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**Social and Psychological Alienation in Barnes's
Above the ether (2019)**

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Dedications

To my lovely parents, sisters and
brother who supported me.

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Abstract:

This research investigates the impact of human excessive abuse of nature in Eric Barnes's *Above the ether* (2019) which is represented as a revenge of nature. In order to analyze the vengeance of nature on society and individuals' psychology, this study relies on Ecocriticism and Psychoanalysis. The first chapter relies on some ecocritical concepts that examine the relationship between nature and man. It aims to delve into the characters' belief that nature is a passive recipient of human's actions. This plays a major role in bringing about the post-apocalypse, which has an effect on social life. The second chapter employs Frank Johnson's "Psychological Alienation: Isolation and Self-estrangement" as a framework to scrutinize the impact of social alienation on characters' psychological conditions. The investigation of the issue under study has led to some findings. People's overuse of chemicals and pollutants caused climate change. Natural disasters have severe consequences on social and individual relations. The post-apocalyptic environment results in social decline that causes fundamental changes at a social level. There are six characters who are socially alienated in the novel namely the investor, the father, the stranger, the carousel operator, the restaurant manager and the doctor. Every character resides either alone or with one partner or family member. Moreover, social alienation has a direct impact on the individuals' psyche. Because some of the characters become self-alienated as they do not wish to communicate with their family members, friends, or other individuals.

Key words: Post-apocalyptic environment, Social alienation, Psychological alienation, Ecocriticism, Psychoanalysis.

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I. General Introduction

Throughout history, humans have consistently strived to improve the quality of life. Especially after the British Industrial Revolution, technological improvements have progressed in various fields, including healthcare, energy, science, and business. The era known as the industrial revolution was a period in which fundamental changes occurred with a remarkable economic growth. It is labeled revolution because it destroyed the old manners of doing things. Capitalism as a policy has also made substantial contribution to progress since it encouraged people to work diligently without government intervention. Individuals' hard work and global development have had an adverse effect on the entire planet. The primary catalyst for climate change is the rampant and exploitative treatment of natural resources. Some literary texts depict the connection between humanity, technological progress, and climate change, and how these factors impact society and individuals. Victims may face difficulties due to the absence of the government, and the lack of food and supplies. Additionally, they are also vulnerable to migration, criminal activities and acts of violence. Furthermore, a number of writers concentrate on portraying either an apocalyptic or a post-apocalyptic world to highlight the consequences. For instance, some individuals experience social alienation from their community. Others might encounter psychological effects as a result of the lack of social interaction.

This study examines Eric Barnes's representation of characters' challenges in dealing with climate change and its impact in *Above the ether* (2019). The narrative focuses on six primary characters who are the investor, the father, the doctor, the stranger, the carousel operator and the epileptic and the restaurant manager. The story delves into these characters' social and psychological alienation. This dissertation investigates families' and individuals' daily struggles with a lack of communication. Characters experience social alienation because of the collapse of the government and lack of human trust. In order to analyze this theme, this

research relies on ecocriticism to tackle how climatic changes can trigger the fall of interhuman relations. Additionally, it aims to address the impact of social alienation on the mental state of the characters. In order to discuss psychological conditions of some characters, this research focuses on Frank Johnson's "Psychological Alienation: Isolation and Self-estrangement" (1975).

A. The Review of the Literature:

A number of researchers have reviewed *Above the ether* by Eric Barnes from different perspectives. But given the fact that the novel is too recent, it has received very little attention from scholars and critics.

Anissa Annalise is among the reviewers who reviewed Barnes's novel. According to Annalise (2019), *Above the ether* is a novel that depicts the difficult lives of individuals. The natural world forces its inhabitants to endure appalling situations. The characters grapple with environmental challenges and their consequences, like the loss of family members, feelings of loneliness, alienation, insecurity and illegal responsibilities. To illustrate, she argues,

The dire situation presaged an ever closer, ever inescapable cataclysm and people were simply existing in it with varying levels of acknowledgement. Each of the characters followed are also not just dealing with fractured families, estranged and missing relatives, financial insecurities, loneliness, isolation and for one, in particular, exercising the power they have over those who are desperate. (2019)

This reveals that the novel portrays the characters miserable life in the post-apocalyptic world since they struggle with different emotions. The characters entangle with the consequences of the industrial revolution which once was a blessing for them.

It is worth noting that some critics have critically approached this novel from different perspectives. In "Tracing Corruption, Crime and Violence in Eric Barnes's *The City Where We Once Lived* (2018) and its prequel *Above the Ether* (2019)," Souhila Kentouche and Ferial Kaci investigate the effects of climate change on both the North End and South End. They

relied on Claire P. Curtis's *Postapocalyptic fiction and the social contract: "We'll not go home again"*, Shela Sheikh's concept of violence and Gregers Andersen's *Climate fiction and cultural analysis: A new perspective on life in the anthropocene*. The primary focus of the research is corruption and its impact on the lives of individuals in a post-apocalyptic setting. Moreover, it explores the relationship between the absence of governance and the escalation of corruption. The leaders are unable to halt the ongoing situation. In this vein, they argue, "the investor takes advantage of natural disasters, since she makes profits" (Kentouche and Kaci, 2022, p. 21). For instance, the investor serves as the symbol of corruption. Furthermore, Kentouche and Kaci claim that corruption is the main cause of violence. They examine the presence of violent teenagers, aggressive adults and criminal organizations. In this sense, they write, "the absence of governmental authorities causes a high increase of insecurity" (Kentouche and Kaci, 2022, p. 16). To put it succinctly, crime and violence are prominent themes in *Above the ether* and *The City where we once lived*. Characters have to deal with violent groups and a challenging battle for survival. For example, in the first novel, the doctor works for gangs to ensure his safety.

In "The Representation of women in Eric Barnes's *Above the ether* (2019)," Sarah Chabane Chaouch has offered a feminist reading of the novel. Due to the absence of authority, female characters reside in a dangerous and desolate city. They fight for survival in a world where climate change has caused a post-apocalyptic scenario. The novel depicts the lives of "the father's wife, the investor, the doctor's wife and the stranger. It also gives hints to the lives of some girls who are owned by gangs" (Chabane Chaouch, 2024, p. 598). It examines women's experiences and interactions with their male companions. The doctor's wife and the stranger are exemplary instances because their spouses rarely care about their lives or their every day challenges. The investor is the only strong, self-reliant, affluent woman in the novel. However, in order to reach a secure place, she needs assistance. Consequently, women are

described as weak since they rely on males in order to be powerful (Chabane Chaouch, 2024, pp. 598- 601).

The previous mentioned studies done on my selected novel *Above the ether* have concentrated on the study of corruption, crime, violence and the status of women in a post-apocalyptic setting. Consequently, my research aims to study social and psychological alienation in the post-apocalypse. Briefly, climate change might engender the fall of social and family relations. This research seeks to improve that nature has the power to avenge on society and people by making them socially and psychologically alienated.

B. Issue and Working Hypothesis:

Eric Barnes's *Above the ether* is approached from different perspectives. The above mentioned scholars have examined the impact of climate change on the government, corruption, crime, violence and women. Nevertheless, to the best of my knowledge, no research investigated the theme of alienation brought about nature's vengeance against society and individuals. Therefore, this research scrutinizes social and psychological alienation in Barnes's novel. It particularly aims to represent the revenge of nature which comes in the form of social and psychological alienation in the novel.

Above the ether is a climate change novel that explores human's exploitation of nature and its effect. Additionally, the majority of people live in the South End after the apocalypse. Social alienation among citizens arises from the post-apocalyptic environment and the government's collapse. The concept of social alienation refers to the state in which individuals feel estranged and disconnected from their surroundings. The narrative structure of the novel reveals that every character either lives alone or with his partner. Characters represent a community that suffers from a lack of interaction. The characters who are socially alienated are the father and his children, the investor, the stranger, the carrousel operator, the restaurant manager, and the doctor and his wife. Furthermore, social alienation has a detrimental effect on characters' psychological degradation since certain characters have psychological disorders. Because they believe that they are vulnerable, they distance themselves from their spouses. Barnes focuses on how people's psychological conditions are affected by both climate change and social alienation. The main characters who are psychologically alienated are the stranger, the doctor's wife, the caroussel operator and the restaurant manager.

C. Methodological Outline:

This dissertation investigates the impact of nature's vengeance on society and some individuals in Eric Barnes's *Above the ether* (2019). It follows the IMRAD methodology. It opens with a general introduction that introduces the study and its main purpose. The Methods section integrates two theoretical frameworks, namely Ecocriticism and Psychoanalysis. First, it clarifies the exploitation of nature and how this exacts retribution on humanity, leading to social collapse. It also draws attention to social alienation in eco-critical texts. Secondly, it explains Frank Johnson's "Psychological Alienation: Isolation and Self-estrangement" to analyze psychological alienation. The Materials section provides a biography of Eric Barnes and a synopsis of *Above the ether*. The results section is going to provide the key findings of this research. The discussion section is divided into two chapters. The first chapter tackles social alienation in a post-apocalyptic world. The second chapter investigates psychological alienation that arises from social alienation. Therefore, it explores characters' psychological problems. The general conclusion presents the findings of this dissertation.

II. Methods and Materials:

A. Methods:

This research incorporates several theoretical frameworks to analyze social and psychological alienation. The first chapter relies on some concepts of ecocriticism to discuss the connection between nature and society. It explains how humans govern nature to serve their own benefits. It also aims to explicate the abuse of nature and the possible impact of nature on social relations. The second chapter depends on Frank Johnson's "Psychological Alienation: Isolation and Self-estrangement" to explain psychological alienation.

