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**Emotional Dissociation, Suicidal Ideation and Apathy: An Analysis of Climate Trauma  
in Sam J Miller *Blackfish City***

\* Abdul Wahab, PhD English Literature Scholar

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**Abstract**

*This research paper endeavours to examine Climate Trauma in Sam J Miller's Blackfish City (2018). Miller's novel portrays the characters suffering from Climate Trauma exhibiting symptoms such as suicidal thoughts, pre-anxiety, apathy, emotional dissociation and other ecologically induced mental distresses. The major character, Fill, is a victim of Climate Trauma and he exhibits Climate Trauma through his psychological distresses like emotional dissociation, numbness and apathy. This research paper gathers and interprets relevant textual evidence of Climate Trauma and its symptoms while employing close reading to select relevant text and textual analysis to analysis the selected text in the light of the theory and context. The analysis concludes that Climate Trauma is a real ontological, epistemological and psychological rupture which is the result of the chronic, ever-present and imagined ecological calamities. In the novel, Fill's condition is shown to stem from the way he is disconnected from nature at various level. It demonstrates that his Climate Trauma is due to his mechanistic, materialistic and reductionistic world view. The significance of the paper lies in its contribution to the growing field of ecocriticism; and aims to engage literary scholars and explore it in new ways.*

**Keywords:** Climate Trauma, Pre-Anxiety, Apathy, Nature, Ecological, Emotional Dissociation

**Introduction**

In the present era humanity is now functioning as a force, causing destruction, domination, and exploitation of nature to a degree that has triggered severe ecological crises, such as climate change, global warming, species extinction, deforestation, depletion of natural resources and many other issues like these. These destructions by humanity have precipitated a range of social, physical and psychological distresses like eco-anxiety, eco-grief, solastalgia and Climate Trauma. As a recent and growing area of study in environmental humanities and ecocriticism, the first major work on Climate Trauma namely *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction* was written by E Ann Kaplan in 2016. However, it has also grabbed the attention of writers who create fictional characters who suffer from Climate Trauma.

Climate trauma is also known as pre-trauma or pre-TSS i.e. pre-traumatic stress syndrome is a trauma where the individual suffers from the fear of the total collapse of natural environment and social infrastructure (Kaplan, 2016). This trauma stems from the extreme fear of future ecological apocalypse, distinguishing it from the classical trauma which is the trauma of the past. In classical trauma, a past event stirs the consciousness and disturbs the individuals in the present, whereas Climate Trauma is future oriented in which a yet-to-be event in the future causes present day distress. This reference to tense makes it a very compelling phenomenon. An individual suffering from Climate Trauma experiences a dual fear: the fear of the collapse of the ecosystem and the fear of the collapse of the social infrastructure which threatens the survival of themselves, their family and the whole humanity. Symptoms of Climate Trauma identified by Kaplan include, pre-anxiety, nightmares, hallucinations, flashforward and stress.

The conceptual groundwork for pre-traumatic stress syndrome, however, was not laid by E Ann Kaplan. Norfolk (2016) was the first who mentioned it in *Report: more U.S Soldiers Suffering from Pre-traumatic Stress Disorder*. This article was subsequently published in *The Onion*. Norfolk claimed that the soldiers waiting for their future deployment to the war zones are traced with pre-traumatic stress syndrome and they exhibit symptoms like acute anger, insomnia and sweating. Similarly, they were also troubled by the vivid mental images of future combat scenarios of war like rocket attacks, bomb explosion or their friends being shot dead or. It also disturbs their cognitive and

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\* NUML, Islamabad, Pakistan Email: [Abdulwahabchd10@gmail.com](mailto:Abdulwahabchd10@gmail.com)

mental health. This concept was later investigated by Dorte Bernsten and David C Robin, by conducting an experiment on Danish Soldiers who would be sent to Afghanistan in the future. They presented a checklist of pre-traumatic stress syndrome to soldiers, they found a significant number of soldiers displayed the syndrome, thereby affirming the status of this syndrome as a real mental condition. Similarly, Stacey Collins (2017) in *Fearing the Future: Pre-traumatic Stress Reactions*, contends that despite its absence from *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-V)*, substantial evidences from various psychologists' points to its presence in human rights and climate activists. These individuals have been observed to suffer from severe grief, sadness, sleeplessness and future oriented disturbing images.

