

Echoes of the Earth: Ecocriticism and Climate Change in Stephen King's *The Mist* and *Under the Dome*

R. Sheeba Mary

Research Scholar, Sri. Meenakshi Govt. College for Women (Autonomous)
Madurai 625002

Paper Received on 15-08-2025, Accepted on 18-09-2025
Published on 19-09-25; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.10.3.723

Abstract: Ecocriticism, the study of literature and the environment, has been the academic response to this convergence over the last few decades. With all the crises humanity is facing in climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation, ecocriticism has developed as an important lens for understanding how literature may reflect, comment upon and shape the ways we respond to our environment. However, the interdisciplinary approach transcends the representation of nature in literature; it focuses on the ethical and philosophical problems of the way texts ideate about how humans interact with the ecological world. With human actions now more than ever compromising the sustainability of the planet, ecocriticism plays a necessary function in making sense of why literature is an influential instrument for developing an ecological mentality and for practising responsible treatment of nature.

This article looks at Stephen King's two seminal novels, *The Mist* (1980) and *Under the Dome* (2009), through the lens of ecocriticism, arguing that these texts deal with urgent environmental questions. Placing these works in the context of the speculative fiction genre, the paper examines how King employs horror and science fiction to respond to ideas of ecological disaster, anthropocentrism, and the violent consequences of disturbing the natural order. More specifically, it explores how both novels depict nature striking back on human disruption with an implicit critique of sustainability and the dangers of human over-extraction of the environment. Using these analyses, this article demonstrates the potential of speculative fiction to nurture eco-consciousness and to prompt discourse on the future of humans integrating within the environment.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Speculative Fiction, Environmental Sustainability, Anthropocentrism, Ecological Consciousness.

Ecocriticism, a nature-centric branch of literary critique, rose to prominence in the late 20th century. As one of the founding figures of the field, Cheryl Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as the study of literature and the physical environment—its focus is on the representation of nature in literature and how those representations both shape and reflect human attitudes toward the environment. The definition itself is quite simple: ecocriticism explores the relation between art and ecological problems, and in what way a work communicates directly or indirectly topics of or about environmental disasters, sustainability, and the results of human intervention in nature. Pioneering scholars like Lawrence Buell have broadened the term's purview by exploring the moral stakes involved in the representation of environments in literature. Buell's *Environmental Imagination* (1995) discusses how literature can be used as a narrative to evoke an ecological worldview and a sense of responsibility for the planet. Ecocriticism is not limited to the study of nature in literature but is also about how literature depicts realities of social life, including real-world environmental debates and practices.

Increasingly, speculative fiction — particularly horror and science fiction — has served as a tool for voicing environmental fears. *The Mist* and *Under the Dome* are speculative narratives that speak to fears and anxieties over environmental crises and catastrophes in the vein of the work of Stephen King. These genres afford an alternative prism through which to dramatize and interrogate the long-term effects of climate change, ecological collapse and human overreach. Horrific reminders of the dangers of humanity seeking dominion over nature enter in King's fiction that resonate with our dread of spontaneous real ecological collapse also known more accurately as the collapse of civilization and morality from resource depletion of the biosphere.

In relation to an ecocritical reading of King's works, the concepts of human overreach, the Anthropocene, and nature's vengeance arise as the most relevant. Human overreach is the unthoughtful abuse of the environment for technological or political gain — an abuse that all too often results in unintended ecological disaster. These environmental crisis stories unfold in the Anthropocene — the geologic epoch that has been shaped by the profound impact human activity has had on Earth's systems. Another pillar of King's work is the revenge of nature, which hammers home that the natural world will strike back when pushed too far, reflecting how humanity's mistreatment of creation will pay off in disaster. These are the same ideas behind *The Mist* and *Under the Dome* as ecocritical readings, with King's speculative imaginings

outlining warnings by humans over a currently fragile environment, and the impossibility of human dominion.

Stephen King's novella *The Mist* (1980) is set in a fictional town in Bridgton, Maine, and follows a small group of people who find themselves stuck in a supermarket as an unnatural mist has overtaken the town. When the mist arrives, it also brings supernatural horror and strange creatures who immediately start attacking the residents. The mist, as a natural event, ends up being a byproduct of a failed scientific experiment created by the Arrowhead Project, a military research project on interdimensional portal opening. The mist serves as a physical barrier, cutting off the townspeople from the outside world. This fog is both a physical barrier, and also a metaphor for environmental collapse and the consequences of people tampering with nature. As this violent new threat continues to spread, the survivors in the supermarket have to not only remain safe from the creatures at large but the even deeper psychological torture being forced on them by the absence of civilization, order in their community, and the trauma of being isolated.