Ecocriticism and Social Alienation:

a. Society and the Abuse of Nature

Ecocriticism is a literary theory that emerged in the late twentieth century with the aim of revealing the interrelationship between literature, human beings and the natural world. In this sense, Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) defines it as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment... ecocriticism takes an earth centered approach to literary studies" (p. xviii). Ecocriticism is a field of study that examines the interconnectedness between nature and culture. It focuses on how culture, as a human product, perceives nature. Numerous theorists address the origins of man's abuse of nature. According to Lynn White, it may be traced back to the medieval period when humans relied on nature to harvest their sustenance. In this context, he argues, "Man's relation to the soil has profoundly changed. Formerly man had been part of nature; now he was the exploiter of nature. Man and nature are two things, and man is master" (White, 1996, p.8). This means that man no longer views himself to be a part of the physical world because of his superiority complex and desire to exploit it for his own benefits. This suggests that he perceives himself as the master and nature as inferior. Human-nature relations have their roots in Judo-Christian theology and Cartesian dualism. In this vein, Lynn White (1996) examines the impact of Christianity on

human ideas and the foundation of dualism. He argues that it “not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature to his proper ends” (White, 1996, p. 10). In other words, Christianity is considered the primary religion that promoted and advocated the exploitation of nature for the benefit of humanity. Furthermore, humans had to distance themselves from the natural world because it is viewed as a passive and silent object. In this context, Christopher Manes (1996) argues, “nature is silent in our culture” (p. 15). According to Christopher Manes, nature is deemed silent in western culture as it lacks the ability to communicate and articulate its thoughts to humans. This encourages humans to exploit and mistreat nature.

Society is responsible for shaping knowledge and endorsing certain beliefs. The discourse can depend on scientific knowledge to serve its interests (Soulé, 1986, p. 84). The social construction of knowledge refers to the way society creates and shapes certain realities that govern the world, including the dualism of man/nature (R. Bird, 1987, 256). Cartesian dualism is a philosophical belief that highlights the existence of two distinct principles, beliefs or people. It emerged with the separation of the mind and the body. Hence, reality is divided into two separate realms, which are mental/spiritual and physical/material. According to Val Plumwood (2009), dualism

is a western based cultural formation going back thousands of years that sees the essentially human as part of a radically separate order of reason, mind or consciousness, set apart from the lower order that comprises the body, the woman, the animal and the pre-human. (Plumwood, 2009, p. 118).

From the above excerpt, Westerners constructed dualisms to demonstrate that humans are superior because they rely on their brain to generate meaning. Therefore, they distanced themselves from both nature and women due to their perceived inferiority. This implies that dualism helps humans to exclude nature. According to Plumwood (2009), human

centeredness refers to the hyper separation between humans and non-humans, inspired by humans' perception that they are special and significant (p. 116).

Anthropocentrism is an important concept that places humans at the center of the universe, since nature is a passive and evanescent entity. This helps them reduce non-humans to instruments because the natural world is considered subordinate. In this regard, Plumwood (2009) argues,

Anthropocentrism is a very tricky concept, with many functions. But one of its main recent roles is that of policeman for reductive materialism, enforcing polarised and segregated vocabularies for humans and non-human. Its covert assumption is usually the Cartesian one that mentalistic qualities are confined to the human and that no mentalistic terms can be properly used for the non-human. (p. 127)

Humans believe that they are the center of the world owing to their superiority complex. Humans also reduce the physical world to a passive entity that is supposed to be abused and exploited for humans' economic benefits. Plumwood's critique of anthropocentrism stems from its foundation in Cartesian dualism. It is worth noting that human actions bring about climate change. In this sense, Serres Michel (1995) argues, "we are partly responsible for the global change in the weather" (p.31). Simply put, Michel attributes the depreciation of the natural world to human actions.

b. The Agency of Nature and its Influence on Society

Several ecocritics questioned the reduction of man/nature dualism. They show that the social construction of dualism can be dangerous as it negatively affects both the planet and society (R. Bird, 1987, p. 261). Kate Burningham and Geoff Cooper (1999) explain, "[t]he critique is not simply that social constructionism is incorrect in denying an independent agency of the natural world, but also that the position is dangerous and morally or ethically wrong" (p. 300). Put differently, social construction of binary oppositions is dangerous, unethical and morally wrong.

Ecocriticism challenges hierarchical binaries that privilege human over non-human and advocates the need of an ethical consideration to the natural world. According to Plumwood (2009), there is a need for a world where both man and nature can be taken seriously as active agents in the physical world (p. 116). She promotes the necessity of constructing a less humanized community where consideration is given to both humans and non-humans. The portrayal of nature as active is a common theme in climate change fiction. Some climate fiction authors depict future imaginary incidents relying on post-apocalyptic genre (Andersen, 2020, p. 2). They represent the revenge of nature, which can be in the form of monstrous animals or natural disasters.

Some ecocritics believe that nature shows its power and strength so as to avenge its humans' exploitation and abuse. Andersen (2020) argues, "According to this imagination form anthropogenic global warming will at some point instigate a reaction from the non-human world to the violence inflicted upon them" (p. 11- 2). Put differently, Andersen believes has the potential to exhibit violence and respond to humans' abuse. He coins the concept judgement to refer to the revenge of nature since nature defends itself by judging and punishing humans (Andersen, 2020, p. 42). Bruno Latour (2005) argues that nature is an "actor" rather than a passive entity (p. 10). This indicates that nature has a voice and can return human abuse. Latour (1993) also claims, "[t]he repressed returns, and with a vengeance... nature, over which we were supposed to gain absolute mastery, dominates us in an equally global fashion, and threatens us all" (p. 8). In other words, nature is an active agent that returns human's violence by taking revenge. It has the power to dominate humans and disrupt humans' lives.

In some contemporary novels, nature has an adverse impact on humans' safety. Climate change narratives portray the impact of natural disasters and global warming on communities. Citizens might experience a sense of insecurity and endangered in their cities. In this context,

Lawrence Buell (2007) explains, “[a]t the turn of the twenty-first century... perceived environmental crisis will doubtless prompt many affluent individuals, communities, and societies to seek safe havens from which they can blame- or trash- the victims” (p. 35). That is to say, nature is an active entity capable of disrupting social life. It exerts a negative impact on both society and individuals. They feel insecure because they have to look for better places to inhabit. Furthermore, novels demonstrate the impact of nature on social interactions.

Nature possesses the power to dismiss Western society as it is a dynamic force that has the power to disrupt societal progress (Grewe-Volpp, 2006, p. 78). In addition, Andersen (2020) contends that nature, animals, pandemics and natural disasters have a negative impact by causing the apocalypse. Novelists portray “worlds where socio-political complexity has been rapidly and significantly reduced. That is, worlds where the complexity embedded in social relations has either greatly decreased or has entirely disappeared along a number of institutions” (Andresen, 2020, p. 23). This suggests that climate change can negatively impact social connections, especially during the apocalyptic time.

Nature has a detrimental effect on a single community since it disrupts it. It causes an abundance of harm and problems, including social and economic instability. It drastically changes the environment and the economy, which is extremely difficult for the local population and makes it worse for everyone else (Buell, 2003, p. 70). Consequently, society faces several challenges as individuals experience feelings of insecurity and poverty. Nature exacts its revenge on civilization as a whole by posing a number of issues. In certain novels, the characters no longer function as a cohesive unit as they begin to battle for their own survival. In this sense, Peter Quigley (1999) argues, “[t]here is a way to think about how social meaning is generated, how it is contoured, raised, given shape, how it is undermined, and what role ‘nature’ plays in such a dynamic” (p. 199). Put differently, the aim of the

natural world is to shape the destiny of individuals in a single society. This means that nature shapes the relationship among individuals.

Psychological Alienation

To explore the concept of psychological alienation in Eric Barnes's *Above the ether* (2019), I have chosen Frank Johnson's "Psychological alienation: isolation and self-estrangement." Johnson offers a psychological justification for self-estrangement and alienation. He presents the primary causes and consequences of Schizoid personality. According to Johnson, Schizoid personality is a mental personality disorder characterized by an individual's inability to express oneself and establish interactive social relations. In this sense, he (1975) explains, "Schizoid, like schizophrenia, enjoys a non-technical meaning denoting a quality of strangeness, isolation or peculiarity" (p. 379). Basically, a person suffering from this disorder will undergo social isolation and experience peculiar feelings that are unacknowledged. In addition, the American Psychiatric Association also offers a definition of schizoid personality. It argues that

The behaviour pattern manifests shyness, or sensitivity, seclusiveness, avoidance of closer competitive relationships, and also eccentricity. Autistic thinking with loss of capacity to recognize reality is common, as is daydreaming and the inability to express hostility and ordinary aggressive feelings. These patients react to disturbing experiences and conflicts with apparent detachment. (1975, p. 380)

The excerpt asserts that a personality disorder is distinguished by a pervasive disconnection from others and a restricted range of emotional expression. Furthermore, schizoid personality is indicative of a serious clinical dysfunction. That is to say, people with a schizoid personality disorder endure a serious problem which requires special treatments.

Various circumstances can contribute to the experience of profound self-alienation. In this context, recalling Johnson's words that numerous factors can lead to self-alienation such as natural disasters. He argues that

It is useful to divide those situations which place existential stresses on individuals into two categories... adventitious situations would be those which are more fortuitously encountered by the individual; they would include natural catastrophes, the unexpected loss of intimate associates, and exposure to severe physical threat. (1975, p. 376)

This shows that natural catastrophes might be the primary factor leading to self-alienation and isolation. In *Above the ether*, psychological alienation arises as a consequence of environmental calamities, which in turn cause social alienation. This means that it has a direct impact on characters' psychological conditions and mental states of the characters. In this sense, Johnson argues (1975), "Individual deviations and madness are directly related to the impact of malevolent society on the individual" (p. 385). This unveils that society has a crucial influence in causing an individual to experience a sense of alienation from oneself and family relations.