In order to strengthen the argument further about the link of ecological crises and psychological repercussions, I now mention few more studies which reveal that the ecological crises have severe impacts upon the psyche of individuals. Lise Van Susteren (2018) in *The Psychological Impacts of the Climate Crisis: A Call to Action*, contends that the inner world of the psyche and the outer world of the environment are intertwined in a way that the one forcefully affect the other. She argues that the psyche of the humans is tied to nature. Nature can trigger both positive and negative emotions in humans. Moreover, the psychological health of the humans is tied to the health of the planet Earth. She states: "humanity is already suffering – and will increasingly suffer – varying degrees and types of psychological harm as climate-related disasters alter how and where we live, and, in some cases, if we live" (25). She argues that climate crises affect humanity in direct as well indirect ways. She argues that some individuals are affected directly because they witness a natural calamity like storm, flood, earthquake or tsunami etc. while other are the second-hand victims because they see the dreadful condition of the first-hand victim. Moreover, she further contends that the number of the affected people is gradually increasing with each passing day and there is a mental disorder which is arising consisting of "depression, anxiety, and trauma related conditions" (25).

Likewise, Doherty and Clayton (2011) in *The Psychological Impacts of Global Climate Change* delineate that climate crises have fundamentally three major impacts upon individuals. The first one which they mention is the direct impacts where individual witness severe environmental conditions or ecological catastrophes and these ecological issues cause several issues like social violence, gender violence, and individual issues like depression, anxiety, and stress. The second are the indirect influences which are caused by witnessing the first-hand victim of the various ecological calamities. The second kind of impacts are also caused by imagining a future ecological calamity and thinking about the potential environmental disaster which can be unleashed at any time. They argue that these impacts "include emotional and affective responses associated with viewing images of environmental degradation or human suffering in the media or with questions of lifestyle or purchasing choices" (Doherty & Clayton, 2011, 286). The psychosocial repercussions is the third major impact of climate change which include along with psychological problems some social problems like social justice, resource distribution, migration and other such issues.

Similarly, Benjamin White (2015) in *State of Emergency: Trauma and Climate Change* traces the link between ecological crises and their ramifications upon human mind. In his opinion, climate change is actually a trauma. He says, "In the midst of climate change—a process that is undisputedly traumatic and is perhaps even the greatest trauma—understanding trauma and its effects on our minds and bodies has become more important than ever" (White 192). In the same fashion he refers to climate change as a trauma which seems to have been evolved from alienation, isolation and aggression. While exploring the psychological impacts of the ecological crises, his special focus is on climate denial and humans' lack of action. He argues that contemporary humans have emotionally distanced themselves from the ecological crises. He states, "The powerful, automatic, and unconscious effects of trauma have led us to exploit our environment and entrench ourselves in a relationship to nature that negates both our own subjectivity and that of the world around us" (White 193). He argues that our lack of action and paralysis are owing to trauma which eventually perpetuates and accelerates the climate crises. In his opinion, our collective indifference and apathy towards climate crises are actually the trauma itself. He is of the view that "The ways we orient ourselves against suffering—dissociation, vigilance, and aggression—are the roots of our environmental ills" (White 194). These issues, that I discussed in detail, though belonging to the psychological realm have also grabbed the attention of the literary writers who deal with them through their fictitious characters.

