

Eco-Emotions and Literary Solastalgia: The Adolescent Mental Discomfort in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction *

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2025.25.1.28>

Abstract

Current ecocritical literature claims that young minds are affected by sudden changes in their surrounding environment on a large scale, as they lack the maturity to cope with sudden blows of eco-emotions. These eco-emotions are called Psychoterratic syndromes, which include eco-anxiety, ecological grief, climate worry, and climate trauma. Solastalgia is a prominent emotion that can mould people from all walks of life. Younger generations are anticipated to experience more upsetting occurrences over their lifetimes due to extreme climate events' increased frequency, severity, duration, and spatial extent. Teenagers or the 'young-adults' react more aggressively to stressful news and changes, making them emotionally vulnerable. Drawing on the theory of 'solastalgia' by Glenn Albrecht, this paper will inspect how drastic changes in select young adults' home environment provoke ecological insecurity, peril, and chaos in their minds through a close reading of the three children's novels. This study will concentrate on the new categories of emotion ascending from Earth's atmosphere and environmental changes distressing young adult minds.

Keywords: Psychoterratic emotions, Solastalgia, Anthropocene, vulnerability, Mental distress.

Introduction

The ecological changes in the planet's physical environment can directly contribute to developing earth-related emotions in human minds. These strong emotions amend humanity's role in environmental awareness, as emotions are the primary force that motivates us to act, positively or negatively. Glenn Albrecht defined these familial emotions related to Earth as 'psychoterratic' (2019, 64). Albrecht talked about a few types of psychoterratic emotions, both distressing and pleasing. The emotional distress caused by climatic disruption, particularly due to the drastic changes on the earth's surface, is psychoterratic emotion that Albrecht famously termed 'solastalgia' (2019, 27). Unlike nostalgia, which refers to the longing for a distant place or past, solastalgia is the anxiety that comes laterally with a change or displacement of any natural object that people are attached to. Solastalgia encompasses varied emotional responses to the lived experience of environmental change (Biswas 2). These psychoterratic or solastalgia reactions are stereotypically driven by feelings of anxiety, sadness, melancholy, loss, grief, and related states of "negative affect" (Albrecht et al. 2007, 95). Albrecht's motive behind this proposed the concept is to clarify the experience of people whose home environment was being changed in unwelcome ways, and they face psychological difficulties due to this phenomenon. He also points out that the sense of place challenges the identity of rural people in a calm environment. He stated, "In losing the potential for solace from their home environment, the

***Article History:** Full Article Received on 2nd June 2025. Peer Review completed on 27th June 2025, Article Accepted on 3rd July, 2025. First published: September 2025. **Copyright** vests with Author. **Licensing:** Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

people of the Upper Hunter gained solastalgia” (Albrecht 2020, 12). Cianconi et al. argue that providing a healthy amount of importance to the negative consequences of climate change on mental health is needed; it should be studied and validated (2023, 219). The researchers also advocated contemporary studies on psychoterratic emotions as a comparatively new phenomena that are still not completely understood.

Climate changes increase the likelihood of experiencing signs of mental disorders and exacerbates pre-existing symptoms and suffering while depleting resources. It affects all populations, endangers species and intricate communities, and erodes their structures. Understanding the consequences of the climate crisis is suggested due to its alarming impact on individual mental health. One of the demographics that stands mostly at risk from the effects of climate change could be young people (Cianconi et al. 2023, 211).

Relevance of Studying ‘Solastalgia’ in Young Adult Fiction

Distressing eco-emotions or solastalgia are commonly experienced by teenagers, particularly by young adults (according to the World Health Organization as individuals aged 10–24 years) and youth (15–24 years) who are strangely affected (Wu et al, 2020, 435-436). After an effective survey, Marks et al. concluded that young people have been observed going through severely painful episodes due to their feelings and inability to cope with climate change (2023, 12). The younger generation tends to recognize climate change as a global crisis while associating it with other planetary problems, including social injustice, uneven wealth, class divisions, and ecological destruction on a universal scale. Because they are severely affected by the ongoing devastation, it affects their future, including that of the planet. Carlos Laranjera and colleagues put this argument by stating that the challenges as direct or indirect consequences of climate change will be on an intensified scale worldwide, particularly targeting vulnerable groups, including children, the aged groups, refugees, and people with pre-existing health vulnerabilities (Laranjeira et al. 2024, 1). The uncertainty of their future makes the younger generation precarious subjects of society. Here, precarity not only talks about the state of being unstable, but it also discusses inclusively how to reconfigure the social system and its consequences regarding climate change. The increasingly precarious state of lives, including all humans and non-human life forms, is the result of processes and events that also lead to ecological disaster, and it has been reflected in contemporary literary-cultural texts (Nayar, 2019, 4). Now the question is, is this precarious state of life form due to climate degradation also having negative paraphernalia on young adults’ minds that play with their eco-emotions and result in solastalgia?