Like any other mental illness, schizoid personality disorder exhibits various symptoms. Robert Daly is one of the researchers who provides information about the symptoms. An initial symptom is an individual's intense anxiety during their conversations with other people. This makes communication very hard and painful for the individual; hence; he prefers to remain alone and isolate himself (As cited in Johnson, 1975, p. 371). In addition, an individual with a schizoid personality experiences profound internal difficulties, including uncertainty in making decisions, evaluating situations, and reaching conclusions. Additionally, he feels a "lack of fit" with both the individuals and the environment that surround him (As cited in Johnson, 1975, p. 371). As a result, this individual will develop "the tendency to withdraw from others" (As cited in Johnson, 1975, p. 371). More importantly, Daly highlights the instability that characterizes an individual's relationships with other people since he can distance himself from society and abruptly reengage. This phenomenon is referred to as "approach- avoidance conflicts" (As cited in Johnson, p. 371).

Despite the fact that Robert Daly provides some symptoms, Frank Johnson adds additional traits. Johnson provides a detailed explanation of schizoid personality disorder and distinguishes between two variations of the disorder. While some individuals feel anxious and isolate themselves, others find comfort and enjoyment in socializing with others. In this regard, he (1975) writes, “First are alienated states defined as the manifest schizoid personality, where there is a high degree of consciousness of estrangement from self and others accompanied by copious anxiety and withdrawal” (p. 378). This demonstrates that an individual struggling with schizoid personality is aware of his self-estrangement from other people and society. He lacks empathy towards others’ emotions and experiences. My research study will focus on the first category of people who are consciously self-aware of their alienation. Furthermore, schizoid personality disorder is characterized by emotional detachment, solitariness and self-reflection. Introspection is the process by which an individual who feels a self-alienated from himself examines his own ideas and self. In this vein, Johnson (1975) argues,

Introspection, of course, refers to mental experiences where the individual is both the subject and the object of his own conscious awareness. It stands in distinction to fantasy, reverie, or daydreaming insofar as these latter modes are not accomplished by an intense, conscious focus on self-observation. (P. 372).

This shows that a self-alienated individual is aware of his own estrangement from others. Due to introspection, he disregards the presence of other people. This situation causes his mental self-abuse as self-reflection can generate dangerous thoughts.

B. Materials

Biography of Eric Barnes

Eric Barnes is an American novelist who obtained a Bachelor’s degree in arts from Connecticut College and a master’s degree in fine arts from the University of Colombia. He was born in the United States on February 28, 1968. He grew up in Tacoma, Washington. He

holds the position of chief executive officer (CEO) of the daily Memphian, a daily online news outlet located in Memphis. He worked for Memphis' PBS station prior to that. He is the head of the American judicial system and commercial newspapers. *The city where we once lived*, *Above the ether*, *Shimmer*, and *Something pretty, something beautiful* are the four novels that Barnes is recognized for. In addition, he is the author of forty short stories, some of which include "All I can see", "Dreams where I can fly", and "We would drive" and "perfection". His novels have received an attention since *The city where we once lived* has contributed to advancing the national conversation on climate change.

Synopsis of *Above the ether* (2019)

Above the ether is a climate change novel, which revolves around six characters who live in an unpredictable environment. They live in the post-apocalypse because of climate change. The world is divided into two different parts, which are the North End and the South End. While some of the citizens continue to dwell in the north, the majority of citizens reside in the South End. The father and his two children struggle to reach a safe location after a tsunami, while his wife is trapped inside the house. Unfortunately, she dies because nobody could rescue her. Therefore, the father and his kids pursue their journey together without any relatives or connections. The investor is a powerful unmarried woman who lives alone in her apartment. She works for a company and takes advantage from natural disasters. The stranger is another female character who lost her two children owing to drug addiction. This character and her husband do not have any social relations. Their lives become unbearable because the stranger is silent and feels guilty. She even alienates herself from her husband. Things get better when she finds one of her sons. Furthermore, the epileptic and the carousel operator are friends who live together. They witness scenes of violence on a daily basis because of the absence of government. In order to avoid violence, these characters neither have friends nor encounter others. Moreover, the doctor and his wife live in a refugee camp under the

protection of an illegal gang. The wife kills four guards and escapes with her husband to another place as she feels unsafe. In addition, the restaurant manager is another character who is an eyewitness of violence; he lives alone in his house although he has family relatives. The restaurant manager breaks up with his girlfriend without any convincing reason. He does not promote any social relations with the members of his community.

III. Results

This dissertation has explored the consequences of climate change incidents on human life. To illustrate, in the first section, it highlights the impact of a revengeful nature on the characters' social and psychological conditions in Eric Barnes's *Above the ether* (2019). This research relies on different theoreticians' definitions to define Cartesian dualism and anthropocentrism. These concepts have a pivotal role in understanding how nature is a passive recipient of humans' actions. I also aims to deconstruct Man/ nature dualism to represent the agency of nature. In the second section, it employs Frank Johnson's definition of schizoid personality disorder, as presented in "Psychological alienation: isolation and self-estrangement," to address the issue of psychological alienation in the novel.

The first chapter examined social alienation in Barnes's climate change fiction. The characters in *Above the ether* (2019) are socially alienated due to the absence of social communication and interaction. Natural disasters shape people's lives as they have to struggle continuously in the novel. The author depends on non-linear narrative and different chapters for each character to dramatize social alienation. For example, he portrayed the father and his two children, the investor, the stranger, the carousel operator, the restaurant manager and the doctor and his wife as models of socially alienated characters. They neither knew others nor attempted to socialize and communicate. Throughout the novel, the characters didn't communicate with each other.

The second chapter revolved around psychological alienation in Barnes's novel. Characters' mental well-being is negatively impacted by social alienation in a post-apocalyptic environment. Otherwise stated, these circumstances have had an effect on characters' mental health. The stranger, the doctor's wife, the carousel operator and the restaurant manager experience psychological alienation. These individuals struggle with

schizoid personality disorder due to their tendency to isolate themselves from their family members. They fail to effectively explain and express their ideas to their relatives, which leads to spending the majority of their time alone.

IV. Discussion

Chapter One: Social Alienation in Barnes's *Above the ether* (2019)

Numerous contemporary American novels represent society's connection to the natural world. They depict the abuse of nature, which causes the degradation of the ecosystem. Society created the dualisms of mind/body, man/nature, culture/nature, center/margin and superior/inferior due to its superiority complex. Because of its belief that nature is only a passive recipient of humans' acts, these ideas promoted the exploitation of nature for their personal financial gain. Thus, individuals prioritize the well-being of society rather than the preservation of the natural world. Moreover, the ongoing abuse of nature is catalyst for nature's retribution against society. This chapter investigates humans' detrimental actions that have had a negative impact on the environment in Eric Barnes's *Above the ether* (2019). It also examines how nature is an active agent that maintains its agency and dominance over the human world. Indeed, Barnes demonstrates how the non-human world takes revenge on its abusers, specifically society. This chapter emphasizes the potential societal alienation that can arise as a result of natural disasters. It relies on ecocriticism to expose the relationship between nature and society in a post-apocalyptic setting.

Analysis of *Above the ether*

1. The abuse of nature in the novel

Above the ether is a novel that revolves around the characters' experiences in a post-apocalyptic setting. It is a polyphonic novel that represents six characters who are the father, the stranger, the investor, the doctor, the carousel operator and the restaurant manager. The novel depicts their lives in the South End, exploring their familial and societal connections. From characters' various accounts, it seems that South End residents once resided in a developed environment. Indeed, the world has developed in various domains since the advent

of the industrial revolution. Humanity has extensively exploited nature through the use of power and technology in a destructive manner. For instance, the novel portrays the intensive use of fossil fuels, chemicals, oils, herbicides. It also exhibits the overuse of the means of transportations to transport goods and manufactured products. Hence, Barnes depicts the overconsumption of resources.

Human actions have brought about the post-apocalypse in *Above the ether*. The post-apocalyptic world is defined by several scholars. It refers to a society or civilization that lives after a catastrophic event, whether caused by humans or nature. A post-apocalyptic narrative takes place in the future to depict the aftermath of a disaster. According to Claire, P. Curtis (2010), post- apocalyptic genre distinguishes itself from other literary genres as it focuses on a small group of people who learn to adapt to the chaos that appear after the end of the world (Curtis, 2010, p.17). In addition, the post-apocalypse emerged in the mid-twentieth century as a genre of science fiction. It focuses on the excess use of technology and its effect on humanity. In *Post-apocalyptic fiction and the social contract: we will not go home again*, Claire, P. Curtis (2010) explains,

I define post- apocalyptic fiction as any account that takes up how humans start over after the end of life on earth as we understand it. The apocalyptic event or events cause a radical shift in the basic conditions of human life... the end may occur either through natural disasters or human made causes. (Curtis, 2010, p.5)

The post-apocalyptic genre focuses on the aftermath of events such as natural disasters, wars or nuclear bombs. Furthermore, it describes how individuals attempt to adjust their lifestyles in order to conform to the new environment.

In the post-apocalyptic setting, the investor is a businesswoman who attempts to find ways of gaining wealth. Her main goal is to make profits. The narrative puts emphasis on the character of the investor to denounce human's exploitation of natural resources for their personal advantages without giving any consideration to the environment. It describes her

business and how she gains money from catastrophes in the Gulf and other locations. In this sense, Barnes (2019) writes, “In the morning, she bets on oil. She bets on natural gas... She bets on gun sales, mood disorders, certain foods. She bets on water” (p. 25). In summary, Barnes provides a negative representation of wealthy people since they abuse nature for their economic interests. The investor does not consider the ethical implications of her acts, but rather focuses solely on strategies to enhance her financial prosperity. Moreover, she displays a complete disregard for the natural world and global warming.