Literature is a unique space where such trauma is not only articulated but its healing possibilities are also narrated. Sam J Miller's *Blackfish City* (2018) is one such narrative that deals with Climate Trauma. It is a speculative narrative that creatively engages with the ecological degradations, social inequality, technological advancement and severe surveillance. The novel is set in the artificially built city of Qaanaaq which is controlled and run by technology. The city is the epitome of high-tech industry's solution to the upcoming environmental apocalypse. Its temperature has been artificially maintained through thermal heating. There are several characters and they have been engaged in various activities. They are the direct victim of the ecological calamities, social inequalities and elite sponsored surveillance. The novel very befittingly portrays ecological trauma. In fact, it endeavours to imaginatively present the relationship between humans and nature especially portraying the psychological repercussions of the environmental crises. Literature creates stories about the relationship between humans and nature. It represents these crises through the lived experiences of characters hence humanizing these external crises. By reading these stories, the readers exercise empathy, sympathy and love and hence develop strong ecological consciousness.

**1. Suicidal Thoughts, Emotional Dissociations, and Pre-anxiety in *Blackfish City*: Analysis of Fill's Climate Pre-trauma**

Fill is the protagonist and one of the major characters in Sam J. Miller *Blackfish City* (2018). He is completely cut off from nature physically, psychologically, epistemologically and culturally. Therefore, He develops Climate Trauma and exhibits symptoms like suffering from pre-anxiety, emotional numbness, apathy and inaction. In the context of Fill, Climate Trauma is the ontological, epistemological and psychological rupture which is caused by the ongoing and imagined ecological calamity. It is an ontological rupture because it affects the individual sense of the stable nature, ecosystem and the planet earth. It also affects how the individual sees themselves and their relationship to the rest of the world. The very being of the individual is based on the planet earth but when the earth is going under massive transformation how an individual can sustain the sense of being-in-the-world. In the same way, it is an epistemological rupture where nature is behaving in such a weird manner that existing knowledge systems like modern science, philosophy and even technology are helpless to solve these problems. Likewise, it is a psychological rupture as well. Fill feels numb, paralysed and disinterested. He has lost his interest in each and everything. Thus, it means that Climate Trauma in the novel is not just ecological but ontological, epistemological and psychological. In fact, he lives with what is called hyperobject. Timothy Morton (2013) in his seminal book, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, defines hyperobjects as objects that are "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (1). Therefore, in Fill's case, climate change is the hyperobject which has generated his Climate Trauma.

His Climate Trauma is largely inward and instead of exhibiting symptoms like nightmares, hallucinations, and flashforwards etc he demonstrates emotional dissociations and has recurring suicidal thoughts. Such kind of distresses stem from the ontological, epistemological, and psychological ruptures that have been caused by the ecological degradations. He sometimes sends messages to his contacts and then deletes them because he is in distress, emotionally numb and wants to take his life. In Miller's words "...then deleting five separate long graphic messages to all his contacts, and then deciding to kill himself" (Miller, 2018, 11). His decision to delete these messages stems from his existential crises and from the rupture in the very fabric of his being. He is aware that he lives in uncertain and unpredictable world where any natural calamity can destroy not only his family but the whole planet Earth. Both the coming and the ongoing ecological degradations have created ontological rupture in him where he no longer believes in nurturing, stable and trustworthy nature. Nature has turned violent and has endangered his very survival. A nature which once was a home where he has been deeply rooted and lived a safe and stable life has now created chaos in his life and has compelled him to take his life. His suicidal ideations also stem from his belief that the world is collapsing and if the world is collapsing, he should kill himself in advance. His suicidal thought and disconnection from people are strongly connected to the ongoing ecological crises which endanger the lives of all. As Zhiwa Woodbury (2019) argues:

"Once we become aware of its true scope, depth, and accelerating pace, we then begin to view everything else through the traumatic lens of the climate crisis— from weather anomalies to political crises and polarized dysfunction, from the threat (and memory) of nuclear war to the absence of

songbirds and honey bees on our nature walks, from apocalyptic developments in the Middle East to the latest superhero movie.” (5)

Fill’s suicidal thoughts are the manifestations of his obsession that the world is fragile, vulnerable and is moving towards eco-collapse. In the same way, his sending messages to people and then deleting them is symptomatic of the loss meaning. People and their contacts have become meaningless and purposeless for him. He is not in a position to situate himself in a stable and trustworthy world. His deletion of the messages is actually his attempt to delete his digital footprint and to disappear gradually. Therefore, it can be said that his suicidal thoughts and the deletion of messages are not just random emotions but are patterns that exhibits that his being-in-the-world has been fractured by the ongoing and imagined ecological calamities.