The answer is yes; scholars have initiated studies proving that children may feel demotivated and distressed because of significant ecological changes in their home environment. The anxiety and worry of facing an environmental collapse in the near future can be explicitly distressing among young adults (Ojala et al. 2021, 35-58). There will be mental health consequences, which will vary according to the effect of climate degradation and based on individual vulnerability. Eco-emotion in the psyche of young adult fictional characters has been previously discussed, but not to the extent where we can find the classification of it based on the characteristics of the respective eco-emotion. However, in the past decade, with the urgency of knowing and understanding the nature of distress, researchers have stimulated and moved forward with the focus on solastalgia in young adult characters. As we go into more detail about eco-emotions on the surface, solastalgia and eco-emotions seem similar. Still, they can be significantly differentiated in the definite object of their eliciting stimulus. Voški and colleagues suggested that emotions related to one’s home environment and climate, or eco-emotions in short, are terms and constructs sometimes used interchangeably (2023, 7). Perceptions of the impact of climate change differ with age groups. Besides, austere narratives

of the climate crisis in popular media unexpectedly strike and remind young people of the fatality dancing with them and will follow them into the future.

Novelists like Wendelin Van Draanen and Piers Torday portray how young adults respond to ecological changes in their place and how they cope with their solastalgia. These two novels also shed light on young adults' ways of resistance and how they attempt to overcome distressing eco-emotions. In Draanen's *Flipped*, distress caused by solastalgia and damages were compensated with conservation. Torday portrays communication with non-living things and grievances of loss of biodiversity. Similarly, Hannah Lalhlanpuii's debut novel, *When Blackbirds Fly*, aimed at a young audience, presents young characters or children growing up amidst conflict, witnessing major social and ecological destruction. The author provides an actual picture of amalgamated Mizoram with heinous vividness. Lalhlanpuii's portrayal of the 'troubled periphery' foregrounds the sufferings of three young individuals whose world starts and ends within the boundaries of their small bamboo houses, schools, and playgrounds in the small hilly town of the northeastern corner of India. This essay discusses three young adult characters with different worldviews of the Global West and Global South and how they articulate the sudden changes in their home environment. This essay will also explore the solastalgic experiences experienced by a teenager 'Juliana' from the novel *Flipped* (2001) by Van Draanen and 'Kester,' a young boy from *The Last Wild* (2013) by Piers Torday, and the devastating eco-emotions experienced by an unnamed narrator from the novel *When Blackbirds Fly* (2022) by Hanah Lalhlanpuii.

Impact of Eco-emotions on Teenage Minds

Sometimes, mankind ties their emotional experiences to the state of their surrounding earth. Humans have lamented the ecological loss of their home environments in words within the realm of literature for ages. Yet there is a gap in identifying and addressing emotional discomfort within language. Albrecht calls this gap "the gap in our language identified by solastalgia" (Albrecht 2019, 64). Albrecht demonstrates the idea of mental discomfort caused by changes in immediate ecology to bridge the gap. In his work, *Earth Emotions* (2019) the author subtitled solastalgia as "The Homesickness You Have at Home" (2019, 44). While narrating solastalgia in general, Albrecht has brought up the subject of children or teenagers and how they experience solastalgia discomfort by bringing a few promising literary examples. Albrecht points out that Richard Louv described solastalgia in his best-selling book *Last Child in the Woods* (2008). Louv has initiated the concept by calling it 'nature deficit disorder' (Louv 2008) to possible negative consequences on an individual's health, especially on children. This non-medical term delineates the potential adverse effects as children go indoors and disengage from physical interaction with the natural environment. The book ignited a national discourse in the United States and catalyzed a global initiative to reestablish children's connection with nature. In the subsequent book, *The Nature Principle* (2011), Louv explores the parallels and distinctions between nature-deficit disorder and solastalgia. (Albrecht 2019, 44).

Talking about the Indian literary scenario, in terms of mental discomfort or eco-emotions in children or teenage characters, Arundhati Roy has presented it to some extent in her writings. In the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2018), Arundhati Roy weaves a complex narrative that explores various social and environmental issues in contemporary India. Besides, the story touches upon the effects of environmental degradation and neglect on marginalized communities, particularly children, amidst political turmoil. Rituparna Mitra argues that the novel centres on the ruins of the Anthropocene while reflecting ecological precarity (Mitra 2022, 385). This reflects how Anthropocene, environmental precarity, and eco-emotions are chained; as Albrecht pointed out, "Contemporary children are being exposed to less 'raw' nature than ever before in history" (Albrecht 2019, 74).