Barnes portrays environmental degradation owing to the spread of pollution and diseases in the South End. In this context, He (2019) states,

Views of the city and the port on the bay, lit up to a kind of daylight, the containers colored red and orange and yellow and green, in motion, transported, from ship to crane to truck or train, and beyond the port, she can see the airplanes taking off, jets ascending or descending; she likes it when they land, nearing the ground, ready to alight on the crowded outskirts of this overgrown and searing city. (p.31)

This indicates humans’ misuse of different means of transportations such as ships, trucks, trains and airplanes. This suggests that they rely on diesel oil, which pollutes the air, soil and water. Pollution is the primary factor contributing to the decline of the natural ecosystem. This also reflects the investor’s joy and happiness while observing these daily movements due to her wealth.

In numerous instances, the author depicts humans’ overuse of oil and chlorine in the South End. While fleeing the city, the father receives information from his car’s radio on the presence of oil in the Gulf. In this context, he (2019) narrates, “On the radio, he hears about oil leaks in the Gulf. Twenty oil rigs. Maybe more. All damaged, some completely overturned, sinking or already sunk. Oil slicks, at least twenty of them, growing every day” (p.46). This reveals the daily number of oil rigs that sink in the oceans. It entails that humans over exploit natural resources and ignore the consequences. Furthermore, it appears that nobody tries to find a solution for the issue of oil contamination in the oceans, resulting in the extinction of

marine creatures. Additionally, it produces diseases that have the possibility to harm individuals. Barnes adds (2019), “The soot and smoke of diesel oil rising from the massive ships that sail the oceans. Flotillas of plastic bottles, drawn together, miles across, and there’s no plan, no intent, no will to clean this up... to die” (p. 141). This refers to humans’ abuse of the environment. Their daily actions have polluted the earth, air and water. He refers to their unwillingness to clean their environment. Thus, the author sheds light on humans’ carelessness about the natural world. He also highlights the impact of industrialization, urbanization and human activities on the environment. Hence, he focuses on humans’ use of negative pollutants that harm their environment. He also implicitly raises his reader’s awareness about environmental issues.

Human activities contribute to environmental pollution; therefore, Barnes addresses the environmental pollution in several subsections. He (2019) states, “The air smells like smoke” (p. 3). Due to the destruction of factories, toxins spread through the air. The noxious smell has a significant effect on the remaining citizens. This shows that human actions have resulted in adverse effects on the ecosystem, human health, and the wellbeing of other organisms. The narrative describes the city as following,

Cities where, every day, people must cover their faces with masks because of the pollution... children and the elderly aren’t allowed to go outside for weeks... To breathe is to taste. Plastic, smoke, rotted wood. It lingers to your throat. It pours freely through your nose, finally coating your tongue. The flavor of eventual disease. (p. 146).

This demonstrates that the industrial revolution and contemporary development have encouraged humanity to over abuse nature. As a result, they have become indifferent to the consequences of their actions. Barnes identifies pollution as the primary outcome of excessive human utilization of contaminants, resulting in adverse effects on human health. From the quote, the characters are susceptible to diseases, pandemics and death due to the presence of smoke. The use of chemicals and herbicides before the apocalypse has resulted in the current

pollution that residents are experiencing. The novel examines human acts to subtly demonstrate their culpability for environmental contamination and the proliferation of illnesses.

In a polluted post-apocalyptic world, characters face significant challenges in finding clean water sources. Barnes depicts the absence of drinking water as a result of its undrinkable nature or its limited availability. He (2019) writes, “water laden with lead and chlorine and huge quantities of benzene. Water that runs brown throughout the summer, emitting the smell of plastic or oil or rot” (p.35). In other words, humans have used a variety of dangerous substances that have polluted drinking water. Consequently, the shortage of potable water renders it impossible to consume. Citizens’ lives are endangered, and their primary objective is to ensure their survival. This illustrates the fact that humans represent an important threat to their natural environment owing to their lack of concern for the consequences of their actions. *Above the ether* explores the impact of water pollution on human life with the intention to indirectly heightening the reader’s consciousness of human behavior.

Barnes portrays the collapse of the South End in the post-apocalypse. *Above the ether* describes the downfall of the government, the absence of law enforcement, and human extinction. He focuses on the decline of all aspects of the city as an opportunity to denounce the proliferation of crime, violence and the absence of safety measures. He explains that the environmental collapse can have profound consequences for governmental and social systems. Therefore, he emphasizes the lack of assistance with the occurrence of natural catastrophes in the Gulf and the South End. This implies that human abuse of nature might result in the collapse of the governmental systems and the increase of illicit activities and violence in all areas. In this vein, Souhila Kentouche and Ferial Kaci argue (2022), “the absence of the government gives rise to violence because citizens are not afraid of punishment” (p. 35). This

means that individuals exhibit aggressive behavior and engage in illegal activities, therefore enjoying unrestricted freedom of action.

Citizens' lives have changed dramatically since they have to adapt to the absence of schools, houses and hospitals. In this context, Barnes (2019) writes,

It is a region slowly turning its clock upside down. More people working at night in order to sleep during the day. Schools convene at three in the afternoon, sports played only in the late evening of the weekends, under lights paid for entirely by donations from the wealthy. (p. 39)

This maintains that adults work at night while children go to school in the afternoons as a precautionary measure. They practice their activities, like sport, in the evenings. These changes have occurred mostly due to environmental degradation, namely the extreme heat and security reasons. Citizens have to adapt to the new world as there are no available solutions in the post- apocalypse. This represents the negative impact of environmental degradation on the lives of humans. Thus, Barnes cautions his readers about the severe repercussions of environmental degradation on mankind.

Above the ether revolves around the consequences of human actions. In the post-apocalyptic world, human technology and actions have an adverse impact on animals, as they are deprived from an appropriate environment. They find diverse difficulties to live in the realm of climate change. They might also face their ultimate death because of the absence of food or poisonous water. The following quote describes the consequences of climate change on animals, “you can hear it, from windows half a mile away. The frenzied desperation of wild animals in the street, all simply trying to live another day” (2019, p. 38). Animals struggle to survive in the post-apocalypse. Therefore, Barnes aims to expose the consequences of humans' lack of awareness of the environment by depicting the two cities, the North and the South End. This narrative plays a pivotal role in denouncing the human exploitation of the natural world on the environment.

2. The Revenge of Nature in *Above the ether*:

Barnes's *Above the ether* is a climate change fiction that describes the increase of natural disasters such as hurricanes, storms, earthquakes, and floods. Climate change fiction is a genre of speculative fiction that explores and addresses the impacts of climate change on the planet and society. It was coined for the first time by mid-2013 to present narratives set in the near or distant future, where climate change and its consequences play a central role in shaping the plot, characters and setting. It also refers to the representations of global warming in some American literary texts. In this sense, Adeline Johns-Putra (2016) writes, "We suggested that it was the time when ecocriticism took seriously the relationship between climate change and literature as a worthwhile topic of study" (p. 267). Said differently, climate fiction was introduced as a subfield of ecocriticism to tackle the relationship between climate change and literary texts. Furthermore, some novelists rely on a futuristic setting to describe the events of their novels. Some novelists rely on post-apocalyptic genre to illustrate the aftermath of natural catastrophes (Johns-Putra, 2016, p. 268). *Above the ether* is a climate narrative and a post-apocalyptic novel that explores the consequences of natural disasters.

Above the ether is a climate narrative and a post-apocalyptic novel that explores the consequences of natural disasters. In the novel, natural disasters negatively disturb characters' lives as they are helpless. Nature is represented as an active agent that opposes man's actions through describing how it can take revenge. It exerts a significant influence on society by molding social life and leading to social distancing. Thus, nature has the capacity to shape characters' fate and alter their lives. In this sense, nature deconstructs social construction of binary opposition, especially the distinctions of man/ nature and culture/ nature. Barnes's novel explores the themes of survival, family and the consequences of environmental deterioration. It unfolds a plot where humans face a number of dangers. It encompasses the fact that nature no longer needs people since it causes both displacement and social distancing.

In order to analyze the vengeance of nature in *Above the ether*, it is significant to examine the representation of natural disasters, as they are prevalent in the novel. These natural disasters are portrayed as active agents which maintain their agency. Barnes portrays the ongoing occurrence of natural disasters and their impacts on people and the surrounding environment. For instance, the father and his two children are compelled to leave their flat as a consequence of a hurricane that strikes the city, precimated by an earthquake. In this regard, he describes,

They had felt the earthquake in their apartment. But there was also a hurricane centered south of them. Over the Gulf. And so, as the earthquake ended, he had a sudden thought. Fear, but something rational. The hurricane was massive. The biggest yet. And even though the worst of it was bypassing the city, the storm was also pressing down on the Gulf at highest tide. (Barnes, 2019, p. 45)

This demonstrates the presence of natural calamities in the South End. Earthquakes and hurricanes pose a threat to human lives since the demolition of the buildings generates a sense of terror. These natural catastrophes pose a threat to human lives. Many characters are forced to leave their homes and assume the status of refugees. Hence, the novel suggests that natural disasters might cause displacement. Consequently, the post-apocalypse has a negative impact on nature and mainly on humans. Natural disasters shape characters' lives because they are unable to lead a conventional lifestyle. Characters face difficulties in finding a safe area from the opening of the novel. *Above the ether* explores the effect of climate change on social disruption, as many individuals experience displacement. Nature affects society as they have to move to other places. According to Gregers Anderson, the role of natural disasters is to judge and punish humans in climate change narratives (Andersen, 2020, p. 20). Briefly, nature has the power to communicate its ideas through powerful natural disasters and return man's violence. This means that Climate change and displacement are interrelated since bad environmental conditions threaten individuals' lives, security and rights. For instance, several citizens become homeless and refugees such as the father and his children.