Moreover, these suicidal thoughts are the result of the slow violence. He lives in a system which has been committing violence upon people and nature for centuries. However, it is not a sudden, episodic and spectacular violence but slow, ongoing, and “a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales” (Nixon, 2011, 2). It is a “violence decoupled from its original causes by the workings of time” (11), a “pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects” (3), the “fatal repercussions [of which] are dispersed across space and time” (10) as per Rob Nixon (2011) who in his *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* has expressed these ideas.

Thus, his deletion of the messages and his suicidal thoughts are the result of the long age erosion of his emotions. The social inequality which is present in the Qaanaaq city, the constant surveillance, the plague known as The Breaks, and the ecological degradations are adding to his emotional burden. There is severe pollution in the city where the inhabitants inhale poisonous gases because the city is run by renewable energies. The poor also live in scummy areas and add to the already existing dirt in the city. Fill being aware of all this suffers a lot. He read and hears about the climate crises. He is also aware that the whole world has been destroyed by ecological devastations and that he has no future left. This sort of slow violence has conquered even his remote areas of the psyche and has compelled him to take his life. The psychological problems that have been produced by climate crises have turned inward and has destroyed his inner psychological life. He is “living with a sense of an uncertain future and an unreliable natural environment” (Kaplan, xix).

Similarly, these two events from the novel: suicidal thoughts and deletion of the messages, can also be both literally and symbolically represented as the symptoms of his epistemological rupture. The setting of the novel is in a post-apocalypse world where an ecological calamity has taken place and has destroyed the whole planet. Humans have died but some of them have survived in this artificially built city named Qaanaaq. It is a city which is run by technology and which temperature has been maintained artificially. The whole system works through data, digits, numerical and algorithm. There is not an iota of knowledge which is based on ecosophy, ecological wisdom, intuition, emotions, and ecological thinking. This hyper disconnection has completely alienated Fill from nature and he is disconnected from it. It is because of this that he exhibits Climate Trauma. Likewise, it is a psychological rupture as well. Fill while seeing nature being destroyed decides to kill himself. His psyche is entangled with the distresses of nature. In fact, he is the true example that a nature destroyed cannot render him a healthy psyche.

However, his orientation is towards future. Although, he lives in the ongoing ecological crises (though in future because the novel is speculative), he severely suffers from the thoughts of a bleak future ahead that is why he wants to commit suicide. This is a very inique situation in the context of the contemporary ecological degradations where individuals suffer from the ongoing ecological degradations but they suffer more from imagining future ecological calamities. As Michael Pavel (2020) *Lament: Climate and Trauma* argue “Where, though constituted partly by catastrophes in the present, the climate crisis is largely oriented toward the future” (13). Classical trauma theory is backward looking and is focused in the agonies of the past. In a time of severe ecological emergency, future memory or what Stef Craps (2017) in *Climate Change and the Art of Anticipatory Memory* calls “anticipated memory” (486) becomes pivotal. According to Craps, such kind of memory has gained significant attention in the contemporary cultural texts like fiction, documentaries and films. In his own words:

The preoccupation with anticipated memory and preliminary or proleptic mourning evident in fictional future histories of climate change, which subvert the customary parameters of memory in

terms of both scale and directionality, resonates with recent calls for memory studies to become more future-oriented instead of merely backward-looking. (479)