Terra L. Goodes and colleagues state that youth are aware of the psychological damages that climate disruption can cause; particularly regarding stress hormones during the formative years of puberty (Goodes 2022, 2-3). Berry et al. point out three categories of mental discomfort due to climate change or anthropocentric factors: direct, indirect, and vicarious. Goodes et al. discuss vicarious reaction in detail, referring to it as “the emotional and affective impacts of the awareness of climate change lived through knowledge about the issue” (Goodes et al. 2022, 2).

While discussing eco-emotions, specifically solastalgia and eco-anxiety, the representation of these emotions in young adult fiction is emerging as part of Anthropocene literature. More than depicting these emotions, there has been an inherent undercurrent of these precise emotions of distress within literature since the last century. In Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1952), the author depicted a landscape of a deteriorated ecology because of war and violence, and in those circumstances and environments, the children became violent and the subject of violence. E. C. Bufkin points out that Golding portrays “another traditional cosmic symbol, the storm, to reflect in the realm of nature the evil or chaotic doings in the world of man” (Bufkin 1965, 45). The sudden storm in the novel and the plane crash hint at the slow ecological degradation that consumes young adults’ minds. Coming to young adult fiction of the contemporary period, *The Overstory* (2018) by Richard Powers portrays nature from a fresh perspective of grief. In this novel, trees are depicted as linked with each other, like an immune system, as if they have inner networks and work as one organism (Hess 2019, 195). Powers stressed the cooperation of the natural world by mentioning, “Everything in the forest is the forest” (Powers 2018, 142). He affirms eco-emotions such as symbiocene, which stands for “collective human and ecological flourishing” (Murray 2023, 2). As Albrecht argues, “The Symbiocene will be that period in the Earth’s history where humans symbiotically reintegrate themselves, psychologically and technologically, into nature and natural systems” (Albrecht 2014, 58-59). Through the novel, Powers provides narrative insights into other than humans and a possible symbiotic relationship while foregrounding the teen’s emotional connection with nature.

The selected young-adult fiction epitomizes solastalgia, accompanied by climate worry in the narratives. Young people are becoming leaders in climate advocacy and are engaged in ecocriticism as the climate catastrophe intensifies. Young adult literature provides a secure environment for readers to discuss tragic events and view nuanced depictions of activism and climate anxiety.

Solastalgia at Play: Understanding the Dilemma of Young Minds

The emotional bond between the human mind and the sense of their place or the physical environment develops Psychoterratic emotions, showing how humans are tied to earth emotionally. Similarly, the changes in the planet’s environment cause mental distress in one’s mind, and humans endure profound pain and loss due to the changes in their surroundings. As Albrecht defined, Solastalgia is the distress or emotional pain caused by environmental change, particularly the loss of a familiar natural or cultural landscape (Albrecht 2019, 71). In Wendelin Van Draanen’s novel *Flipped*, solastalgia is explored as a subtle but significant undercurrent that reshapes the young adult character Julie Baker’s connection with nature. While *Flipped* is not explicitly an ecological novel, themes related to solastalgia emerge through key events and characters’ emotional responses to changes in their environment. Julie Baker’s deep connection with the sycamore tree symbolizes her bond with nature. When the tree is cut down, Julie experiences profound grief, which aligns with the concept of solastalgia. Her distress stems from losing a place where she felt safe, inspired, and connected to her world. This event showcases how a physical change in her environment profoundly affects Julie’s emotional state, reflecting her love for natural beauty and her sense of belonging tied to the tree.

Christopher T. Gullen says the ruins and burned-out buildings of Detroit, Michigan, were once part of a thriving metropolis (Gullen 2018, 33). Gullen argued that the peculiar contrast between devastation and affluence has engendered a sense of melancholia and distress among the Detroit citizens, indicating a strong sense of solastalgia. Similarly, in the case of Julie Baker, the devastation in her home environment brings out the psychoterratic emotional side of her character. Julie's appreciation for nature reflects a resistance to the encroachment of uniform suburban culture, which could be linked to a broader sense of solastalgia as natural elements are replaced by urbanization.

