

Climate Catastrophe and Environmental Injustice in Guinevere Glasfurd's *The Year Without Summer*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64938/RIJ.v12i4.26.May019>

Abstract

This paper focuses on the volcanic eruption of Mount Tambora in 1815 as natural disaster and its catastrophic consequences of climate change represented in Guinevere Glasfurd's The Year Without Summer. The study analyses the novel through an ecocritical framework by drawing upon the ecocritical theories of Greg Garrard and Kate Rigby. The paper uses qualitative textual analysis, to explore the impact of extreme climatic conditions on human societies and ecological systems. In the novel climate catastrophe is represented not merely as a natural event but as an ecological and social crisis. The author uses climatic catastrophe to expose inequalities, suffering, migration, trauma, and most importantly the interconnectedness between nature and human society. The paper analyzes how environmental disasters affect vulnerable communities and highlights injustice and exploitation of the vulnerable in the society. The author demonstrates human response to catastrophe and how literature records environmental disasters and memory. Through the experiences of labourers, migrants, writers, and survivors, the novel reflects the long-term consequences of climate disasters and the fragility of human civilization before nature.

Keywords: Climate Change, Ecocriticism, Climate Catastrophe, Environmental Injustice, Mount Tambora, Greg Garrard, Kate Rigby



Open Access

Manuscript ID:
RIJ-2026-May-04-019

Subject: English Studies

Article History:

Received : 15.05.2026

Accepted : 26.05.2026

Published : 30.05.2026

Recommended Citation:

Abisha, X. "Climate Catastrophe and Environmental Injustice in Guinevere Glasfurd's *The Year Without Summer*." *Roots International Journal of Multidisciplinary Researches*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2026, pp. 148–53.



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Introduction

One of the most current issue and theme that continues to resonate in literature and literary studies is the theme of climate change. Environmental disasters are also part of climate change that leads to ecological collapse, famine, and human suffering. Ecocriticism not only deals with the relationship between literature and the physical environment but it goes a step ahead and focuses on representation of ecological crisis. Greg Garrard pints out how environmental concern such as pollution, apocalypse, wilderness, and catastrophe has become a central theme in his work *Ecocriticism*. Kate Rigby emphasizes the significant role of literature is to help societies to imagine ethical response to environmental destruction. Their theories provide a useful framework for examining climate catastrophe in fiction.

The term “disaster” has its origin in the Italian word “disastro”, which in turn is derived from the Greek prefix “dis” which means “bad” and “astron” meaning “star.” Initially it was associated with the alignment of star which would bring misfortune and destruction. It was during the period of Enlightenment and Romantic period the idea of “natural disaster” gained significance. Writers of this period began to explore human vulnerability, most of them in their works depicted disaster to expose social inequalities and psychological trauma rather than a divine punishment.

Eruption of Mount Tambora

The eruption of Mount Tambora which occurred in April 1815 at Indonesia is not just seen as a historical event, but one which turned the entire world upside down due to its climatic catastrophes. The novel *The Year Without Summer* deals with the impact of Mount

Tambora eruption. Mount Tambora’s volcanic eruption was the largest in human history.

Unusual Occurrences

The first unusual change is noticed by Henry Hogg, the surgeon aboard the ship Benares. Henry Hogg’s narrative is important because he recorded the events that he had witnessed in his letter to his wife, Emmalina, to convey the harrowing events of the 1815 volcanic eruption. Through Hogg’s intimate correspondence, readers gain firsthand insights into unusual weather changes, such as the air being unusually hot. There is an increase in temperature. This increase in temperature not only affects humans but also birds as well. The catastrophic effects of the 1815 volcanic eruption altered the natural environment, impacting air, land, and sea.

As the crew members and Henry Hogg navigate towards the island of Sumbawa, unable to comprehend the impact of the volcanic eruption, they witness an unsettling darkness blanketing the region, turning daylight into a night-like. Dark ash fell like snow. This unusual climate change in the environment affected their health, while many of the crew members suffered from wheezing.

They anticipated lush green scenes but witnessed desolate landscapes covered with pumice. The crew and Henry Hogg wonder at the mystery of such a climatic change. Unknown to them, fear grapples them with the riddle of nature’s violent change. The sea had become sluggish, thickened with ash grey. There was no water, but the entire sea looked as if it had become stone. The author records how humans respond to climate change. Climate change evokes feelings of chaos and fear. Crew members and Henry Hogg share the same feeling during this natural disaster. The novel not only captures the physical impact of the

eruption but also the personal turmoil and resilience of those affected.

