



Climate Radicalization and The Human Cost of Ecological Collapse in Paul Schrader's *First Reformed*

Mr. Muhammad Haneef Khan

Undergraduate Student

Department of English and Foreign Languages (University of Swat)

haneef.kh7151@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines Paul Schrader's First Reformed (2017) as a narrative of climate radicalization and the human cost of ecological collapse. The story follows characters Michael, Mary, and Toller, who struggle with emotional trauma of climate change. The film suggests that climate change is not only a scientific issue but also a psychological one that leads to distress for individuals and communities. The study employs qualitative textual and cinematic analysis using theoretical frameworks such as eco-trauma, ecocriticism, and cultural and moral critique. Through an in-depth analysis of Michael's character, the study explores how radical environmentalism can lead to despair and even suicide. Toller's character symbolizes spiritual degradation and a progression towards climate extremism. The paper illustrates how psychological trauma leads to forms of violence, self-destruction, and moral or ethical decline. It argues that when religious, political, and corporate sectors fail to respond effectively to climate catastrophe, this failure produces mistrust in individuals. To explore this, the study analyzes the characters, key scenes, and thematic ideas. Schrader reveals links between climate change, human mind, corporations, and religion. The study contributes to understanding the hardships individuals confront due to the climate crisis in the modern era.

Keywords: *Cultural and Moral Critique, Climate Crisis, Climate Radicalization, Ecological Collapse, Eco-Criticism, Eco-Trauma*

1. Introduction

Globalization is one of the emerging global issues in modern days. It is impacting the environment and the human beings. The scientific study work is concentrated mostly on the physical effects of the climate change like loss of biodiversity, global warming, soil erosion, floods, etc. Cultural and psychological impacts are relatively less mentioned. The increasing consciousness of climate change influences the psyche of people and impacts the human behavior and decision-making process. The psychological effect is also significant and it needs to be considered before it is late. That is why climate change should not be perceived as only an environmental issue, it should be a psychological issue also.

Cinema is a strong and positive means when it is properly used. It plays an important role in influencing the popular opinion, as well as the formation of a sense of the international debates like economy, politics, fashion, and a variety of other geopolitical issues. Climate change has been one of the biggest international issues that numerous movies have touched. The last several years have seen numerous authors and filmmakers create a series of narratives with the emphasis on climate. Most of such works revolve around the policymaking, environmental damage, and other physical implications of climate change. There are very scarce studies that have tried to delve into psychological and moral impacts of

ecological breakdown. A film that showcases the moral and psychological outcomes of climate change is the film *First Reformed* (2017) by Paul Schrader.

1.1 Brief Review of *First Reformed*.

First Reformed (2017) by Paul Schrader is an American Thriller in the psychological genre. It is about the life of Reverend Ernst Toller, a pastor of a small historic church in Upstate, New York. Toller is experiencing the loss of his son and his existence is characterized by loss, being isolated and losing faith. Having seen Michael and his wife, he becomes psychologically upset. Michael is an eco activist who is well versed with climate change. His wide domain of knowledge and cynical attitude lead to eco-trauma that also affects Toller psychologically.

When Michael kills himself, Toller is even more preoccupied with matters of the environment. He gathers and updates the work of Michael on the climate change. This brings doubts to the mind of Toller and makes him disillusioned. Upon learning that the church is not even an exception as it is also affiliated with corporations that are ruining the environment, he is facing a moral crisis and starts mistrusting. His mental and religious crisis culminates and drives him to extremist views. The key themes of the movie include eco-trauma, moral crisis, existential crisis, ethical responsibility, institutional hypocrisy and climate radicalization. *First Reformed* shows climate change as a mental problem and also showcases the anthropological cost of a fallen environment.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the growing body of scientific and cultural research on climate change, existing research has largely prioritized its physical and policy-related consequences. The psychological, moral, and existential consequences of climate change on individuals remain unexplored. Climate-focused films are often analyzed for their role in the representation of environmental destruction, the relationship between ecology and capitalism, and environmental ethics, yet limited attention has been given to the psychological consequences of climate change. Paul Schrader's *First Reformed* (2017) remains underexplored in this regard. Existing studies have examined the film through eco-theological perspectives but have not sufficiently discussed how ecological collapse, extensive climate awareness, and institutional failure generate eco-trauma which leads to climate radicalization and moral crisis. This limitation creates a significant gap in climate humanities and film studies, particularly concerning the human cost of ecological collapse as portrayed through cinematic narratives. Therefore, there is a need for an analysis of *First Reformed* to understand how extensive climate awareness, eco-trauma, institutional hypocrisy, and moral crisis contribute to climate radicalization.