Different chapters and subsections are devoted to the father and his family. Due to an earthquake and a tsunami, the father and his two children are forced to evacuate their apartment and start their journey to an unknown destination. Additionally, individuals flee their homes because of the dangerous environment. The father uses his car to escape since he has to “get the kids in the car. Get the kids in the car and flee” (Barnes, 2019, p. 44). The father relies on his car to escape from the dangerous region. He activates the radio to remain informed about the present circumstances. In this context, Barnes writes, “the radio, the volume low, continues to warn about the danger behind them. The damage. And chaos” (p. 5). The radio is the only medium that provides the father with brief warnings, and informs the listeners about the safe roads they can take in order to avoid the flood. Therefore, natural disasters such as earthquakes, storms, floods, and hurricanes shape characters’ lives in the South End. They have to struggle with displacement, horrific weather conditions and the challenge of survival.

Like the father and his children, several citizens have been displaced to other places. They look for a new safe area to inhabit. In this sense, Barnes writes, “in the cold cities, the homeless set up camps under bridges, or in the empty spaces between an overpass and an exit... the homeless build shelters to protect themselves from the cold” (Barnes, 2019, p. 24). In other words, people confront various obstacles to find shelter following the occurrence of an earthquake. Therefore, characters’ aim is to survive in the post-apocalyptic world. Because of these natural disasters, governmental bodies that are supposed to restrict the rules are absent. Hence, citizens of the South End feel unsafe. In this sense, Souhila Kentouche and Ferial Kaci (2022) argue, “a post-apocalyptic novel typically recounts the story of a world in which military and governmental systems have mostly disappeared; there are only few survivors” (p. 7). This means that citizens encounter various challenges in a post-apocalyptic world owing to the absence of any help. This implies that contemporary governments have

opportunity to fall apart in the event of a natural disaster. Hence, *Above the ether* is a didactic work that serves as a warning to both the readers and governments on the issue of climate change and its repercussions.

From the beginning of the novel, Barnes depicts the endless catastrophes that cause the post-apocalypse. His main purpose is to emphasize the dangers of global warming on characters. Nature is portrayed as an autonomous entity that affects humans' lives. In this sense, Michelle Serres (1995) argues, "Nature takes them away from us as soon as we abuse them" (p. 36). In other words, climate change demonstrates that nature is a powerful entity that has the strength to shape social life. In the novel, the author delves into the impact of natural disasters on the disconnection and alienation of individuals in the South End. He also captures the complexity of human relationship as humans are unable to establish a sense of community owing to the feeling fear. In this context, he writes, "But it's impossible to say that anyone feels safe" (p. 18). This may entail that society is dangerous for individuals since the majority have lost their values. As a result, individuals feel insecure in the South End and are unable to have any contact with others.

In a post-apocalyptic setting, crime is a prominent theme that affects the citizens of the South End. Several criminals, violent people and gangs aim to disrupt social life. Their main purpose is human trafficking, murder and rape. In this vein, Andersen argues (2020)

In climate fiction utilizing *The Social Collapse* the use of violence marks different degrees of loss in socio- political complexity: the more interhuman violence is represented as a necessary individual mode of action the more apparent is the loss of socio-political complexity. (p. 23)

Violence dangerously influences society since it causes the fall of social relations. Barnes dramatizes the representation of violence and its impact on social life. He writes, "The violence was no longer confined to the people working in the drug trade and to those trying desperately to fight it. It had become, instead, a commonplace infection throughout the entire

country” (Barnes, 2019, p. 132). This shows that violence is prevalent in the South End after the apocalypse. Hence, natural disasters have disrupted both society and institutional bodies. One can notice the loss of values, the collapse of government and the absence of security. These factors brought about social alienation.

3. Social Alienation in *Above the ether*

Climate change narratives often represent social life in a post-apocalyptic world in order to highlight the impact of the revenge of nature. According to Andersen (2020), nature punishes human beings because of their excessive abuse and exploitation (p. 42). Nature’s judgement can cause social collapse. Andersen (2020) explains that novels describe “worlds where socio-political complexity has been rapidly and significantly reduced. That is, worlds where the complexity embedded in social relations has either greatly decreased or has entirely disappeared alongside a number of institutions” (p. 23). Put simply, climate change negatively disrupts social connections since the citizens of the South End become socially alienated. This means that they are unable to construct social relationships in a world that is devastated.

Above the ether is divided into three parts, each containing several chapters. It revolves around six anonymous characters, each of whom gets their own chapters. The characters are the investor, the father, the doctor, the stranger, the carousel operator, the epileptic and the restaurant manager. The characters are nameless because of the loss of identity in a post-apocalyptic world. The fall of government results in the absence of characters’ documents that can define their real identity. Hence, they are defined by their profession, familial status, or illness. This reveals that these characters can refer to anyone. Kentouche and Kaci explain (2022) that the characters are deprived from their names to show that any person can experience the characters’ conditions (p. 37). This maintains that people are subject to the same fate in the post-apocalypse despite their social status. More significantly, the novel’s

narrative structure demonstrates how each character has a unique life story. The character's narrative does not align with those of other characters. As a result, there are no encounters between the six anonymous characters. This suggests that chapter division shows the lack of communication. In fact, climatic change affects social interactions because citizens fail to adapt to a regular life in the post-apocalypse. The novel, therefore, represents social and family alienation due to the breakdown of social structures and norms. This reveals that Barnes portrays his characters as socially alienated owing to the ongoing conditions.

The investor is a hardworking woman who bets on everything because she cares about her job and fortune. She is the first character who is socially alienated. She does not have social ties with other individuals. From the beginning of the novel, she is described as a single woman who does not have a husband, boyfriend, family relatives or friends to communicate with. She enjoys living alone in her apartment because she finds it peaceful. She spends her time cooking, eating and reading. In this context, Barnes (2019) writes, "Going home instead to be alone" (p. 58). This denotes that the investor has no family relatives such as parents, siblings or cousins. She lives in her apartment since she is an educated businesswoman who does not give an importance to social or family relations. In the office, the investor works alone at her workplace to avoid any disruption from her colleagues. She collaborates with three analysts, whom she does not like. She fails to create normal relations and conversations because she barely looks at their faces. This following quote illustrates, "She and her three analysts sit facing one another. She doesn't prefer this to be so. But she will manage" (p. 178). Hence, the investor experiences social alienation from her coworkers because she is only concerned with growing her business and fortune. Despite spending daylight with her analysts, she feels no need to communicate with them. She also hates sharing her personal life with other people. This explicitly shows the investor's social alienation from others

The investor is a bisexual character who is not interested in marriage or children. She engages in consensual sexual activities with individuals of both genders without restrictions. For example, she likes taking care of her young boyfriend because she can dominate him. Barnes argues, “but she likes this boy. How quiet he is. How pretty he is. How he let her dress him up” (p. 63). He describes the investor’s desire to have sex out of wedlock. She appears to refuse the notion of marriage due to her intention to avoid any connections with others. This entails that she rejects the notion of familial relations. Undoubtedly, she wishes to avoid any interruptions while inside her apartment. Moreover, With the exception of her girlfriend or boyfriend, nobody is allowed to enter her house. The cleaner is the only person who periodically visits. Barnes writes, “but before she is interrupted by the person who cleans and after she has spent her time in the motion of cooking herself dinner, that’s when she can be alone in the silence of her apartment atop this building” (p. 31). This maintains that she does not wish the presence of people since she considers them an interruption. This exacerbates her feeling of social alienation since she is unable of developing any form of social connections

While on a trip with her boyfriend and analysts, a storm hits the North End; consequently, they die. The investor survives and avoids the presence of the corpses besides her. She exits the car and stands on the highway, unable to move. An unknown man assists her to reach an appropriate spot. Barnes writes, “the woman once an investor, follows a man she has met. She doesn’t know his name. She forgot to ask” (Barnes, 2019, p. 228). This demonstrates the superfluousness of communication in the post-apocalypse since she does not ask him about his name. The man helps her climbing the ladder and then departs. Unsurprisingly, she stands apart from the other people. She just gazes at them while traversing the overpass. She is among the group of people; “she stands too now. Walks over to the group of people. They don’t speak. So quiet” (2019, p. 239). Then there is an absence of social communication since she does not dare to communicate with other people. Besides, she wishes to be silent in her

office. Barnes describes, “She assumes she could walk south. To her hotel. Shower. Fly out. Or just drive away. Return to her silent office overlooking the city’ (Barnes, 2019, p. 233). In other words, the investor despises social interactions and wishes to remain in the post-apocalyptic world. Thus, the author displays the investor’s inability to establish any form of social connections. This illustrates how climate change can cause social collapse and have a harmful effect on the investor’s social interaction.

The father and his two children are socially alienated as they move frequently from one place to another, leaving his wife in the house. The novel reveals the fall of interhuman relations inside the social institution of marriage since the father does not rescue her since he no longer loves her. Before her death, the wife sends a message about the collapse of their house. The father remains completely unaffected by her death. He writes, “it’s strange. He knows he’d once cared about her. But for years he hadn’t cared. And so what he feels now isn’t clear. It’s not that he doesn’t want her to be alive... he knows that he doesn’t miss her” (Barnes, 49). The father does not care about his wife in the post-apocalypse owing to the absence of love. This implies that climate change affects the father’s familial and social connections. He is indifferent to both his wife’s death and social connections. The fact that he departed with his children reveals a lack of concern for the presence of other.

The novel devotes a few chapters and subsections for the father and his children to emphasize their social alienation. From the early beginning, this family travels using a car like several other families. They are obliged to travel alone using their vehicle because of hurricane. More significantly, they do not communicate with each other. Barnes writes:

The kids had been screaming at first, crying and panicked, and so he took thirty seconds, thirty precious seconds, to kneel down. Hold them both calm them. “I’m not mad,” he said quietly. “Don’t be scared... but we have to go. Listen. Don’t be scared. But listen to every word I say. (p. 44)

This shows the father's care for his children. He attempts to calm his children while driving the car because of the dangerous natural disasters. The mother is the only person who wants to ensure their safety since she calls before her death. The father remains in his car with his children and does not form friendships with other individuals. This draws attention to their societal estrangement from other people in the post-apocalyptic realm.