Catastrophe of Mount Tambora

As the crew surveyed the shattered remnants of the landscape of nature. They were struck by the complete destruction of life. The island in the midst of nature had become a barren wasteland. The volcanic eruption led to the emission of gases such as sulfur. The crew members battled with extreme heat, and their skin was coated with ash. There was sight of destruction; while they reached the mountaintop, they could see the rubble of home, fragments of trees shattered to the ground. The sea had carried away their boats, huts, and carts and hurled them back inshore, causing material destruction. This catastrophic event had taken away the lives of men, women, and children on the island.

Human Suffering in the Midst of Calamity

Few inhabitants of the island had narrowly escaped the fury of nature. But even those survivors were in pain as they were affected with severe burns and were in urgent need of medical aid. Some of them faced the effects of ash inhalation. The ash had clung into their wounds.

Shortage of medical supplies, and other resources lead to starvation. There was severe water crisis since the ash from the volcanic eruption had contaminated their drinking supplies. The more their supplies dwindled the more people became desperate, this reveals the vulnerability of humans. The natives struggled to find clean water, an epidemic of diarrhea rapidly spread, affecting the king's own daughter who dies due to diarrhea. This reveals the survivors in pain, they were desperate for help.

Survivor's Tale of Calamity

The king recalls the natural disaster when three towering columns of flame erupted from the mountain. This was soon followed by the flame of fire engulfed everything, a sudden violent earthquake flattened crops like papaya and plantain. The gushing powerful winds uprooted the trees swept away entire homes, along with their inhabitants and livestock. The sea rose flooding the rice fields in Saugur. The natural disaster had completely wiped off twelve thousand people of the island. The king's lament, "We cannot live where nothing grows," a poignant realization of their lost home, uncertain future, survival. The aftermath impact of volcanic eruption had caused ashfall, pyroclastic flows, tsunamis. All these had altered the life of people leading to displacement and a desperate struggle for survival.

Global Impact of the Mount Tambora Eruption

The novelist uses five different characters from different parts of the world to illustrate the world-wide impact on eruption of mount Tambora. Therefore, the author has employed multinarrative approach. The first narrative is from John Constable, who is a painter struggling due to his creativity block. England is affected by incessant rain. John Constable, Sarah Hobbs. Mary Shelley become victims of continuous down pour of rain.

The second character is Sarah Hobbs, who is a common labourer. From a common man's perspective, the author uses Sarah Hobbs to depict how climatic change affects their everyday life. The third narrative is from the notable writer like Mary Shelley, who reflect on the climate crisis. Peter Hope is a soldier who is returning home after the war. He offers the view

of altered landscape that he witnesses. The last character is the preacher Charles Whitlock from Vermont urges his followers to maintain hope, while they still continue to endure drought and starvation. Through these intertwined perspectives, the narrative paints a comprehensive picture of hardship and resilience during a time of global crisis.

Unexpected change in climate conditions such as cold, drought, constant rain. Because of all these people were affected and they were denied the basic necessities. There was a crisis that was looming because of this. Epidemics, mass migrations, social problems and mass demonstrations lead to revolutionary mood and suicide attacks. This affected the livelihood of the people. Due to erratic pattern of seasons and climatic conditions there was Failure of harvest, famine, epidemics, social unrest all over the world.

Climate Change and injustice

John Constable is a painter who travels to Suffolk to meet his father. He notices that the picturesque countryside due to the incessant rain has become soggy. The roads were filled with puddles. The field and the crops were ruined by excessive water.

The relentless rains affect the rural economy of the common labourers like Sarah Hobbs and Tessie. Winter season became short. This indicates the change in weather season. Further the spring season did not arrive yet. As a result of the change in seasons, there was failure of crops and harvest. The seed that they planted had not come up. Floods washed away the harvest. Farm labourers such as Sarah Hobbs and Tessie are unable to find a job in the farm. While they continue their desperate search, they realize that men are prioritized for employment, whereas women are just dismissed. Such

situation forces them into a cycle of instability and starvation. Sarah's daily struggle continues while she makes use of the little opportunity that she gets. Her determination and persistence while she endures the farmer's indifference. She endures hunger. Their plight, and suffering is brought by environmental calamity. Man's dependency on nature is portrayed; the rural economy is depended on agriculture. During crisis, crops fail and livelihoods are washed away, forcing the labourers of the farm to migrate for their survival.

