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**Staying with Vulnerability: Crip Ecologies, Care, and
Climate Agency in *The Ones Who Stay and Fight* and *Delhi***

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Abstract: Climate fiction has increasingly shifted attention from spectacular environmental disasters to the quieter, everyday experiences of ecological deterioration. This paper examines how N. K. Jemisin's *The Ones Who Stay and Fight* and Vandana Singh's *Delhi* imagine climate agency through bodily vulnerability rather than heroic resilience. Drawing on crip theory, affect theory, and new materialism, the article argues that both stories challenge the ableist assumption that agency depends upon physical autonomy, mastery, or control over nature. Instead, vulnerability becomes an epistemological resource through which ecological crisis is perceived and negotiated. In *Delhi*, bodily exhaustion, illness, and environmental decay reveal the reciprocal relationship between human bodies and the material city, while *The Ones Who Stay and Fight* imagines collective care as an alternative form of political and ecological action. Together, these texts reposition disability not as absence but as an ethical mode of inhabiting damaged environments. Climate agency emerges through interdependence, attentiveness, and shared exposure rather than through conquest or technological domination. By bringing disability studies into dialogue with contemporary climate fiction, this article proposes crip ecology as a productive framework for understanding environmental justice in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: *Climate Fiction, Crip Theory, Disability Studies, Affect Theory, Care Ethics, New Materialism*

Introduction

The climate crisis has changed not only ecosystems but also the ways literature represents human life. While earlier environmental narratives often focused on disaster, heroic survival, and technological solutions, contemporary climate fiction is more concerned with gradual environmental damage and with what it means to live in landscapes that are slowly changing. This shift gives room for bodies that are exhausted, exposed and dependent. Rather than asking only who can survive a crisis, these narratives also explore how people live with vulnerability and how care might shape our relationship with the environment. Rob Nixon's idea of "slow violence"--"a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (2) is useful here because both the selected stories represent environmental damage through everyday experiences rather than through one dramatic catastrophe.

Disability studies provides a useful way of looking at this shift. Environmental narratives often value resilience and self-sufficiency. They tend to present the ability to adapt quickly as a sign of strength. Such ideas can also create an image of the ideal person as someone who is independent and physically capable.

Crip theory challenges this idea of the ideal body. Robert McRuer argues that "compulsory able-bodiedness functions by covering over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there actually is no choice" (8). This helps us see dependence differently. It is not necessarily a weakness that people must overcome. It is a part of human life. Reading climate fiction through crip theory therefore allows us to look more closely at the ways environmental conditions affect bodies. It also draws attention to the ways communities and social structures respond to vulnerability.

This perspective is particularly useful in climate fiction because ecological crisis makes our dependence on the material world difficult to ignore. Heat and polluted air can make everyday life harder, while damaged infrastructure can leave some people more exposed than others. The effects of environmental change are also not equally felt. People living with poverty, illness, or disability may face greater risks and have fewer resources to cope with them. From this point of view, disability can be understood not only as an identity but also as a way of recognising how environmental harm is experienced differently by different bodies.

This article examines two speculative short stories, Vandana Singh's *Delhi* and N. K. Jemisin's *The Ones Who Stay and Fight*. Although the stories come from different cultural and imaginative contexts, both move away from the familiar idea of the heroic survivor. In Singh's story, Delhi becomes more than a setting. Its dust, heat, traffic, history, and imagined futures shape Aseem's

experience of the city. Jemisin, on the other hand, presents Um-Helat as a community where care and accessibility are woven into everyday social life. Collective responsibility is treated as a shared value rather than as an exceptional response to crisis. Read together, the stories suggest that ecological agency can emerge through vulnerability and interdependence rather than through human mastery.

The article uses the term “crip ecologies” to describe ways of living with the environment that recognise bodily limits and human dependence. Vulnerability is not seen as a weakness that must always be overcome. It can instead help us understand damaged environments and think about more caring forms of collective life. This approach brings disability studies into dialogue with affect theory and new materialism. It also presents climate agency as something shaped by the body and by our relationships with the material world.

Theoretical Framework: Crip Ecologies, Affect, and Material Agency

Crip theory challenges the assumption that able-bodiedness represents the natural or ideal condition of human existence. Robert McRuer’s concept of compulsory able-bodiedness is particularly relevant because it draws attention to the social pressure placed on individuals to appear autonomous and productive. His argument shifts the focus from what a body can or cannot do to the social norms through which certain bodies acquire greater value than others. This perspective is particularly significant in climate fiction because ecological crisis exposes the limits of human autonomy. Human bodies remain dependent on air and water. They also rely on shelter and social support.