Other than suicidal thoughts and the deletion of the messages, he suffers from numbness and emotional dissociations. In the same way, he pays no attention to the news about the falling of the American government. He states: “why he should care about anything” (Miller, 2018, 11). Such kind of emotional dissociation is actually the result of his obsession with ecological calamities and the realisation that he is helpless and cannot do anything to save the planet Earth. His cold response to the falling of the American government demonstrates his future anxiety, helplessness and desperation. As Judith Herman (1992) in *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* argues that such incidents have the potentials to “overwhelm the ordinary human adaptation to life” as well as “the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning” (33). He has emotionally dissociated himself because he neither understands nor do anything about the climate crises. Although, his Climate Trauma has become inward but that does not mean that he has no or less Climate Trauma. In fact, his Climate Trauma is so intense that he has emotionally dissociated himself so that he may feel no pain. As Muhammad avers “The word trauma is used to describe experiences or situations that are emotionally painful and distressing, and that overwhelm people’s ability to cope, leaving them [feeling] powerless” (2).

But this is not the only problem that he has. He has completely become indifferent to the people of Qaanaaq. He pays no heed to what is going on in his surrounding. He has completely alienated, disconnected and isolated himself from them: “Today he didn’t hate them, these people passing him. He didn’t pity them” (Miller, 2018, 12). In fact, he has no emotions for them. He has actually lost his belief in meaning, in purpose and in identification with people. He is deeply aware that these people are actually responsible for the massive intervention in nature that has caused these violent ecological changes. As Benjamin White (2015) argues “The ways we orient ourselves against suffering—dissociation, vigilance, and aggression—are the roots of our environmental ills” (194). Dissociation is one of the responses of a climatically traumatized individual. Today, we do not feel for nature. We know that our planet earth is at the verge of destruction because of climate crises, but we do not take any action because we have dissociated ourselves from nature.

He has become insane because he has lost his rootedness, relatedness and transcendence. Moreover, he does not exercise identification with nature and with people. Rootedness enables a person to be firmly grounded in his surrounding, in land, home, and nature. Thus, it is the best remedy to overcome alienation from nature. In the same way, relatedness enables a person to establish connection with human beings and with his family. This too is pivotal for overcoming Climate Trauma. Likewise, transcendence enables a person to move beyond the individual survival and to find out higher meaning and purpose: in Fill’s case, the ecological connection. The aforementioned psychological tools are essential components of our subjectivity. As Benjamin White argues (2015) “The powerful, automatic, and unconscious effects of trauma have led us to exploit our environment and entrench ourselves in a relationship to nature that negates both our own subjectivity and that of the world around us” (193).

Fill has the aforementioned psychological symptoms which means that he has developed Climate Trauma. His trauma is inward and is severe. He has lost meaning, purpose and trust in each and everything. He even wants to commit suicide. Thus, it means that the novel is replete with the representation of Climate Trauma and the character of Fill is suitable character for the analysis of Climate Trauma.

## **2. Conclusion**

The aforementioned analysis revealed the various layers of Climate Trauma as exhibited and manifested by the character of Fill. It revealed that Climate Trauma is not just an ecological material problem rather it is deeply ontological, psychological and existential affecting the very existence of the selected character while shaping his identity, memory, subjectivity and relationships at all levels. By foregrounding Fill’s manifestation of Climate Trauma, this research article has contended that in the narrative arc of the selected novel, Climate Trauma does not follow linear temporality. It is a phenomenon of both the present and the future. While doing so, the aforementioned analysis has highlighted that Fill’s nightmares, hallucinations, anxiety, depression and other mental agonies are not because of some personal episodic loss but is the result of his constantly monitoring the ongoing severe ecological calamities stemming from the humans’ perpetual assault of nature. Moreover, it has

also revealed that Climate Trauma itself is a symptom of a much deeper problem which is the disconnection of humans from nature. Fill who at the beginning of the narrative is physically, emotionally, and psychologically disconnected from nature gets Climate Trauma.

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