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ECOLOGICAL DREAD AND POROUS SELVES: CLIMATE ANXIETY AND POSTHUMAN FUTURES IN THE FICTION OF DAISY HILDYARD

Mrigendra Dewangan[1]& Nand Kumar Dewangan[2]

[1]PGT English, Eklavya Model Residential School, Bhelwadih, Balrampur (C.G)
Address: House No. 143, Uparpara, Salka Nawagaon, District-Bilaspur (C.G.) 495113.
Email: dewanganmrigendra@gmail.com
[2]Assistant Professor, Government Rani Rashmi Devi College, Khairagarh (C.G.)
Email: kumarnd99@gmail.com

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Keywords	***Abstract***
Climate Anxiety, Posthumanism, Ecocriticism, Daisy Hildyard, Anthropocene, Affect Theory, Porous Subjectivity	This paper critically examines climate anxiety and posthuman subjectivity in the works of British author Daisy Hildyard, focusing on The Second Body (2017) and Emergency (2022). Using ecocriticism, posthumanism, and affect theory, it explores how Hildyard's writing expresses an environmental awareness that both challenges anthropocentric identity and emphasises the emotional experience of living amid rapid ecological crises. The study proposes that Hildyard constructs a 'porous self,' a subject whose mental and physical boundaries dissolve amid planetary crises, resulting in ecological dread that cannot be mitigated through conventional realist fiction or environmental philosophy. Results show that her fiction captures an ongoing tension between embodied experience and the vast scale of the Anthropocene, resulting in a narrative style that effectively conveys the psychological reality of climate anxiety.

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary literary fiction has become one of the most contested sites for negotiating the psychic and philosophical consequences of climate change. British writer Daisy Hildyard has emerged as one of the more intellectually searching voices to take up this challenge, producing a body of work distinguished by its willingness to subject the very category of the self to ecological pressure. In both *The Second Body* (2017), a philosophical essay-novella that defies easy generic classification, and *Emergency* (2022), a more novelistic work, the human subject is not the stable centre of experience but a permeable, distributed, and ultimately uncertain entity that exists in a state of constitutive entanglement with nonhuman worlds.

Hildyard's work resists the programmatic tendencies of "climate fiction" or "cli-fi." Her texts do not narrate climate disaster as an event; they inhabit it as an atmosphere. They pursue an unsettling inquiry: what does it mean to be a body, human, social, biological, when planetary conditions are in irreversible distress? This question places Hildyard in productive conversation with posthumanist philosophy, ecocriticism, affect theory, and what Timothy Morton calls "dark ecology."

Though her reputation is rising and Emergency was longlisted for the Booker Prize, Hildyard has not yet received consistent academic attention matching the intellectual scope of her work. No published study has brought the combined resources of posthumanism and climate-affect theory to bear on both texts together. This paper fills that gap. It argues that Hildyard's fiction develops a "porous selfhood", a subjectivity open to the nonhuman world, making climate anxiety an ontological condition tied to planetary crisis, not just an individual symptom. The paper draws on the theoretical resources of Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, Timothy Morton, Rob Nixon, and Lauren Berlant.

THEORETICAL AND CRITICAL CONTEXT

Timothy Morton's *Ecology Without Nature* (2007) and *The Ecological Thought* (2010) inaugurated a "dark turn" in ecocriticism particularly germane to reading Hildyard. Morton argues that authentic ecological writing should resist idealised nature, like the pastoral or pristine, and instead focus on "the mesh": the complex interconnectedness of all living and non-living things. This vision of ecology as fundamentally strange rather than consoling finds a precise literary correlate in Hildyard's refusal of environmental sentiment. Her landscapes are not resources of redemption but sites of entanglement where the human body discovers its own unsettling permeability.

Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) raises exactly the formal challenges Hildyard's work implicitly addresses. Nixon argues that the gradual, dispersed, and temporally extended character of ecological destruction renders it peculiarly resistant to conventional literary representation, which depends on condensed, visible, and eventful action.

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Hildyard develops an alternative set of formal strategies through lyric-analytical prose that attends to incremental degradation.

Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013) elaborates a "zoe-centred" ethics that decentres the human subject in favour of a relational ontology grounded in biological vitality. For Braidotti, the posthuman is not a post-apocalyptic fantasy but a present condition: we are already constitutively distributed across human and nonhuman networks. Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) develops a related position, arguing for "sympoiesis"—making-with—as the fundamental condition of all life. Both theorists provide language for what Hildyard enacts when she refuses to stabilise the boundary between her narrator's body and the bodies of the animals, fungi, and ecosystems with which that narrator is entangled.

Affect theory, especially Lauren Berlant's idea of "cruel optimism" and Glenn Albrecht's term "solastalgia," forms the third key theoretical foundation. Berlant's idea that attachment to promises of flourishing can actually obstruct it directly relates to Hildyard's examination of human interactions with nature (Berlant, 2011, p. 1). Likewise, Albrecht's solastalgia, the distress caused by environmental changes in one's home area, is pertinent, as Hildyard's characters often see the altered landscape not as a spectacle but as grief (Albrecht, 2019, p. 38). Renee Lertzman's notion of "environmental melancholia", a kind of unresolved mourning for ongoing ecological losses, is also vital to Hildyard's emotional approach (Lertzman, 2015, p. 54).