Alison Kafer develops this political understanding of disability by encouraging a reconsideration of disability futures. Rather than viewing disability only as a condition that needs to be overcome, she asks us to imagine forms of life in which bodily difference can remain part of the future. She writes that “rethinking our cultural assumptions about disability, imagining our disability futures differently, will benefit all of us, regardless of our identities” (8). This argument is particularly relevant to both stories. Neither text imagines the future through the elimination of bodily difference. Instead, they suggest that vulnerability can be accommodated through social structures based on care and shared responsibility.

The idea of crip ecology develops from this rejection of mastery. It shifts the focus from conquering environmental crisis to understanding how vulnerable bodies inhabit damaged environments. Such an approach also questions the dominant language of resilience when it places the responsibility for adaptation upon individuals. Crip ecology instead draws attention to accessibility and care. It recognises dependence as a fundamental part of human and ecological life. In this sense, it

provides a useful framework for examining how climate fiction imagines relationships between vulnerable bodies and changing environments.

Affect theory adds another dimension to this discussion by examining how environmental change is experienced through the body. Brian Massumi's account of affect is useful here because he writes that "the body is as immediately abstract as it is concrete" and that its activity extends into a "perfectly real" field of potential (31). His argument helps explain why experiences such as heat and dust cannot be understood only as external environmental conditions. They also affect perception and emotion. The relationship between body and environment is therefore both material and affective.

In *Delhi*, heat and dust are more than elements of the setting. They shape Aseem's experience of the city and influence his perception of his surroundings. Jemisin's story presents a different affective environment. In Um-Helat, joy and care are incorporated into everyday social practices. Affect therefore provides a link between bodily experience and political life. What characters feel is shaped by the environments they inhabit. These feelings can also influence how they respond to other people and to the world around them.

Jane Bennett's theory of vibrant matter further challenges the assumption that agency belongs exclusively to human subjects. Bennett describes thing-power as "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (6). This concept is particularly productive for reading *Delhi*, where roads and trees influence Aseem's experience of the city. The river and the built environment also acquire a presence that exceeds their function as background elements. A similar approach can be applied to Um-Helat. Its agricultural systems and water practices contribute to the conditions that sustain collective life.

Taken together, crip theory, affect theory, and new materialism provide a broader framework for reading these two stories. They draw attention to embodied experience and to the material conditions in which life takes place. They also place care and dependence at the centre of ecological thought. Vulnerability is therefore not understood simply as a deficit. It can also become a way of perceiving and understanding environmental change. Ecological agency consequently emerges through relationships between bodies and their material surroundings.

The following sections examine how these theoretical perspectives illuminate the environmental ethics represented in Vandana Singh's *Delhi* and N. K. Jemisin's *The Ones Who Stay and Fight*.

Embodied Vulnerability and Material Agency in Vandana Singh's *Delhi*

Vandana Singh's *Delhi* is particularly useful for a crip ecological reading because it does not present environmental crisis as a single dramatic event. Instead, the story develops its ecological world through the ordinary conditions of urban life. Traffic and dust become part of Aseem's daily experience. So do heat and crowded streets. Poverty also shapes the way he encounters the city. At the same time, old buildings and the layered history of Delhi remain present in his experience. From the opening of the story, Aseem is "intensely aware of the city" and notices its streets and houses along with its traffic and dust (Singh 79). Delhi is therefore more than a setting. It influences how Aseem thinks and remembers. It also shapes his sense of himself.

The story repeatedly brings the environment into close contact with the body. On a hot day in Old Delhi, Aseem finds himself surrounded by "people and sweat and dust" (Singh 83). The simplicity of this phrase is significant. It does not allow the body to be separated from its surroundings. Heat and dust become part of Aseem's immediate experience. So do the crowd and the noise. He does not observe Delhi from a distance. He experiences the city from within it. This embodied position is central to a crip ecological reading because it shows how bodily vulnerability can become a way of knowing a place.

He hasn't slept well—last night the police raided the Aurobindo Marg sidewalk where he was sleeping. Some foreign VIP was expected in the morning, so the riffraff on the roadsides were driven off by stick-wielding policemen. This has happened many times before, but today he is smarting with rage and humiliation: he has a bruise on his back where a policeman's stick hit him, and it burns in the relentless heat. Death lurks behind the walled eyes of the populace—but for once he is sick of his proximity to death (Singh 89).