Hence, the central conflict of the novella is both external (dealing with the creatures in the mist) and internal (dealing with the collapse of the social and psychological structure). The Arrowhead Project – the research and experimentation that attempts to manipulate an ecological system – is the initial catalyst of the events of the novel; the resulting catastrophe reveals the ramifications of human attempts to control nature with science and military force.

The Arrowhead Project in *The Mist* is the ultimate in human arrogance and technological excess. Driven by a desire to push the envelope of military technology, scientists working on the project accidentally opened a portal to another dimension. This irresponsible trial adds an alien and unpredictable menace in nature. The participants in the project are so possessed by their thirst for knowledge and power that they neglect to recognise the destructive impact of their actions, of the wilful ignorance of ecological balance and the boundaries of human intrusion into natural processes.

This scientific hubris is rewarded immediately when the fog, a byproduct of the project, sweeps into the town. Not just a natural force, a deadly force, reeking with unnatural beasts, from the unknown, from the human experiment gone right/wrong. The mist (and its creatures) are an ecological encroachment — a civilisation, here researching mangling, has ruptured a natural cycle, devastating the territory. A breakthrough for mankind becomes an ecological disaster. This story is a

cautionary tale about the dangers of technological hubris and the folly of trying to re-engineer the natural world without understanding the full complexity of that world and without respecting the limits of that world.

The mist — and the horrible creatures it conceals — represent nature's wrath at this incursion. Nature is not a benign force in King's vision; nature is a powerful force that reacts violently when disturbed. It responds to this elemental vengeance that overcomes the characters, forcing them to confront their own inability to evade the inevitable. The inhabitants of the mist — creatures from some other plane of existence — are as terrifying as they are allegorical about nature's irregular and frequently alarmed responses to what humans do to corners such as hers.

Moreover, in depicting nature's incensed power, King captures humanity's wilful ignorance and arrogance. In *The Arrowhead Project*, when human ambition seeks to manipulate natural forces, opening a portal into another dimension, the backlash is unpredictable and chaotic, implying that the natural world can't so easily be put under control. The mist represents not just a physical boundary but also a line humanity has crossed, and nature's feral response is merely a collateral effect of that sin.

An ecological criticism lurks in *The Mist*, which manifests as a parable of how the powerful man's tampering with nature results in disaster. With the Arrowhead Project's failure that led to the destruction of the environment, King critiques humanity's habit of changing nature without understanding or revering the systems of nature. The novella is accountable to significant strands of ecocritical theory, such as the hubris of humanity and the moral obligations of mankind towards the natural world.

Building from the analyses of scholars like Lawrence Buell, *The Mist* can be read as a critique of the Human folly of the assumption that humanity has dominion over Nature. In his novella, King exemplifies Buell's notion of "environmental imagination," a concept that stresses the importance of literature that grapples with the ethical challenges posed by human behaviour concerning the environment. This story shows what happens through humanity tries to bend nature toward technology or warfare ends. The devastating outcomes in *The Mist* are in line with the actual concerns of ecological collapse, like climate change and loss of biodiversity, arising from human overexploitation and disregard for natural limits.

And the novella reminds everyone that ecological humility is not just a literary theme, but that it is also a call, as Glotfelty and other ecocritics have argued,

to the literary world actively to engage with our moral obligation to the natural world. But *The Mist* has a clear message: human beings are messing with systems they do not understand, systems that have sustained life for millions of years, and praying that God doesn't escalate things to the level of Hell on Earth. This speculative horror story urges readers to confront the possible repercussions of technology and the responsibility we bear to maintain the equilibrium of nature.

The Mist is an unsettling reminder of how environmental manipulation can go awry and the throes of violence and murder when humanity forgets its place in the natural world. Not only does King articulate the anxieties of ecological collapse, but he also critiques both human hubris and the relentless thirst for knowledge at the cost of the health of the world around us. In depicting the retribution of nature and humanity's role in extracting the appropriate punishment, *The Mist* provides a haunting and explicit warning about the dangers of ecological disruption, reminding all that one must take responsibility for their actions in an ever-fragile world.