In *Above the ether*, the father and his children refrain from engaging in social interaction and communication, despite their arrival to a safe place. It is because Citizens are unable to create a homogenous society. Claire P. Curtis explains, "Postapocalyptic fiction moves humans from the state of nature through the social contract and to a new civil society" (p. 5). A new societal order arises in a post-apocalyptic setting as a direct consequence of the apocalyptic disaster. In *Above the ether*, the father and his children refrain from engaging in social interaction and communication, despite their arrival to a safe place. To illustrate, Barnes writes, "The group is not particularly friendly with one another. There is no anger. No fighting. But there's no sense of community or camaraderie either" (p. 46). This quote showcases the dearth of social communication within the group, even after they have successfully overcome the danger. Moreover, the children are silent following the loss of their mother and home. Hence, Barnes emphasizes on societal change in the post-apocalypse, since he focuses on the decline of human interaction. The father expresses a strong and intense sense of protectiveness towards his children because of their main purpose of ensuring survival.

The father expresses a strong and intense sense of protectiveness towards his children because of their main purpose of ensuring survival. By the end of the novel, another violent storm hits the city. Clearly, someone is calling to check about this family. While ascending the ladders, Barnes stresses the experience of being alone and separate from others. The father helps his children and himself. Barnes writes, "keep climbing" the father says, repeating

himself, speaking to his children. “Slowly”. Don’t worry. One foot. One hand. One foot. One hand.” Which they do. Again and again. Even as they scream. Above him. Alone. The only sound is their screaming” (Barnes, 2019, p. 231). The father aids his children because of the lack of assistance, indicating a failure among individuals to establish friendships and provide support to one another. This explicitly demonstrates the detrimental impact of natural disasters on the family’s social lifestyle. It also entails that nature is an active entity that has the power to disrupt society because of its abuse of nature before the apocalypse. Consequently, the loss of social communication accentuates the societal collapse in the post-apocalyptic realm.

The stranger is a female character who lives with her husband. They are both educated and wanted to raise their children in a good atmosphere. Because of their loss to drug addiction, she is traumatized and unable to overcome their departure. Barnes represents the failure of the stranger’s marriage with her husband. She experiences a sense of exclusion from her husband and other people. She is depicted as an alienated character who spends her time apart from her husband because of her feelings of estrangement. This particularly causes division within a single family. In this sense, Johnson argues, “alienation also readily subsumes disaffiliations in the family, disorganizations in national and international relations, and those ubiquitous experience of indifference, violence and prejudice occurring among classes, cultures and individuals” (401). This maintains that any form of individual alienation can severely affect family connections since it engenders difficulties and problems. In *Above the ether*, Barnes writes, “her husband watches her from the other side of the porch. In truth, she died many years ago. To him. To herself. Her mind is frozen in the place where everything went wrong” (3). This quote reveals the husband’s feelings. He considers her a dead person who no longer exists. She also regards herself a dead person since she is unable to do anything. She remains in her house, observing the flames. Both the husband and wife

feel estranged from each other because they are mentally ill following the departure of their children. This also shows a lack of communication between them from the opening short subsection.

In the post-apocalyptic world, they are alienated from the outside world because they live in the suburbs. One morning, the stranger decides to drive to the coast. Barnes (2019) argues,

It will take two hours to get to the ocean. She follows a route that avoids all cities. Because she hates all cities. Her entire life. The filth and the crowds. The homeless people everywhere. Crime at every turn. Break-ins, rapes, and murder. She needed to raise her children in the safety of the suburbs. (p. 36)

The stranger appreciates the suburbs because it symbolizes safety for the community and her children. She despises cities owing to the prevalence of criminals, violent gangs, murderers, rapists and drug addicts. Therefore, she spends most of her time alone with her husband. Moreover, climate change has an adverse impact on the social lifestyle in the couple's neighborhood. Due to wildfire, several people have fled the area, including their neighbors. The couple opts to stay in the house as they search for their missing child. Hence, the couple experiences social isolation from their surroundings.

The stranger discovers that her youngest child is isolated as a result of her negligence. He is completely separated from the external world. Due to the mother's affection for her child, she grabs him and start their journey towards a safe place. The father dies and cannot be saved after the outbreak of a natural disaster. As a result, the stranger "gets out of the car. Her son sleeps. Her husband will not wake. The bleeding's stopped. And he breathes. But he won't wake up. She looks around. Why doesn't anyone come to help?" (Barnes, 2019, p. 223). It appears that people have to struggle to survive since nobody will help. This entails the collapse of social ties in a post-apocalyptic setting. This denotes that they fail to establish social interaction. Hence, the stranger and her child remain socially alienated from their environment because of her inability to socialize with other people. This emphasizes the fact

that a climate change setting has a negative impact on the stranger's social lifestyle as she remains socially alienated. It also implicitly demonstrates that nature is an active agent that has the ability to change this character's destiny.

The carousel operator works as a carnival and lives with a black epileptic teenager whom he has met recently. He recounts his story of violence to the epileptic teenager. During his childhood and teenagerhood, he lived in a violent environment where one's reputation is earned by being violent. Barnes puts it, "back home he and his friends were gods. A reputation earned through violence of all kinds" (p. 119). Owing to the fall of governmental institutions, the absence of the police and the spread of illegal gangs, violence and crime are dominant in the post-apocalyptic cities. People become violent and criminals since violence is unavoidable. The carousel operator is one of the main figures of violence. To illustrate, Barnes depicts his recurrent violence in different places saying that it is "a violence that, clearly, is only a repetition of so many moments in this kid's life" (p. 95). Barnes maintains that the carousel operator is used to this kind of environment as he personally confesses that he was a bad person in his homeland. This highlights the adverse influence of the post-apocalyptic setting on his behavior, since he is unable to undergo a constructive transformation

Because of the rising violence, the carousel operator decides to leave the place and live with the epileptic. He does not have family relatives, friends or a girlfriend. In this context, Barnes writes, "He left home. He left everything he could behind" (p. 175). Put differently, he wants to change his life in order to attain a desirable life, free from any form of violence. Furthermore, despite the affordability of cell phones, the carousel operator does not purchase one given the fact that he does not have any connection with the outside world. Barnes writes, "When he left his town, he has cut all his relations with his parents, friends and even with the girl about whom he thinks everyday" (p. 176). This shows his desire to completely

disassociate himself from his past. It also implies that he isolates himself from society in order to avoid a violent environment. The carousel operator prefers spending his time alone and does not befriend anyone who visits the carnival. Barnes writes,

He doesn't know where he will go. He could stay here, right here on the overpass, and no one would even care...All these millions of people... all of them have their own lives... he understands none of them. He likes none of them. He is a friend to no one, anywhere, at all. (2019, p. 223)

This denotes that the rise of violence has a negative impact on several individuals since they cannot establish a homogenous society. The carousel operator is a teenager, who has no social relationships. He fails to communicate and socialize with others in a post-apocalyptic world since he is a lonely character who does not have any ties with his surroundings. This indicates that he may have discomfort in social situations due to a lack of confidence in others. Therefore, nature is an active entity that has the power to shape this character's ties with his environment.

Like the carousel operator, the epileptic struggles with racism in the end of the world. The epileptic is a minor character, who is represented in the carousel operator's chapters and subsections since he is the only companion. The epileptic escapes from one place to another because of his skin color. Barnes describes the epileptic's monologue as follows: "Some places I can go and no one gives a shit about my color" (2019, p. 120). This suggests that the epileptic is marginalized from his society because of his ethnic background and discrimination. Therefore, Barnes through the character of the epileptic is commenting on the social structure of immigrants.

Moreover, the epileptic does not have family relatives and friends. Besides, he feels rejected and marginalized by his society. While watching the disaster on TV in a bar, the epileptic asks a bartender on the nature of the event. However, the bartender does not pay attention to the epileptic. Barnes writes, "The bartender glances at him, then turns back to the

television” (2019, p.90). This shows that colored people are persecuted in the post-apocalyptic world because of their ethnicity. He struggles to overcome the feeling of estrangement and belonging amidst chaos. Nevertheless, he is unable to integrate because he is always called “nigger” (Barnes, 2019, p. 120). This stereotypical image has a negative impact on the epileptic; hence, he wants a new life free from racism. His fear of racism prevents him from engaging in social interactions. Hence, he remains alone in some chapters in the company of the carousel operator. This suggests that he is aware that his physical illness has a negative effect on his social life. It denotes his inability to protect himself if he is attacked by aggressive individuals in the post-apocalyptic setting. Consequently, the absence of the government in a climate change setting directly affects social interaction. This may unveil that nature is an active agent that has the power to shape social relationships.

The restaurant manager is a manager of a chain of hamburger restaurants and runs five stores in the South End. He also works with his cousin on illegal money. He lives alone despite having some family relatives. He is alienated from his mother because she does not like any interactions with him. He spends most of his time eating, reading or sleeping. Barnes says, “he is watching a documentary on a news channel... he is eating dinner. Reading on his phone. Glancing up at the documentary only intermittently... do budget work on his laptop. Read a book. Then sleep” (emphasis added, 2019, p. 109). This suggests that he conducts a lonely life since Barnes highlights the absence of any family relatives. His daily routines and schedules do not include the presence of other people. Barnes portrays the manager’s relationship with other people. In the restaurant, he hires people without taking into consideration their criminal past. He focuses on their well-done job. Moreover, even though he has friends, he avoids interaction because he prefers being alone at home. He loves playing games instead of spending time with other people. In this regard, Barnes writes, “friends will sometimes text him about a good play, a bad call, and he has to be careful not to read their

messages” (Barnes, 2019, p. 110). This clearly illustrates the influence of the post-apocalyptic environment, brought about climate change on the manager. He is unable to construct a suitable social lifestyle as he rejects all the contacts because he wants to remain alone. This might entail that he feels insecure. Hence, he becomes socially alienated and estranged from his friends. This denotes the detrimental effects of climate change on the character’s social isolation, as he fails to acknowledge its negative impact on his mental well-being.