This passage brings together bodily pain and social vulnerability. Aseem's body is exposed to both environmental conditions and institutional violence. The heat intensifies the pain of the injury. His homelessness also leaves him without the protection that a secure home might provide. The passage therefore shows that vulnerability cannot be understood only in bodily terms. It is also shaped by poverty and social exclusion. From the perspective of crip ecology, the significance of Aseem's experience lies in this connection between the body and the conditions in which it is forced to live.

Aseem's experience also unsettles the idea of the autonomous subject. He struggles with his temporal visions and seeks help from doctors and psychologists. His connection with college also begins to weaken. At several points he considers leaving Delhi. Others often treat his condition as a

problem that needs explanation or correction. Yet the story gradually presents his unusual perception as a particular way of knowing the city. Through his visions, Aseem encounters its histories and its possible futures. The point is not to romanticise his distress. Rather, Singh suggests that a body which does not fit ordinary expectations may experience its surroundings in ways that more conventional perspectives cannot easily recognise.

The city itself appears to possess a form of agency. Jane Bennett's idea of vibrant matter is particularly useful here. Delhi is not simply passive scenery. It acts upon Aseem and shapes his experience of time. The story moves between different versions of Delhi without keeping the past and present completely separate. Medieval Delhi appears alongside colonial Delhi. The contemporary city also remains connected to possible futures. The physical environment carries traces of these different moments. The old walls and the Yamuna are part of this material history. So are the pipal tree and the Metro. The Delhi Ridge and the crowded streets also contribute to Aseem's understanding of the city.

This relationship between Aseem and Delhi is reciprocal. Human beings have transformed the city through construction and pollution. They have also changed its social and physical structure. Yet Delhi continues to shape those who inhabit it. Particular places trigger Aseem's memories. His visions also seem inseparable from the city's historical layers. The boundary between person and environment therefore becomes difficult to maintain. Aseem experiences the city through his body. At the same time, his body becomes part of the city's continuing history.

Dust offers one of the clearest examples of this material relationship. It appears from the beginning as part of Delhi's atmosphere. It returns through the streets and roads that Aseem encounters. It is an ordinary presence. Its repeated appearance nevertheless gives it greater significance. Dust suggests accumulated matter and decay. It also carries traces of labour and history. From a crip ecological perspective, dust draws attention to the fact that environmental conditions are experienced through the body. Ecological harm does not always arrive as a clearly defined crisis. It can become part of everyday existence.

The story also connects environmental vulnerability with social vulnerability. Aseem sleeps under bridges and on sidewalks. He is exposed to heat and cold. He also faces traffic and police violence. His lack of security makes the city more dangerous for him. Later, he encounters a blind woman in the Delhi Ridge and offers to help her (Singh 90). This encounter is significant because blindness is not presented simply as an individual deficit. Her vulnerability is connected to her movement through the city. It is also shaped by poverty and access. Singh therefore draws attention to the ways in which an environment can become more or less habitable depending on the conditions surrounding a body.

Affect is equally important in *Delhi*. Aseem's relationship with the city involves fear and exhaustion. It also includes loneliness and wonder. These emotions do not remain within his private consciousness. They develop through his encounters with the city. Streets and bridges affect his emotional state. So do forests and monuments. His memories also alter the way he sees these places. The relationship works in both directions. The city affects Aseem. His emotional response also influences his understanding of the city. Massumi's account of the body as both concrete and open to potential helps explain this movement between sensation and possibility (31).

This becomes particularly striking when Aseem encounters the future city. He learns about a divided Delhi in which the privileged city above is separated from "Neechi Dilli." The latter becomes a space for poor and marginalised people. This division turns environmental cleanliness into a question of social justice. The technologically advanced city depends upon keeping unwanted bodies away from view. Environmental safety is therefore shown to be unevenly distributed. The story draws attention to who receives protection and who remains exposed.

Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence helps clarify this aspect of the story. The future Delhi does not emerge from one sudden catastrophe. Its inequalities have developed over time. Present forms of poverty and exclusion are connected to the future that Aseem encounters. The story also links policing and urban expansion with environmental pressure. In this sense, *Delhi* asks readers to notice forms of harm that become difficult to recognise because they develop gradually.