THE POROUS SELF AND THE SECOND BODY

The Second Body opens with a philosophical provocation that immediately establishes Hildyard's distinctive method: the assertion that we each inhabit not one but two bodies. The first body is the intimate, sensory experience of daily life. The second body, harder to define, is the ecological and evolutionary body involved in atmospheric chemistry, sharing genetic material with all living things on Earth. This second body, Hildyard suggests, is not a metaphor but a literal description of what kind of entity a human being actually is when the anthropocentric frame is removed.

Climate anxiety has immediate, wide-reaching effects. If the human body is truly distributed across planetary systems of atmosphere, water, and biology, then climate change is not just an external threat but a change in embodied existence itself. Hildyard writes: "Your second body lacks nerve endings and cannot feel impacts, molecules do not experience sensations when broken down or eaten, but it is still you. You are in two places at once" (Hildyard, 2017, p. 15).

This passage enacts, in miniature, the epistemological and affective challenge that structures the entire text. The "you" addressed is simultaneously subjected to the familiar intimacy of first-person address and estranged by the information that this self is distributed across contexts entirely beyond subjective experience. The sentence "But it is you" is unsettling because it makes the

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familiar seem strange; the boundary between self and world dissolves, causing a vertiginous sense of exposure. Knowing that the body extends into the atmosphere, industry, and animal systems highlights an ecological implication beyond individual ethics.

A formal aspect of *The Second Body* that relates to climate anxiety is its unique mode of narration. It avoids the confessional realism and detached philosophical style, instead blending personal observations with deep time, biology, and chemistry. This instability is not stylistic but structural: it dissolves the bounded self, reflecting its core idea. Hildyard's sentences shift from microscopic to planetary, disorienting the reader and challenging human perception. Morton describes this as 'ecological thought": perceiving the mesh as part of ordinary experience when human-centred views are loosened (Morton, 2010, p. 7).

CATASTROPHE AS ORDINARY EVENT: EMERGENCY

Emergency (2022) extends the philosophical queries of *The Second Body* through a novelistic narrative set in a modern English landscape, featuring a woman with a child and a vague sense of dread. The story revolves around a series of 'emergencies'—personal, local, planetary—highlighting the word's dual meaning for a child's fever and mass extinction.

This structural irony is one of *Emergency*'s most precisely calibrated formal decisions. The word "emergency" derives from the Latin *emergere*—to rise, to come forth—and in its conventional usage describes a sudden, visible, and bounded crisis demanding immediate response. The ecological emergencies pervading Hildyard's novel are none of these things: they are slow, distributed, often invisible, and resist the grammar of crisis management. By using a term implying urgency, boundedness, and the possibility of resolution to name processes that are chronic, diffuse, and potentially irreversible, Hildyard draws attention to the inadequacy of existing conceptual and emotional frameworks for responding to climate catastrophe—a literary enactment of Nixon's slow violence thesis (Nixon, 2011, pp. 2–3).

The narrator's internal reflections are consistently invaded by quiet, disturbing ecological data, species decline, soil loss, and dwindling bird populations, rather than dramatic disaster news. Hildyard describes how she reads about insect declines but feels nothing in her kitchen, hearing the dishwasher, thinking about dinner, and only then feels something, yet not about the insects. This failure to feel is not callousness but a phenomenological reality: the scale of ecological information surpasses her momentary experience. The final sentence illustrates climate anxiety: the emotion is real, but its object is obscured, displaced onto a more manageable situation.

Emergency consistently and seriously explores nonhuman animals. A fox, appearing repeatedly, is not just a symbol of wild nature threatened by civilisation but a "companion species," as Haraway describes it, challenging the narrator's ethical and perceptual limits beyond current frameworks. The fox shares the narrator's damaged ecosystem, which is subjected to environmental

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harm yet lacks anticipation. This asymmetry, humans projecting future catastrophe, drives climate anxiety, as Hildyard depicts. The narrator's dread partly stems from caring for non-participating creatures: a form of ecological proxy labour with no clear recipient or resolution.

FORMAL STRATEGIES AND AFFECTIVE ECONOMIES

One of the most distinctive features of Hildyard's prose is what might be described as its lyric precision: a quality of attention in individual sentences that is simultaneously scrupulously accurate and emotionally charged without tipping into the sentimental. This precision is a formal correlate of the "porous self": a mode of writing that opens toward the world without losing its discriminating grip on the specificities of experience. Hildyard's sentences often work by the accumulation of exact, unadorned details that accrue affective weight through precision rather than figurative elaboration. When she describes the texture of soil, the behaviour of a particular cloud formation, or the sound of a specific bird, the reader is trained to attend to the nonhuman world with a quality of care that is itself an ethical and aesthetic position.