The restaurant manager lives alone as a consequence of his separation from his girlfriend and family relatives. Accordingly, Barnes writes, “he and the girlfriend break up. A mutual decision. There was nothing wrong. But for neither of them was there much interest in the other” (2019, p. 137). This reveals that the couple is not interested in love relationships; therefore, they agree to leave one other. Barnes emphasizes the effect of the post-apocalypse on the characters’ personal lives. Additionally, he receives a message from his brother to visit his dying mother. He wants to see her for the last time. In the hospital, he does not exchange many ideas because they do not share the same experiences and beliefs. They are unable to identify common topics or interests to discuss or exchange with one another. Barnes writes, “he sits in the waiting room of the hospital. His older brother sits nearby. They don’t talk... they both stare down at their phones. He does so only as a motion with which to occupy himself” (emphasis added; Barnes, 2019, p. 181). Simply put, they do not feel at ease when they are close to each other. Their mother’s funeral will take place within a week. On the day of her death, he decides to go home and come back to the funeral. Consequently, the brothers fail to communicate for a long period with one another. His failure to develop a balanced familial relationship emphasizes the collapse of society in the post-apocalyptic world. This entails the dangerous impact of climate change in disrupting familial interactions

While returning home a storm hits the city; therefore, the restaurant manager is stuck in his car on the highway. He listens to the radio that alerts the listeners about its dangerous

harm in the South End. He thinks of his brother's safety, despite his brother's lack of concern. Barnes writes, "And so he wonders about his brother. His cell phone won't work. He checks often. Still no signal. Although he is not sure his brother would even think to update him" (Barnes, 2019, p. 222). This quote displays the restaurant manager's relationship with his brother, which is characterized by his brother's carelessness and lack of communication. Barnes denounces the fall of social ties in the post-apocalypse. By the end of the novel, it seems that he fails to establish social relationships with other people. In this vein, Barnes writes, "some parts of him think he should cry. Because his mother died. Because he lives alone. Because he barely knows his brother. Because his life is not what he wants" (2019, p. 231). This highlights his loneliness despite having some family relatives. He fails to know his sibling as he is distancing himself.

The doctor is another character who lives with his wife in a camp, which is run by gangsters. He works for these unnamed gangs because they are promised protection. Barnes says, "but the violence at home had gotten to where they could no longer stay. Friends of theirs disappeared" (2019, p. 100). This entails that they have chosen the camps once they have witnessed the loss of their friends. Importantly, they cannot communicate with other people owing to the presence of dangerous people such as criminals and human traffickers. The doctor is asked to provide medical treatment to patients, particularly prostitutes, and receive money in return. In this sense, Barnes writes, "And the doctor needs the money. To pay for a tent he and his wife can live in without other people... to buy protection for himself and, especially, his wife" (2019, p. 98). Briefly, nature is an unpredictable force capable of influencing individuals' social interaction, including the doctor and his wife. Therefore, natural disasters have the potential to disturb social relationships as they modify the social patterns and behaviors of individuals. Due to their inability to survive in a post-apocalyptic environment, the couple decides to abide by the gangsters' regulations in order to ensure their

safety. In other words, the collapse of the government leads to the rise of gangs that impose their rules. Because of the presence of crime, the couple prefers to be socially alienated.

Barnes describes the impact of climate change on the doctor and his wife. In this regard, Andersen (2020) argues, “Genuine human kindness risks becoming impossible in worlds where major climatic changes have turned all forms of human existence into a relentless struggle for survival” (p. 30). In other words, climate change has an impact on human behavior since they have lost their values. They do not show any feeling of empathy because their main goal is to survive. To illustrate, the doctor is obliged to treat girls who are owned by gangs. These gangs want to guarantee girls’ safety. In this sense, Barnes (2019) writes, “The doctor feels sometimes that he is only prepping these girls to be more efficiently abused” (p. 105). This entails that despite the doctor’s feelings of guilt, he offers special care and treatment for them. This means that he has to obey the rules to ensure his safety and survival in the post-apocalyptic setting. The doctor does not have many choices owing to the loss of social values. The couple experiences social alienation in the novel as a result of their inability to trust others within the camp. Barnes’s representation suggests that these characters are adversely affected by the new post-apocalyptic environment. This has the power to shape their social lives since they are unable to make new acquaintances owing to the fear of gangsters and criminals. This implicitly portrays a societal breakdown resulting from a dearth of trust and lack of communication.

To conclude, this chapter investigated humans’ abuse and exploitation of nature and its consequences. Humans overused chemicals and pollutants in the South End because they believed that nature is a passive recipient of human actions. As a result, climate change showcases that natural disasters are powerful since they can take revenge on society and cause social collapse. In *Above the ether*, Eric Barnes delves into how natural disasters shape social relations in the post-apocalypse. Barnes relies on a non-linear plot and specific chapter and

subsection division to emphasize social alienation. He introduces six main characters who are the father, the investor, the stranger, the carousel operator, the restaurant manager and the doctor. Every single character is given his chapters or subsections to highlight their inability to establish communication in the post-apocalypse.

Chapter two: Psychological Alienation in Barnes's *Above the ether* (2019)

The environment might have a negative impact on both society and individuals. Some characters experience social alienation as a result of climate change. Social estrangement might have an effect on characters' mental health conditions. The characters in *Above the ether* become psychologically alienated from their family members. The absence of social interaction and communication psychologically alienates some of the main characters. This chapter investigates how the post-apocalyptic environment and social alienation influence the characters' mental states in Eric Barnes's *Above the ether* (2019). It also aims to examine characters' mental illness, which is psychological alienation. This chapter relies on Frank Johnson's "Psychological alienation: isolation and self-estrangement" to explore four main characters who are the stranger, the doctor's wife, the carousel operator and the restaurant manager.

The post-apocalyptic environment and social alienation cause psychological alienation in *Above the ether*. These two factors are interrelated because social alienation is one of the consequences of the revenge of nature. The non-human world was repressed and subsequently sought retribution on its oppressors, namely society. Nature has proved to be active and powerful in shaping social relations and threatening the deep social ties that used to bind people together. More importantly, society has severe consequences on characters' mental conditions. In this sense, Johnson writes, "the whole question of abnormality is simply social" (p. 385). Put differently, society has a direct influence on individuals' lives and psyches. In the novel, some characters fail to socialize with their family members or friends and prefer to remain self-estranged. According to Johnson (1975), "the forms of self-alienation have been described as a set of possible deficiencies in existence, cognition, conation, feeling, recalling and behavior" (pp. 377-78). This maintains that an alienated individual faces different

symptoms such as being self-aware of severe alienation. This means that schizoid personality disorder refers to “quality of strangeness, isolation, or peculiarity” (Johnson, 1975, p. 379).

A. The Representation of the Stranger as a Psychologically Alienated Character

The stranger is the first female character, who is introduced with psychological problems. She has a special relationship with her husband and children. Subsequently, this chapter attempts to analyze the stranger from a psychoanalytical perspective. She is portrayed for the first time in a small section of the prologue. Barnes’s representation clearly demonstrates her embodiment of the symptoms of self-estrangement. Before the apocalypse, the stranger was a corporate lawyer, while her husband was a surgeon. In the post-apocalyptic world, this educated couple suffers due to the loss of their two children. While the first died because of drug addiction, the second ran away from home after his eldest brother’s death.

From the opening of the novel, the stranger sits in her mansion, watching the flames burning on the hillside from her front porch. She spends most of her time observing the flames that burn in the forest near her house. In this sense, Barnes writes, “she watches from her front porch... she will stand watching the fires for hours... but still she watches the fires” (p. 3). This implies that the stranger focuses on the external environment rather than the internal, because a self-estranged individual concentrates on the outside rather than the inside. In addition, the stranger scrutinizes her environment. Johnson argues that introspection “stands in contrast to problem- solving, logicizing, or formulating, where the content of thought is concerned with the abstraction of phenomena which are conceptually identified as outside of the individual” (p. 372). This passage explains that an individual is self-aware of his environment, but his representations of phenomena are general. This justifies his failure to provide details or references to concrete information. Hence, the stranger analyzes the flames while disregarding the presence of other people, especially her husband.

Barnes represents the failure of the stranger's marriage with her husband. The stranger experiences a sense of exclusion from her husband and other people. She is depicted as an alienated character who spends her time apart from her husband because of her feelings of estrangement. This particularly causes division within a single family. In this sense, Johnson (1975) argues, "alienation also readily subsumes disaffiliations in the family, disorganizations in national and international relations, and those ubiquitous experience of indifference, violence and prejudice occurring among classes, cultures and individuals" (p. 401). This explains that any form of individual alienation can severely affect family connections since it engenders difficulties and problems. In *Above the ether*, Barnes (2019) writes, "her husband watches her from the other side of the porch. In truth, she died many years ago. To him. To herself. Her mind is frozen in the place where everything went wrong" (p. 3). This quote reveals the husband's feelings. He considers her a dead person who no longer exists. She also regards herself a dead person since she is unable to do anything. She remains in her house, observing the flames. Both the husband and wife feel estranged from each other because they are mentally ill following the departure of their children. This also shows a lack of communication between them in the opening short subsection.

The stranger feels miserable as she is unable to overcome her trauma, which reappears on a daily basis, and sometimes every hour. She also fails to distract her mind from her traumatic experiences. In this regard, Barnes (2019) writes, "There is no release" (p. 4). More significantly, her husband invites her to move from their house because of the excessive fires. She replies, "We'll lose all our money... We'll go bankrupt... I can't imagine... why you'd bring that up" (emphasis added, p. 4). This quote represents the stranger's first ordinary conversation with her husband, whereby they address the issue of their displacement. The massive fires compel their departure. However, the stranger is unwilling to leave this place. It appears that she has chosen it as an appropriate environment for her children to grow up in the

right conditions. To illustrate, Barnes writes, “she needed to raise her children in the safety of a suburb. The safety of a new community carefully fenced off from the raising danger” (p. 36). Her failure can be attributed to her sons’ psychological problems. She shows her concern for their wealth to her husband; however, she wants to remain alone as usual. Her last sentence may also entail that she does not want to talk because she wants to be alone.