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To analyze the psychological impact of climate change on humans through the characters of Michael and Reverend Toller.
2. To explore how extensive climate knowledge and consciousness leads to hopelessness and eco-trauma in *First Reformed*.
3. To apply eco-trauma, ecocriticism, and moral and cultural critique to the film and find out how eco-trauma leads to climate radicalization.
4. To highlight the contribution of institutional failure, moral crisis, and climate radicalization in the film.

The study seeks to explore the following questions:

1. How does *First Reformed* portray the psychological impact of climate change on humans?
2. How does extensive climate knowledge and conscious leads to hopelessness and eco-trauma?
3. In what ways eco-trauma leads to climate radicalization in the film?
4. How does institutional failure contribute to moral crisis and radicalization in the film?

This study is very significant as it contributes to the interdisciplinary fields of film studies, ecocriticism, and climate humanities. It explores the psychological and moral dimensions of climate change which are underexplored specifically in fictional cinema. Through an in-depth analysis of *First Reformed*, the study expands critical understanding of how climate awareness can cause eco-trauma and how prolonged eco-trauma leads to mistrust and radicalization. It also emphasizes the need to address climate change as a human crisis that affects individuals mentally, morally, ethically, and leads to mistrust and radical behavior. This research provides insight into the role of cinema in reflecting and shaping responses to ecological collapse.

2. Literature Review

The issue of climate change has gained popularity in contemporary literature. Authors are paying more attention to its impact on individual and corporate human life. Previous literature did not focus on climate-related themes in movies as much as textual literature. But in the modern cinema, this issue is also starting to become more serious. Studies have shown that movies are effective in creating awareness of climate (O'Neill et al., 2017). Ecocriticism has been applied to the films like *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), *Okja* (2017), *Snowpiercer* (2013), and *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) to provide the insight into the effects of the climate crisis and its relation to human lives. Though the ecological themes in films are subject to multiple studies, few studies have focused on the psychological effects of ecological downfall on film, especially in *First Reformed* by Paul Schrader (2017) that is a relatively unexplored field. The eco-trauma lens has been used extensively to the literary and cinematic work so that it is possible to analyze the documentary *Polluting Paradise* (2012) and prove that environmental destruction may trigger psychological issues, such as fear, helplessness, and anxiety. These studies unveil the relation between the eco-trauma and the climate crisis. The studies, however, tend to ignore the fact that ecological fiasco can lead people towards radicalization and moral and ethical decay. The central character in *First Reformed*, Toller, represents the moral and ethical price of eco-trauma through the realization of the climate change and the inaction of the institutions. Through the use of the eco-trauma lens, the film brings out the human cost of ecological collapse, which connects environmental, psychological, and ethical issues. The moral and cultural issues also intersect with the mental pressure of the ecological collapse, and they can be examined with the help of ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism is a critical approach to literature and movies in their connection to nature and the relationship between humans and the natural world. The studies indicate that movies can increase the level of awareness regarding climate change through their ability to introduce environmental concerns in terms of moral and ethical stories (Fathinah et al., 2024). Environmental films tend to blame the effects of industrialization, capitalism, and the development of technologies on nature. Considering these issues, researchers usually put aside the psychological damage of environmental destruction. The current ecocritical literature on the matter is mostly centered on documentaries, environmental writings, general theory, and wrote literature, with a relatively lesser focus on the fictional narrative films. *First Reformed* is fictional story, which dwells upon the psychological level of the human price of the ecological collapse. The movie portrays the concept of capitalism, institutional failure, ethical duty and emotional hopelessness through the detailed development of characters, and expands the eco-critical analysis further.

Climate radicalization is the consequence of climate anxiety and distress caused by the knowledge and awareness concerning the climate change. Clayton and Parnes (2025) review propose that a combination of knowledge about the climate change and feelings that the institution is not doing enough to address the issue motivates people to become radical. This is demonstrated in the *First Reformed* by Paul Schrader. The knowledge of inappropriate institutional response as well as the awareness about the

effects of climate change causes Michael and Toller to act radically. Schrader depicts the unresolved anxiety related to the climate with the failure of the institutions into radicalization.