Stephen King's *Under the Dome* (2009) follows the residents of Chester's Mill, a small town, as it is abruptly and inexplicably sealed off from the outside world by an indestructible dome of clear plastic. In the process, the dome separates the town from the outside world, forcing its residents to deal in the close confines of the dome with dwindling resources and rising tensions. While the dome appears in a town thrown into chaos, the citizens try to make sense of who and what caused this dome and why — it also forces all citizens to deal with dire situations as air, water, and energy are limited. The journey centres on an ensemble cast of characters but follows their struggles as political and social tensions rise in a small space. The heart of the conflict is the town's leadership, headed by a corrupt businessman, and the uprising against him. Over time, Chester's Mill experiences an intensifying ecological and societal downfall in which the depletion of resources and social fragmentation for the erosion of law and order create a miniaturised version of the greater environmental problems facing mankind.

The dome itself is a mysterious force, keeping the townspeople trapped, in hopeless seriousness, fighting for their lives. Within the larger themes of ecology, the dome is both a tangible and symbolic ideal of the isolation and chaos that can stem from the human propensity to consume and forgo awareness of nature. It examines the aspects of human nature that come to the fore when resources are limited and leading to conflict, exploitation, and violence.

The environmental catastrophe that strikes the townspeople in *Under the Dome* is unvarnished and quick. This not only alienates them from the outside world but further drives the exhaustion of its natural resources. Worse still, breathing becomes harder as the dome extinguishes access to the outer air and swallows the pollutants surrounding the town. The water dries up, and the town's power grid sputters to accommodate a population forced into confinement. As supplies dry up, people struggle to deal with the thought of living in a world where environmental sustainability is not taken for granted.

The dome itself, in some ways, symbolises environmental isolation; a tangible separation that signifies humanity's challenge to be a part of the existing, working ecosystem. With the town short on supplies, the story showcases how the absence of natural resources can lead to a swift breakdown of the ecological and societal status quo. The limited resources inside the dome symbolise global issues of overpopulation, resource depletion, and environmental degradation while creating a new awareness of the delicate environments we rely on and the need to maintain them. The dome thus represents the tenuous balance of nature and humanity: the more we drain Earth, the more we risk its collapse; the more successful we are, the more fragile our lives become.

Each day, the environmental collapse inside the dome becomes more pronounced, and so does the disintegration of social order. The same thing happens at the top with the town's leadership, led by the conniving, selfish, power-thirsty businessman Big Jim Rennie, who relishes in the crisis, using it as a tool to monopolise resources and take complete control. The new political dynamics around environmental threats mirror much of what happens in reality, where elites manipulate scarcity to keep control of the State while the marginalised people suffer the consequences.

As resources are scarce in Chester's Mill, the social fabric begins to fray, and the residents find it more challenging to meet their basic needs. What starts as what feels like a momentary crisis transforms into a fight for survival, with riots breaking out in a frenzy over bread, water, and sleep. The environmental destruction also exacerbates the social divides of the town, with conflict not just between rich and poor but also between the different factions over the correct policy response to the disaster. For every resident, such as Julia or Dale, looking for cooperation and community is a Rennie looking for self-interest and domination. This dichotomy is a reflection of the political and social repercussions of environmental destruction.

When ecological systems break down, the human systems that enable cooperation also fall apart, and we are left with competition and conflict rather than community-centred responses.

King's exploration in this book is far-reaching, highlighting the global crisis of climate change and depletion of the Earth. However, unfortunately, in these times of crisis, people tend to become selfish and exploitative, which ultimately aggravates the very conditions that cause further damage to the environment. With the dome locked onto Chester's Mill, its inhabitants are isolated from the outside world, forcing them to realise how impossible it is for them to be self-sufficient in a world that gets smaller; a situation that reflects concerns globally when limited resources trigger a series of ecological catastrophes facing humanity today.

The other most important topic *Under the Dome* tackles is overconsumption and its destruction, whether it be to the environment or to the people who inhabit it. The novel proceeds by critiquing unsustainable practices both in the form of the actual human exploitation of resources and the system of economic and political control that maintains such exploitation. So, all this exploitative capitalism that Big Jim Rennie is doing reflects on the greedy monster of overconsumption, using this magnetic interdimensional cube to greedily store everything he can and as much as he can, all the while keeping control and power over everything in that town. His dismissiveness of the lives of others demonstrates that overconsumption has roots in economic and political systems that prioritise economic growth over the planet's ecological well-being.

