conclusion

The analysis of *The Morningside* demonstrates that urban decay in the novel is not merely a backdrop for narrative action but a central ecological condition through which human existence is redefined. Through its sustained depiction of environmental instability,

infrastructural collapse, and social fragmentation, the novel reorients the reader's understanding of the city as an ecological space deeply entangled with natural processes. The disintegration of physical structures, the encroachment of water, and the gradual erosion of community life collectively reveal that urban environments are neither autonomous nor immune to ecological forces. Instead, they are precarious systems whose survival depends on fragile environmental balances that, once disrupted, lead to cascading forms of decline.

What emerges from this eco-critical reading is a profound critique of anthropocentrism. The novel dismantles the illusion of human control over nature by foregrounding the agency of environmental forces that reshape, infiltrate, and ultimately destabilize urban life. The collapsing infrastructure and rising waters signify not only environmental crisis but also the limits of modernity's promise of permanence and progress. In this sense, the narrative aligns with broader eco-critical concerns that challenge the binary between nature and culture, demonstrating that the city itself is an ecological entity subject to natural laws and vulnerabilities.

At the same time, the novel foregrounds the uneven distribution of ecological suffering, thereby engaging with questions of environmental justice. The displacement of populations, the concentration of marginalized individuals within deteriorating spaces like the Morningside building, and the contrast between different modes of survival all highlight how ecological crises disproportionately affect the most vulnerable. This reinforces the idea that environmental degradation is inseparable from social and economic inequalities, and that any meaningful ecological consciousness must also account for issues of power, access, and marginalization.

Another significant contribution of the novel lies in its exploration of ecological consciousness as an evolving and experiential process. Through Silvia's perspective, the narrative illustrates how awareness of environmental crisis is not abstract but emerges through lived encounters with instability, loss, and adaptation. Memory plays a crucial role in this process, functioning both as a site of mourning for a lost ecological past and as a means of preserving knowledge in the face of ongoing decline. The tension between remembering and forgetting underscores the psychological dimensions of ecological collapse, revealing how environmental degradation reshapes not only physical spaces but also emotional and cognitive frameworks.

Furthermore, the incorporation of mythic and nonhuman elements expands the scope of ecological awareness beyond empirical observation, suggesting that imagination, storytelling, and cultural narratives are essential to understanding and responding to environmental crisis. By blurring the boundaries between human and nonhuman, reality and myth, the novel challenges rigid epistemological frameworks and opens up alternative ways of conceptualizing ecological interconnectedness. This multidimensional approach

enriches eco-critical discourse by emphasizing that ecological consciousness is not limited to scientific knowledge but is also deeply embedded in cultural and narrative practices.

Ultimately, the novel resists offering a definitive resolution to the ecological crisis it portrays. Instead, it presents a world characterized by ongoing decline, uncertainty, and adaptation. This refusal of closure is significant, as it reflects the contemporary reality of environmental crisis as a continuous and unresolved condition. Yet within this uncertainty, the novel also gestures toward the possibility of resilience and transformation. The persistence of life, memory, and storytelling within a deteriorating environment suggests that ecological consciousness, though born out of crisis, holds the potential to reshape human relationships with the natural world.

In conclusion, *The Morningside* serves as a powerful eco-critical text that not only represents environmental collapse but also interrogates its social, psychological, and ethical implications. By situating urban decay within a broader ecological framework, the novel compels readers to confront the realities of climate change and environmental degradation while also envisioning new forms of awareness and coexistence.

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