Importantly, the story does not turn vulnerability into a virtue. Aseem suffers. Singh does not suggest that suffering is valuable in itself. What the story does suggest is that an awareness of dependence can lead to a different form of responsibility. Near the end, Aseem begins to understand that his role involves caring for people who are poor and close to death (Singh 96). His agency is therefore modest. It is also relational. He helps others and listens to them. Most importantly, he remains within the city rather than trying to master it.

The final image of Delhi strengthens this argument. Aseem imagines the city as "an entity in its own right" that expands beyond its existing boundaries (Singh 96). Delhi is neither entirely benevolent nor entirely destructive. It is a material system that exceeds the control of any individual. Read through Bennett's theory, this image suggests that agency is distributed beyond the human subject. From the perspective of crip ecology, it also emphasises human dependence on conditions that cannot be fully controlled.

Singh therefore offers a different understanding of climate-oriented agency. Aseem does not gain power over Delhi through his unusual perception. Instead, his vulnerability makes him more

attentive to the city and to those who remain exposed within it. The story suggests that responsible life in a damaged urban environment begins with recognising dependence. Bodies remain connected to histories and infrastructures. They are also shaped by the material world around them. In this sense, *Delhi* presents ecological life as a condition of entanglement rather than mastery.

Care, Collective Responsibility, and Climate Agency in N. K. Jemisin's *The Ones Who Stay and Fight*

If *Delhi* represents ecological vulnerability through the body and the city, N. K. Jemisin's *The Ones Who Stay and Fight* imagines a community where care forms the basis of social life. Um-Helat is not defined only by technological progress. The story presents it through everyday practices that support different kinds of bodies. The focus therefore shifts from individual survival to the question of how a community can make life possible for everyone.

The Day of Good Birds offers a clear example. Children who can run pretend to fly, while “those who cannot run instead ride special drones” (Jemisin 2). The significance of this scene lies in the way the city creates space for different bodily abilities. Children who cannot run are not excluded from the celebration. They are given another way to participate. Accessibility is therefore part of everyday life rather than a special accommodation. This reflects Kafer's approach to disability futures. The concern is not to make different bodies conform but to imagine social worlds in which they can flourish.

But this is no awkward dystopia, where all are forced to conform. Adults who refuse to give up their childhood joys wear wings, too, though theirs tend to be more abstractly constructed. (Some are invisible.) And those who follow faiths which forbid the emulation of beasts, or those who simply do not want wings, need not wear them. They are all honored for this choice, as much as the soarers and flutterers themselves—for without contrasts, how does one appreciate the different forms that joy can take? (Jemisin 2).

This passage shows that accessibility in Um-Helat is linked to a wider acceptance of difference. The city does not demand that everyone participate in the same way. Instead, it allows different forms of participation. This is important to crip ecology because it shifts attention from bodily limitation to the conditions that shape participation. A body may have certain limits, but the environment can either reinforce those limits or create possibilities beyond them.

Jemisin makes this principle clear when Um-Helat is described as “a city whose inhabitants, simply, care for one another” (Jemisin 4). Care is not presented as private kindness. It forms part of the

organisation of the community. This makes dependence an ordinary condition of social life rather than something to be hidden. From a crip ecological perspective, such a community challenges the ideal of complete independence.

The role of the caretakers makes this vision more complex. They protect the social order, yet their methods can also involve violence. Jemisin therefore does not offer an uncomplicated utopia. Instead, the story raises difficult questions about how a society should respond when harmful ideas threaten collective life. Care becomes a form of political responsibility rather than simple compassion.

This structure challenges the ideal of self-sufficiency. McRuer's concept of compulsory able-bodiedness helps explain why dependence matters here. When independence becomes the standard of a successful life, people who require support can easily be treated as burdens. Um-Helat reverses this logic. Social support and accessibility are treated as necessary parts of community life.

The story also refuses to treat bodily difference as something that must disappear. Children who cannot run are not expected to imitate those who can. The city creates another way for them to join the celebration. This scene is central to a crip ecological reading because it shows that environments can change the meaning of bodily limitation. The question is not only what a body can do. It is also whether the surrounding world allows that body to participate.