At the same time, this lyric precision is consistently interrupted by passages of stark conceptual statement that refuse the consolation that lyric attention might otherwise seem to offer. This alternation between lyric texture and conceptual bluntness is one of the most formally innovative aspects of Hildyard's work. It generates the particular affective tone characteristic of her approach to climate anxiety: neither despair nor hope, but something closer to what Haraway calls "staying with the trouble"—a refusal to look away combined with a refusal to moralise (Haraway, 2016, p. 1).

The generic hybridity of Hildyard's work—particularly the essay-novelistic form of *The Second Body*—is a principled formal response to the epistemological challenges of writing about climate change. The realist novel, with its investment in individual character and its reliance on the event as the fundamental narrative unit, is poorly equipped to represent the chronic, distributed, and anthropologically unexceptional character of ecological deterioration. The essay can mobilise a conceptual argument but lacks the embodied particularity through which ecological experience is primarily registered. Hildyard's hybrid form exploits the strengths of both genres while resisting the limitations of each.

By refusing the closure of narrative plot, Hildyard's texts produce the formal experience of the anxiety they describe: an unresolved, ongoing, ambient sense of dread that cannot be discharged through the conventional satisfactions of narrative resolution. The reader of *Emergency* is left in a state of carefully calibrated unease—aware that the various "emergencies" of the title have not been resolved and will not be, that the ecological situation of which they are symptomatic admits no conclusion within the timeframe of any individual life or any individual narrative.

DISCUSSION

Mrigendra Dewangan & Nand Kumar Dewangan (2026). Ecological Dread and Porous Selves: Climate Anxiety and Posthuman Futures in the Fiction of Daisy Hildyard**.** International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews, 5(6),311-318.

The analyses conducted in the preceding sections converge on a central finding: Daisy Hildyard's fiction constructs climate anxiety not as a psychological aberration or a proportionate rational response to environmental data, but as an ontological condition intrinsic to posthuman existence in the Anthropocene. The "porous self" that her texts develop is not a theoretical abstraction but a lived phenomenological reality, registered in the texture of prose that refuses to maintain a stable boundary between the narrator's interiority and the ecological conditions in which that interiority is embedded.

This finding impacts debates in literary studies and environmental humanities. It suggests that "climate fiction" should expand to include texts that engage with ecological crisis at the levels of form and ontology, not just theme and narrative. Hildyard's work is not about climate change as in a disaster novel; it is shaped by climate change and the challenges it presents for representation.

Hildyard's reading shows that posthumanist and affect theories are intertwined rather than separate. The "porous self" described by posthumanism is one where climate anxiety is a fundamental condition, not just an emotion. Affect theory helps analyse how this feeling circulates within the text and becomes an experience for the reader, rather than mere information.

Hildyard's project may be read alongside a broader British tradition of landscape and ecological writing represented by writers such as Berger, Mabey, Deakin, and Macfarlane. Unlike these writers who affirm human connection with nature, Hildyard's work explores ecological entanglement, where her porous self finds dread rather than comfort in that belonging.

CONCLUSION

This paper argues that Daisy Hildyard's fiction is a highly innovative and rigorous engagement with climate anxiety and posthuman subjectivity in contemporary British literature. Through close reading of The Second Body and Emergency, using ecocriticism, posthumanism, and affect theory, it shows that Hildyard creates a unique literary figure, the "porous self", that portrays climate anxiety as an ontological, not psychological, state. This self, open to the nonhuman world and connected to ecological networks, experiences ecological catastrophe from within rather than from outside.

The major findings are that the Second Body's idea of humans inhabiting two bodies is a literary-philosophical view of posthumanist subjectivity that shapes our understanding of climate anxiety. Emergency illustrates this with novelistic techniques, using the "emergency" as an ironic symbol for ongoing ecological decline. Hildyard's approach, combining the essay and novel forms, with precise sentences and no narrative closure, responds to the epistemological and emotional difficulties of writing in the Anthropocene. Hildyard shows posthumanist and affect theory dialogue: the porous self in posthumanism is a self whose emotional response to ecological crises is climate anxiety.

Mrigendra Dewangan & Nand Kumar Dewangan (2026). Ecological Dread and Porous Selves: Climate Anxiety and Posthuman Futures in the Fiction of Daisy Hildyard**.** International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews, 5(6),311-318.

Future research could extend this analysis by comparing Hildyard's work with that of other experimental writers, such as Annie Dillard, Amitav Ghosh, Jenny Offill, and Richard Powers, to better understand how contemporary fiction represents climate anxiety.

Hildyard's achievement is inventing a literary form suited to a new existential reality: a species aware of its planet's impact but limited to personal, sensory experience. The tension between ecological knowledge and personal perception fuels climate anxiety, which her most precise and courageous writing captures uniquely, remaining largely unmatched in contemporary British fiction.

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Mrigendra Dewangan & Nand Kumar Dewangan (2026). Ecological Dread and Porous Selves: Climate Anxiety and Posthuman Futures in the Fiction of Daisy Hildyard. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews, 5(6),311-318.

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