The workers in the farm feel that their owners do not pay the correct wages that they deserve. He says "They rob us of what's ours,..." (88). Whatever they plough is not given to cow, or horses, pigs to feed. Five of the landowners own the whole land. The entire land is in their hands. From the labour of the poor people, they become rich and they starve the poor of the parish (88). Many of the landlords have already taken the lands that belonged to them. Whereas Irish labourers reside in miserable huts. According to Tom from Downham market "...They stole the land from under us ..." (89). The same is happening to others as well. With the increase in prices of the wheat, they are unable to feed themselves with wheat. "We are starving we want a cheap loaf, cheap bread, and provisions cheaper" (89). the song of protest becomes louder emphasizing that it is the rich man who steals from the poor. But he is not put in to prison for exploiting the poor. When a poor man steals from the rich out of hunger they are put into prison. Here lies the great injustice. The landowners are taking advantage of the situation of climate change by paying them mere wages. They are treated like animals During spring season winter had come. This climatic unpredictability leads to failure of crops and this

further escalates their poverty. This climate changes affects the vulnerable community such as Sarah and her fellow labourers who face starvation. Hunger forces them to steal food. Their plight intensifies into collective protest, as they rally demanding justice for the social injustice they face. For instance, they face social injustice under the working class who favour the rich and keep the poor in the periphery. The labourers demand for fair wages and affordable provisions such as "cheap bread". This struggle becomes a class conflict as they demand their basic rights and reclaim their dignity.

This conflict among the class reveals human vulnerability amidst climatic crisis and how humans respond to climate crisis. Above all the novel also reveals nature as unpredictable force and how people rely on the natural world for survival. Further Glasfurd depicts how changing climatic conditions can disrupt livelihood leading to poverty and suffering as seen in the characters like Sarah Hobbs. Through climatic crisis the author highlights how nature can be an adversary that it can alter the fragile balance between human existence and nature's unpredictable power.

From the Soldier's Perspective of Altered Landscape

When Peter Hope, a soldier returns back to his childhood home, discovers his childhood home has been replaced by a fence. This makes him to reflect on the changes the landscape has undergone due to human activity. While he recalls of what he has lost especially the familiar sounds of nature the rustling of leaves, the creak of branches, the songs of birds. As a child he recalls the collecting oyster shells near the ships and the boats, now they have vanished. This highlights how human activity has disrupted the landscape of nature.

Migration Due to Climate Change and Survival

Climatic change forces people to migrate for their survival. Due to adverse climatic conditions that continued to prevail in Vermont such as severe drought that led to failed harvests. Many cattle's and livestock died, all these factors forced the residents to consider migration in search of better prospects. The preacher Charles Whitlock, tries to instill hope and faith among the congregation. He earnestly urges his congregation to remain steadfast and not abandon their homes, during these trying times.

The weather condition remained unchanged, drought continued, to make matters worse there appeared sunspots in the sky. When people hoped for rain the bleakness continued to exist. Soon the much-awaited rain poured, the earth had failed to absorb the rain since the earth was hard, the rain had ran off. This rain was inadequate as the earth had failed to absorb the water. The temperature continued to fluctuate leading to unexpected arrival of frost that had freeze water in the trough and the land was covered with black ice. The branches of the trees were burdened with frost covered branches that even the birds under the harsh condition were succumbed to the frost and died. When the frozen frost began to thaw it revealed the true extent of the devastation a harvest, especially crops were withered and rotten beneath the ice. The struggling inhabitants had very little to nourish. This erratic and harsh weather pattern painted a grim picture for Vermont's.

There was no corn, the little wheat or oats or barley or fodder was not available for the winter. The cattle ate up the hay stored for winter and the corn set aside for the next year planting. There was no rain and they lost every spring lamb they had. The consequence of the volcanic eruption led to climatic changes all

over the world. summer snow falls were seen in because of the eruption of volcano. Dry fog continued to prevail in large parts of Asia, and it obscured the sun. The upper winds distributed the gas, suspended particles around the world. This reduced solar radiation but it led to global cooling. It was the coldest winter of the millennium during the year 1815-1816. In most of the parts of Europe and North America there was no summer as a result of which the year 1816 was known as 'Year without a Summer'. 1817 became 'Year of Famine'.

In 1816, Lord Byron, along with his friend John William Polidori, Poet Percy Bysshe Shelly, his wife Mary Shelley and her step sister Claire Clairmont stayed near Lake Geneva in Switzerland. Mary Shelley observes the impact of flood and how the climate change affect the poor. She could witness mothers with their children were begging in the streets due to the scarcity of bread, eggs, and milk. The baker's brutal treatment of the man in tattered clothing leaves a deep impact on her. These observation of Mary Shelley reveals the climate change could affect the social and economic condition of the people. Incessant rains had confined them indoors due to the relentless rain.

Mary Shelley describes the unpredictable changes in the weather pattern. While rain

continued to batter when they longed for the sun to come out. Sudden storm came upon them across the lake. Rain continued to pour down against the windows causing waters to seep under the door and puddles were formed. She notices water on the floor and stuffs clothes to prevent rain water to flood the cottage.

Conclusion

Thus, the novel depicts not only the aftermath effects of the volcanic eruption of mount Tambora but how societies responded to unexpected climatic changes. This tension serves as a powerful reminder of how natural calamities can disrupt not only the environment but also can bring disruptions globally over the life on the earth. As Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty emphasizes, climatic events should be viewed from global perspectives

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