The unsustainable consumption of resources—food, water, energy—was presumably part of the reason that drove Chester's Mill to collapse. The citizens of the town have to live within the confines of the dome, and what they consume goes from plenty to a drop. They initially have plentiful resources like food and energy, but soon start realising that there are not enough of these natural resources to keep the town going and how reliant they are on resources from outside the town that were never meant to be sustainable. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear to the characters that their previous lifestyle—one that prioritised consumption over sustainability—cannot last within the dome, and their fight for survival grows ever more desperate. This metamorphosis acts as an incisive commentary on present-day consumerist cultures, which frequently function on the assumption of boundless natural resources.

Through the breakdown of Chester's Mill, King shows the impractical nature of contemporary living, especially the community's reliance on a limited supply without offering thought to the sustainability of these practices. As an environmental boundary, the dome and dome life force this unsustainability to the forefront. Once inside the dome, they face the more direct fallout of excess, including dwindling resources and a fraying social fabric.

In many ways, *Under the Dome* is a sweeping ecological allegory of the physical and social disintegration of Chester's Mill, mirroring the larger-scale ecological catastrophes plaguing the Earth. The dome depicts the natural boundaries existing within Earth, a visual metaphor for the feeling of smallness and containment caused by humanity's exploitative use of resources. Inside the dome, the town's inhabitants have to confront the consequences of overexploitation, of the natural world and the social forms that sustain them.

Under the Dome, therefore, is not only a dystopian tale of a town besieged by an alien force, but a condemnation of the ecological and cultural toll implicit in man's precarious eco-social relationship with the environment. The dome literally and metaphorically represents the environmental disequilibrium caused by people's actions, separating the characters from the rest of the world and, vicariously, the reader, as we are all made to face the fragility of an ecologically collapsing globe. *Under the Dome* mimics overconsumption, depletion, and collapse, as it parallels and reinforces the overconsumption ethos and presents human sustainability and the restructuring of the human-natural relationship as a necessary alternative and a desperate solution to the imminent destruction of the biosphere before ruin becomes irreversible.

The researcher notes similar motifs in *The Mist* and *Under the Dome* regarding human overreach, environmental disturbance and nature's bloody counterattack. As for *The Mist*, the Arrowhead Project is a bunch of experiments on otherworldly creatures that create the mist and the monsters within it, illustrating how mankind's hubris creates ecological misfires that spiral out of control. *Under the Dome*, in contrast, provides a single vision of environmental crisis through a grotesque, dystopian lens. Both works feature the nature-given, murderous answer when nature is pressed to its extremes and its answer, packed with social disarray, to its assailant.

Although these texts offer discussions of a diversity of sources of environmental crises, they all span a cross-section of environmental issues in

contemporary literature. *The Mist* deals with the consequences of human meddling — via sci-fi tropes — when scientists meddle with the fabric of nature. This novella is a magical realism in which nature reacts literally to various human deeds. By contrast, *Under the Dome* contextualises ecological collapse within a larger social framework of overconsumption and political greed. The dome stands for environmental segregation and resource depletion, mapping the social fragmentation that comes after ecological collapse, as well. *The Mist* is a story of a pressing external threat; *Under the Dome* is a story of a slow internal unravelling, produced through unsustainable practices.

This paper explores the emphasis on the natural world in speculative fiction in addressing the environmental crisis by using *The Mist* and *Under the Dome* as the subject of analysis, and claiming that when humankind acts excessively over nature, the natural environment goes through exhaustion and finally suffers an apocalypse. Each of Stephen King's works provides a lens and an unflinching view on how human intervention driven by scientific dalliance, or destructive social behaviour, brings destruction on a savage, and sometimes an apocalyptic, scale. The fast, vicious retaliation of nature in *The Mist* is more intimate when compared with the sociopolitical and psychological vulture landscape in and above the environmental enclosure and overconsumption of *Under the Dome*, which results in societal collapse, but both novels point a finger at modern human ways of life.

As these works demonstrate, speculative fiction has an important part to play in crafting ecological consciousness. Authors like King force readers to confront the truth of the situations that arise when we lose connection with nature through relatable narratives woven with environmental themes. Through flared-out, but realistic, scenarios like these, the texts urge everyone to grasp real-world ecological catastrophes such as climate change and resource depletion.

The power that speculative fiction has to influence the conversation around climate catastrophe is an area of distinction of its own, which makes the role of speculative fiction so important in contemporary literature. Amid increasing global ecological predicaments, such works can also turn reflections into actions that help compel alternative ways of being and more cultural awareness in need of evolving caring for our environment.

References:

Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995.

Glotfelty, Cheryll. *Literary Nevada*. University of Nevada Press, 2008.

King, Stephen. *The Mist*. New York, Scribner, 1980.

---. *Under the Dome*. New York Recorded Books, 2009.