Oh, some of this will be familiar to you in concept at least, like terms for gender that mean neither he nor she, and the condemnation of words meant to slur and denigrate. And yet you will puzzle over the Um-Helatians' choice to retain descriptive terms for themselves like kinky-haired or fat or deaf. But these are just words, friend, don't you see? Without the attached contempt, such terms have no more meaning than if horses could proudly introduce themselves as palomino or miniature or hairy-footed. Difference was never the problem in and of itself—and Um-Helatians still have differences with each other, of opinion and otherwise. Of course they do! They're people. But what shocks the young citizens of Um-Helat is the realization that, once, those differences of opinion involved differences in respect. That once, value was ascribed to some people, and not others. That once, humanity was acknowledged for some, and not others (Jemisin 6).

This passage strengthens the connection between disability studies and crip ecology. Jemisin makes a distinction between bodily difference and the social meaning attached to it. Being "deaf" is not presented as a problem in itself. The problem begins when difference becomes a basis for exclusion

or unequal respect. Um-Helat therefore imagines a society in which bodily variation can exist without becoming a reason for marginalisation. This directly supports a crip ecological understanding of livable environments. Such environments do not demand bodily conformity. They make room for difference.

The title of the story is equally significant. Jemisin responds directly to Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*. She describes her story as a “pastiche of and reaction to” Le Guin's work (Jemisin, Introduction). While Le Guin focuses on those who leave an unjust community, Jemisin considers what it means to remain and work against injustice.

This idea also connects with Donna Haraway's call to “stay with the trouble” (1). Jemisin's idea of staying involves continued responsibility. It requires people to remain engaged with the difficulties of social life rather than seeking an easy escape. Climate agency therefore becomes a matter of continued care and maintenance.

Um-Helat's environmental practices reinforce this argument. Farmers receive recognition for their work. When water systems become difficult to sustain, they adapt their practices by changing crops and working with fisheries (Jemisin 2). The story connects ecological responsibility with everyday social life. Environmental sustainability is not treated as a separate technical concern.

Read through crip ecology, the story redefines agency as relational. No individual character saves Um-Helat. Its survival depends on practices of care and accessibility. It also depends on ecological responsibility. Vulnerability does not remove agency. Instead, it creates the need for systems in which people can depend on one another.

This vision complements *Delhi*. Singh presents vulnerability within an unequal city. Jemisin imagines a community where responsibility is built into social life. Their approaches are different. Yet both stories challenge the idea that ecological survival depends on individual mastery. Together, they suggest that care and interdependence can provide a more inclusive basis for imagining ecological futures.

Crip Ecologies as an Ethics of Climate Agency

The comparison between *Delhi* and *The Ones Who Stay and Fight* strengthens the argument for crip ecologies. Both stories question the idea that human beings are fully independent of their surroundings. In *Delhi*, Aseem is deeply shaped by the city. In Jemisin's story, individual lives are supported by a community built around care. Agency therefore emerges through relationships rather than through individual control.

Crip ecology becomes useful at this point because it changes the meaning of agency. Agency does not disappear when bodies are vulnerable or dependent. It can take the form of care and mutual support. It can also involve adapting spaces and responding to the needs of others. Such ordinary practices become important because they make collective life possible.

Read together, the stories present crip ecology as an ethic of interdependence. Bodies are vulnerable and environments are never fully controllable. What matters is how people respond to this condition. Climate agency can therefore develop through care and accessibility rather than through mastery.

The political visions of the two stories remain different. *Delhi* exposes the inequalities already present within urban life. *The Ones Who Stay and Fight* imagines a community that tries to organise life around care. This difference makes the comparison productive. Together, the stories suggest that sustainable futures require a different understanding of agency. Crip ecology thus becomes a way of imagining more livable relationships between bodies and their environments.

Conclusion

Contemporary climate fiction does not always rely on spectacular disasters to represent ecological crisis. *Delhi* and *The Ones Who Stay and Fight* show how environmental concerns can emerge through everyday life. Singh presents Delhi through Aseem's bodily experience of the city. Jemisin imagines a community where care and accessibility are part of ordinary life.

The comparison shows that climate agency does not have to be heroic. In *Delhi*, it emerges through Aseem's growing awareness of vulnerable lives and of the city's material power. In *The Ones Who Stay and Fight*, it develops through accessibility and collective care. Both stories present vulnerability without treating it as weakness. They suggest that dependence can also become a basis for agency.

This study therefore brings crip theory into dialogue with climate fiction and the environmental humanities. It argues that disability and ecology can together question ideas of autonomy and mastery. A crip ecological reading makes environmental justice a question of both embodiment and social organisation. More just futures may depend not on overcoming vulnerability but on learning to live with it and creating spaces where different bodies can flourish.

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