We find similar characteristics in Piers Torday's creation- 'Kester.' The first novel of his popular trilogy, *The Last Wild* by Piers Torday, narrates the decline of the animal population. Piers Torday introduces a twelve-year-old boy, 'Kester', who has been mute since his mother's death and locked away in a hall for differently abled children. Kester discovers a cockroach and soon realizes he can talk with it. Waheed and Khan mentioned that author Torday highlights how humans affect and exploit the earth insensitively and destroy all other organisms. Humans are responsible for the destruction of the planet as well as for the extinction of animal species. If they rectify their anthropocentric devastating ways, they will continue to live like 'earth-bound ravages' on the new plane (2021, 824). While this novel is aimed at a younger audience, it addresses significant environmental themes that resonate with the effects of climate change. The story starts in a post-apocalyptic future where animals have been eradicated due to human actions and climate change, leading to a sterile environment devoid of natural life. Kester's unique ability to communicate with animals becomes crucial as he embarks on a quest to save the last remaining creatures. The protagonist goes through extreme psychological distress by witnessing the destruction and extinction of species in his home environment.

Hannah Lalhlanpuui, in *When the Blackbirds Fly*, recalls the disturbing 1960s Mizo famine and the rise of insurgency movements in her novel from the point of view of a young narrator. The school-going boy from the Aizawl town of Lusai hill district (present-day Mizoram) finds himself in a repulsive world, deprived and pierced with hunger. In the novel, the psychological journey of the child narrator shows symptoms of a diversity of eco-emotions, such as solastalgia, because the distress is not a result of the destruction of manmade structures and human resources; rather, this distress includes the destruction of all natural landscapes. The brutality towards humans and the environment in his surroundings makes him feel guilty about feeling happy or smiling for a few moments. The narrator reveals how the state of being conscious and aware of the stillness and desolation manipulates children's minds: "we are feeling guilty for being happy in this gloomy atmosphere" (Lalhlanpuui 2022, 53). From the small window of his room, observing the serene sky during the night was the young narrator's way of passing time, but the air strikes his town, followed by yelps and cries of his neighbours, makes him look at the sky at an odd time. He finds the sight immensely disturbing as a "canopy of thick dust immediately covers Tuikhuatlang" (Lalhlanpuui 2022, 79). There is an assertive perception of looking at these changes around him; he further adds, "it is as if the sky has burst into fragments" (Lalhlanpuui 2022, 79). The definition of home gets altered as the teenager encounters maximum brutalities around him: "I realize that home without the people living in it is nothing more than just a wooden structure (Lalhlanpuui 2022, 83).

The young boy's fascination with the calm, starry sky is put to an end by the bigger political bodies; his mind fills with distress at seeing everything in black and grey instead of its colourful existence. The more ashes in the air, the more pessimistic regarding finding ways to survive (Lalhlanpuui 2022, 98-99). C. Hickman suggests that eco-emotions, specifically 'eco-anxiety,' constitute a clinical dilemma among children and young adults while observing the climate emergency and finding out it is not receding or being fixed at all soon (Hickman 2024, 358). The narrator assumes there won't be any solutions to their precarious living condition in the adjoining future. The narrator finds, after horrible nights of continuous airstrikes that caused

all schools of Aizawl to be closed, that he feels stuck within the four walls of his house. It deeply affects his psyche, reflected in his subconscious mind; he often dreams of his late mother, but this time it is different: "I was all alone in a vast dry land. I looked around and there was no one in sight. Not even a single human being" (Lalhlanpuii 2022, 41). The psychological distress in his young mind has been visible in his dreams, he has seen how the war is destroying the lush green village, therefore, all he can see in his dreams are pictures of barren lanes. What he has seen, felt, and heard is personal to him; witnessing the devastation of his home environment results in eco-anxiety.

The mental health challenges faced by all the children in selected stories can be related to the psychological stress that climate change and environmental degradation impose on real children today. This stress can disrupt hormonal balance and overall development. It is important to note how Torday illustrates the consequences of human neglect and exploitation of nature. The loss of biodiversity and habitat reflects real-world climate change issues, which can lead to poor health outcomes in children as they are increasingly exposed to pollution and degraded environments.

Conclusion

The emotional significance of the natural object is being recognized; however, their experience as young adults and talking about these feelings is not well understood (Jones and Lucas 2023, 11). By combining literary insights with scientific studies, a more profound understanding of climate change's impact on young adults' mental health could be achieved. It can be a step towards cohabitation and defying destruction since these young adults hold the planet's future. This study has reflected both the immediate and long-term consequences of solastalgia and other emotions on young adults' health. Young individuals are more vulnerable than adults to the hostile consequences of climate change anxiety. They are at a pivotal stage in their ontological, psychological and physical development, where increased susceptibility to stress heightens their chance of developing depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders (Wu, et al. 2020, 435). The inherited consequences of climate change and the future are in young adults' hands. Through engaging with eco-emotional narratives, young people can develop empathy for others affected by environmental change and a sense of shared responsibility.

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