In *First Reformed*, the issues of institutional failure are closely interconnected with religion and moral crisis. The movie describes the role of the church in climate crisis. Jelangdeka and Kristianto (2021) analyze *First Reformed* in terms of eco-theological perspective based on the conflict of Christianity to address and act upon the challenges of the environment. Nevertheless, their work makes no mention of the psychological implications of poor religious response and institutional failure in relation to people. Toller exhibits the relationship between the institutional failures and moral crises. Toller is mistrusted after discovering that even the church is a culprit in the problem of climate change. This distrust creates a moral dilemma in his personality that promotes his radicalism.

To conclude, there are current studies that are overly devoted to climate radicalization in psychological and sociological literature with little regard given to how it has been reflected in films. Eco trauma, ecocriticism, and climate radicalization studies demonstrate the impact of environmental crisis on human feelings and social behavior. Nevertheless, little has been done on the issue of how these aspects of cinematic accounts especially in the first reform by Paul Schrader. Through the psychological, moral, and radical aspect of ecological breakdown, this paper aims to address this gap and help the further comprehension of the human-cost of climate change as presented in the film.

3. Methodology

The qualitative text and cinematic analysis will be used to conduct the study by analyzing *First Reformed* (2017) by Paul Schrader as a climate radicalization narrative and human cost of environmental deterioration. The study aims at studying themes, characters, moral issues, and existential crises in this movie as opposed to quantitative information. The aim of the research is to decipher how climate change influences the psychological state of the characters through watching some of the most important scenes and character analysis.

The research uses three theoretical prisms eco-trauma, ecocriticism and moral/ cultural critique. The eco-trauma lens aids in discovering the psychological effects of changes brought about by climate change on an individual. Ecocriticism is a study of the depiction of the relationship between the environment and man and the criticism of the societal and institutional roles. The Moral and cultural critique lens is more in-depth on the spiritual and ethical aspects. It brings out the impact of institutional failure on morality. All these structures help to analyze the film in terms of its storyline and message.

The first source of information will be the film, *First Reformed*, itself, a fictional narrative. It lays emphasis on psychological, ethical and social outcomes of ecological downfall. The secondary sources include the articles and reviews regarding climate change, ecocriticism, eco-trauma, climate radicalization, and film studies created by scholars. They have been utilized to set up the context of the analysis and to back the theoretical bases. These sources assist in reviewing the current research on similar study and determining the gap in the research to ascertain the significance of such research.

The analysis will include a close study of the main characters and the major scenes. Reverend Toller is the character in the focus. His personality is an allusion to climate change causing eco-trauma and moral consequences of institutional failures, which propagate climate radicalization. The paper examines the ways that *First Reformed* depicts climate radicalization and how climate change has been made human through this character intimate and scene based observations.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The film *First Reformed* by Paul Schrader does not only describe climate change as an environmental and scientific problem but a problem that has psychological components as well that can cause emotional despair, moral crisis, and extremism. The movie, through the main characters, the main scenes, and the

cinematography, investigates how the ecological breakdown coupled with the institutional breakdown lead to the formation of eco-trauma, moral crisis, fear, emotional despair, and radicalization. In this part of the paper, the theoretical approaches that will be used to examine the main characters and main scenes include eco-trauma, ecocriticism, and moral and cultural critique to examine the human price of environmental destruction.

4.1 Eco-Trauma and Psychological Distress

Schrader so through the character of Michael has managed to draw how the excessive awareness of climate data and statistics of the future impact of climate change could result in psychological distress. Michael has a character of anxiety and pessimism. The anxiety in Michael is brought out in his initial dialogue with Reverend Toller. He provides some statistical information about environmental destruction with charts, graphs, and videos and explains that he believes that the climate crisis is over and it is wrong to bring a child to such a world. Rearing children towards their own destruction is unethical.

When Michael realizes that political systems and religious institutions fail to react to the climate crisis or simply do not want to do so, this despair is enhanced. The attitude towards institutional inaction makes him have a mistrust, fear, and enhances his concepts of irreversibility of climate change. He becomes hopeless about environmental solutions. He has existential hopelessness and sees life as meaningless. All this trauma all leads to the suicide of Michael.

This suicide is the human cost of the ecological collapse showing that environmental problems are not confined solely to the external world and have a significant effect on the psychological condition as well. The movie shows this action as a severe and fatal outcome of unaddressed eco-trauma showing the way climate anxiety is lethal. His trauma relates to the study indicating that the feeling of climate anxiety may result in excessive feelings (Domalewski, 2023).

Psychological distress in Reverend Toller is also an indication of eco-trauma. Originally, he is religious and a tranquil character. He not only becomes psychologically damaged after realizing the destruction of the ecology and discovery of the insufficient response of the church. His anxiety, grief, and confusion develop after having seen the role of the institution in climate change instead of taking any action on it. The case of Toller proves that eco-trauma is not a problem of professional experts and researchers only but also of those who acquire awareness of climate crisis.

4.2 Climate Radicalization

Paul Schrader in *First Reformed* shows how climate radicalization is the result of unresolved eco-trauma of climate change awareness and realization of poor institutional response. The consciousness and study of climate change is what drives Michael to despair. He gets eco-trauma that will not be solved and he does not find the answers to the questions in his mind. The unrewarded eco-trauma causes him to turn to extreme measures such as refuting the idea to bring more life to a ruined world and committing suicide at the end.

The appearance of Reverend Toller is a kind of representation of gradual turning of a person to the radicalization in climatic conditions. His initial talk with Michael makes him gain a consciousness regarding climate change and its effects. Toller explores the data collected by Michael after Michael commits suicide, to get to know more about climate change. The more he becomes aware the more it impacts him on the psychological level. Toller undergoes a mental process throughout the movie. His mental path leads to the realization of how environmental consciousness brings about the eco-trauma, the eco-trauma results in anger and moral crisis, and the moral crisis pushes him to radicalism.

Michael's despair is inward and self-destructive whereas Toller's despair leads to radical urgency as he becomes self-destructive but also wants to punish the responsible ones. In both cases, climate

radicalization and its impact on human lives are evident. The story of both the characters can be linked with the research that argues that when individuals perceive institutional inaction, it intensifies climate anxiety and motivates individuals to take radical actions (Clayton and Parnes, 2025).

4.3 Moral Crisis and Failure in Institutions.

Institutional failure is also illustrated in *First Reformed* as a fuel to fire since it contributes significantly to human cost of the ecological collapse. The movie illustrates the inability of religious and business institutions to resolve environmental disasters. Rather, these institutions increase the ecological destruction. The church in the movie is the representation of all the religious institutions. Its political coincidence with business is a huge question to its ethical authority. Having known that the same corporation that is financing the church is contributing towards the climate crises, Toller becomes distrustful of church and religion. This adds to his ethical dilemma.

The movie criticizes the corporate and religious organizations through the ecocritical purism. It underlines the terrible truth of the civilized world where power and profit are more important than moral and ethical duties and ecological ones. The message that is brought out in the film is that religious organizations are an embodiment of faith and hope, but are being perverted behind the curtain. This criticism looks at the overlap between religion and the environment indicating the systematic neglect regarding climate change and its effects on the morality and psychological state of an individual.

4.4 Human Cost of Ecological Despair.

Paul Schrader focuses on the human-nature interaction in *First Reformed*. It depicts that climate change is not only an environmental issue, it has implications in human life both psycho-moral and otherwise. Ecological breakdown influences the mind of the human being and morality and social trust.

The movie emphasizes fear, anxiety, mental pressure, and the radical measures as the outcomes of climate change through the character of Michael and Toller. Both characters feel psychologically unstable and the sentiments of pessimism. This weight is the ecological cost to humanity.

Another aspect that the film presents is the fact that people mistrust social and religious institutions as a result of ecological collapse. The climate change is expected to be addressed and responded to by the social and moral institutions. The institutions are engaged in this instead of solving this problem. Toller is isolated as he discovers the role played by church in climate crisis, and is having a moral crisis. This institutional collapse further raises mistrust towards church by Toller and his mental anguish.

Also, *First Reformed* shows that human price of ecological degradation consists of high potential of climate radicalization. This eco-trauma, institutional failure, and moral crisis drive people to the extreme of action. These radical measures are similar to the personalities of Michael and Toller. The burden of climate crisis that lies inside them drives them to an extent where they see that extremism is the only way out. Through the psychological implications, the movie depicts how climate change is transforming the behavior of people in a devastating manner. It underlines the fact that climate change is not only an environmental but psychological, moral and cultural crisis, which is highly detrimental to humans.

4.5 Limitations of the Study

The study has a number of limitations that can be noted. To begin with, the study revolves around one movie, *First Reformed* (2017), making it impossible to extrapolate findings to other films devoted to the issue of climate. Second, the theoretical frameworks implemented in the study are eco-trauma, eco-criticism, and moral and cultural critique, other theoretical frameworks could influence the analysis in a different way. Third, the research is centered on protagonists (Michael and Toller), as well as on the most significant scenes. This minimizes the attention of secondary characters, cinematography and subplots. Such constraints can ignore the other possible perspectives of analysis.

5. Conclusion

The paper has examined *First Reformed* (2017) as a film that brings out the issue of climate radicalization and the human price of ecological breakdown through the psychological, ethical, and institutional prisms. Using theoretical perspectives of eco-trauma, ecocriticism, and moral and cultural critique, the analysis shows that the *First Reformed* by Paul Schrader does not depict climate change as an environmental or scientific issue. Instead, the film is also symbolic of climate change being a highly human issue that is troubling the human mind, morality, ethics, and social trust.

The results emphasize that ecological disaster in *First Reformed* causes mental distress which is clearly manifested in the characters of Michael and Toller. The eco-trauma process is triggered by the overwhelming access to the climate information and the fact that the climate change is irreversible. This is how existential despair that is brought about by climate anxiety can result in one committing suicide. Conversely, the psychological annihilation that Toller goes through is progressive. His personality brings out the role of climate consciousness and institutional dysfunction that result in moral crisis, confusion, and climate radicalization. The path that he goes through in the movie reveals how climate trauma that has never been resolved can be turned into extremism that makes people engage in radical changes.

In a critical view of the environment, the movie reveals the unsavory aspects of religious and corporate entities. The marriage between the church and business corporations that are ravaging the environment is a systemic failure sign. It reveals the way institutions put economic interest and power on top of ecological and moral responsibility. Instead of being a solution to the problem like environmental crisis, these institutions are in full denial of the same or they are in covert support. This laxity has significant damage to the environment on the one hand and lead to psychological distress and moral crisis. In this way, the paper can show that institutional failure is one of the factors that contribute to the increased impact of climate trauma and the development of radical responses.

On the whole, this study suggests that *First Reformed* is a criticism of the modern society, as it uncovers the interdependence between climate change, eco-trauma, moral crisis, and climate radicalization. The paper has highlighted the fact that climate change is not only destroying the environment but also people through human cost of ecological breakdown. By addressing these related features, the paper can be seen as adding to the body of existing knowledge regarding cinema about climate (especially with reference to the relatively underresearched areas of psychological and ethical implications of the issue in the narrative films). Future studies can build on this discussion by examining the secondary characters or how emotional support copes with eco-trauma or even comparing *First Reformed* to other films concerned with climate change.

References

- Bong, J. H. (Director). (2017). *Okja* [Film]. Netflix.
- Clayton, S., & Parnes, M. F. (2025). *Climate anxiety, distress, and radical responses: Psychological consequences of perceived institutional inaction*. *Journal of Environmental Psychology, 85*, 101932.
- Domalewski, J. (2023). Eco-trauma and environmental anxiety in climate documentaries: A study of *Polluting Paradise* (2012). *Environmental Humanities, 15*(2), 245–260.
- Emmerich, R. (Director). (2004). *The Day After Tomorrow* [Film]. 20th Century Fox.
- Fathinah, A., Rahman, M. A., & Yusuf, N. (2024). Ecocriticism and environmental ethics in contemporary cinema. *Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies, 12*(1), 55–70.
- Guggenheim, D. (Director). (2006). *An inconvenient truth* [Film]. Paramount Classics.
- Jelangdeka, R., & Kristianto, D. (2021). Eco-theology and institutional responsibility in Paul Schrader's *First Reformed*. *Journal of Religion and Film, 25*(2), Article 6.

Joon-ho, B. (Director). (2013). *Snowpiercer* [Film]. CJ Entertainment.

O'Neill, S., Smith, N., & Cook, J. (2017). Climate change communication and the role of visual media. *WIREs Climate Change*, 8(1), e440

Schrader, P. (Director). (2017). *First Reformed* [Film]. A24.