In another subsection, the stranger thinks about displacement because of the fires. She decides to talk with her husband for the first time about this issue. When her husband says sorry for not moving earlier, she blames him. This entails that the stranger is traumatized because of her experience. Subsequently, she is overactive. In this vein, Johnson (1975) argues, “the problem is that the mental life, whatever its quality is overactive” (p. 371). Simply put, the self-estranged person unconsciously exaggerates his thoughts and generates ideas that create conflicts. In the novel, Barnes argues, “always the same answer, *I’m not sure*’... always you’re sorry... Sorry... *Sorry*” (emphasis added, Barnes, 2019, p. 6). The presence instability that characterizes their relationship highlights the stranger’s struggles with schizoid personality disorder. She communicates with her husband after being self-alienated for a long period. On this occasion, she blames her husband for not leaving before. She makes him feel guilty to release herself from her internal conflicts.

The novel portrays the stranger and her husband as a new model of couples in the post-apocalypse. As a result of their daily challenges, she continuously neglects her husband. Barnes puts it, “come inside... she ignores him. He says it again, and again she is ignoring him, ““please come inside”” (p. 34). Despite her dislike of being ignored, she does not answer her husband or look at him. Barnes adds, “she knows, though, that if he didn’t ask, that would make her angry” (p. 35). This may entail that self-alienated individuals are ambiguous. The stranger constantly ignores her husband; however, she does not like when he acts the same

way. Therefore, the husband fails to understand his self-alienated wife. This elucidates his persistent efforts to convince her to engage in various activities.

One day, she wakes up early and drives from her house to the coast. She loves the coast because of her solitary experiences there. She can spend most of her time alone, given that she feels targeted by her husband. She thinks, “Mothers are targeted. By their troubled, sinking children” (p. 38). This entails that the stranger enjoys self-estrangement because she considers society and individuals a threat. The presence of people threatens her peace of mind and mental health. After spending her whole day alone without her husband, she comes back home. In the middle of the night, she wakes up and drinks gin. She finds her husband on the porch, and he asks, “can’t sleep?” her husband asks... she doesn’t answer. Of course, she cannot sleep. Neither can he. Why would we talk about this” (emphasis added, p. 39). This quote exhibits that she finds communication unnecessary. It also demonstrates her belief that her husband’s question is trivial; therefore, she does not answer his question. This unveils that they do not need to discuss basic things. This might indicate that she struggles with schizoid personality disorder since she alienates herself from her husband once again.

The stranger does not have any friends or relatives in the post-apocalyptic world. Her self-alienation affects her relationship with her husband. Consequently, she is a traumatized person who forgets her daily tasks. She does not offer a gift to her neighbor when she gives birth to a baby. She tells her husband, “I’m sorry. I forgot that. But I will be sure never to forget such a thing again... Or is it... that there is no point in my apologizing? Right? It’s a sin. Like all my failings” (emphasis added p. 39). Owing to the disappearance of her children and her self-alienation, she fails to remember anything that was taking place. She doubts herself; hence, she asks her husband if she can apologize. The stranger has lost her self-confidence due to her inability to know what is appropriate. The stranger experiences

profound self-estrangement as she focuses only on her shortcomings. This presents the detrimental effect of self-alienation on the individual's connection with his world.

Many subsections in the novel depict the stranger's dislike of engaging in conversations with her husband. He makes her feel vulnerable, as she is compelled to experience remorse every time. He also shows inappropriate behavior towards her. During their conversation, he leaves without providing an answer to her. To illustrate, Barnes writes, "he moves down the steps, into the yard, walking carefully away as he soon disappears into the dark" (p. 40). This hurts the stranger's feelings and creates a conflict within herself. She feels vulnerable because she believes that her husband's opinion is significant. Consequently, she always has to apologize and feel sorry because she committed a sin. This showcases the pressure that her husband puts on her once their children are lost. This also justifies her self-alienation from both society and her husband.

The stranger always remembers her experiences with her children. She recalls their presence in the house because she cannot overcome their loss. For example, Barnes (2019) writes,

Her house is filled with ghosts. The ghosts of children who once lived here. But ghosts aren't just born of the dead, she's realized. Or the absent. Or the missing. The living can be ghosts as well... Her husband, too, became a ghost eventually... now he sits. On the other side of the room. The other side of the porch. Saying little. Watching her. In no way trying to reach her. (p. 40)

Barnes relies on the word ghost in the novel to refer to a living person who does not communicate with other people. This explicitly represents her self-estrangement from her husband, even if he is alive. For the stranger, her family members are ghosts since they fail to engage in any conversation with her husband. They live in the same house and share the same room; nevertheless, they cannot reach each other. This reveals that the stranger struggles with schizoid personality disorder since she is unable to mentally engage in a discussion with her

spouse. Furthermore, she is aware of her self-alienation from her husband. In the same sense, Barnes (2019) writes, “She knows all of this. He does too” (p. 40). They are conscious of their daily struggles, but they do not attempt to find a solution. This may demonstrate that they feel comfortable with self-alienation.

Barnes tackles the main problem between the stranger and her husband. It goes back to the loss of their children to the “demons” (Barnes, 2019, p. 70). The husband uses the word demons as a metaphor for drugs. Besides, he continuously drinks alcohol and becomes drunk. The stranger feels anxious due to her self-estrangement from her family members. In this sense, Johnson argues (1975), “the notion of overcoming separation from others creates the highest level of anxiety in the alienated person” (p. 398). Put simply, anxiety can unconsciously haunt the characters’ lives. In his novel, Barnes displays the stranger as a self-alienated individual after the loss of her children. She blames herself for the loss of the second son since he ran away from the house. She was unaware of his psychological problems and his daily obstacles with other violent children. She believes, “maybe for once we could talk about our other son” (p. 71). This reveals that she has lost her son as a result of her irresponsibility.

Barnes represents the relationship between the stranger and her husband. After the loss of their two sons, the husband drinks alcohol whenever he remembers his lost children. As a result, he leaves his wife alone in the house because he is unconscious. This justifies her behavior and self-alienation from the opening of the novel. It also reveals why they are strangers to each other. To illustrate, Barnes (2019) writes, “The boys became strangers to their mother. To their father. Finally, they weren’t even ghosts. Instead they became people their parents didn’t recognize. Or had ever known. Of course, the woman is a stranger too now. A stranger even to herself” (p.71). In other words, the husband is a careless person who repeatedly ignores his wife. Hence, she is unable to form a healthy relationship with her

husband, leading to a feeling of self-alienation. The stranger is a stranger not only to her family members but also to herself, since she fails to identify her own identity. Consequently, she does not know her inner self.

In another subsection, the stranger wants to talk with her husband; therefore, she inquires about his feelings on many occasions. He does not answer and ignores her temporarily. Then, he informs her that their previous conversation had a profound impact on his emotional well-being. Therefore, she argues, “Let me apologize. For your feelings and how they hurt. And my role. My essential responsibility for how bad and awful you always feel” (Barnes, 2019, p. 73). She always feels targeted by her husband since she has to apologize on every occasion. This results in her self-alienation and their lives as a couple. The husband is aware of the distance between them; thus, he says, “You’re impossible to reach” (Barnes, 2019, p. 73). The stranger’s self-estrangement has resulted in the husband’s alienation. This worsens their marriage since the husband does not find ways to pursue her.

Amid chaos, the stranger attempts to find her runaway son in order to release herself from her horrific experiences. Even if she struggles with self-estrangement, she asks a detective to intervene in the situation. Once the detective finds his location, she drives her car to the location. In this context, Barnes (2019) writes, “She likes it, in her way. No thinking. No worry. No madness. She just walks” (p. 190). This quote describes the stranger’s feeling of release for the first time while on her way to find her son. It also depicts how she ignores her husband since they do not exchange words. Furthermore, the stranger does not care about him because she only thinks about her child. In this vein, Barnes (2019) argues, “her husband taps her shoulder. She turns quickly. Wants to slap at his hand or face or body. Anything. He steps back. Is saying something. She can’t hear the words. The sound of the vehicles is far too loud” (p. 190). This showcases the stranger’s unwillingness to communicate with her husband since she does not show any interest in what he is saying. Therefore, one can notice that she

struggles with schizoid personality disorder that cannot be healed in the post-apocalyptic world.

The stranger experiences psychological distress and injury as a result of self-alienation. Therefore, she tries to convince herself that she is doing well and every single mother grapples with the same problem. In this context, she thinks, “Tell yourself you’d do better. Tell yourself you’d find a way... Tell yourself your love for your children and your faith in your spouse would never falter, never change, never exit this landscape that’s been created without warning or invitation” (Barnes, 2019, p. 191). The stranger attempts to console herself because she does not have a person who can assist her. Even her husband fails to do it because he makes her feel vulnerable. Moreover, the absence of therapists and psychiatrists in the post-apocalyptic world plays a major role. The stranger cannot undergo any healing process because she feels lonely.

By the end of the novel, the stranger finds her son and attempts to protect him while escaping a natural disaster. Barnes (2019) writes, “She holds her son. This is something different. Something not allowed. In so many years” (p. 202). She strives to build a strong connection with her son, but fails to communicate with him. The husband dies during their displacement while the stranger and her son survive. They find other refugees climbing high buildings; hence, the stranger and her son join them. Barnes does not describe any direct interaction between the stranger and her son because she is psychologically alienated. One can notice that this climate change fiction portrays the stranger as a character who suffers from schizoid personality disorder.

B. The Representation of The Doctor’s Wife as a Psychologically Alienated Character

The doctor’s wife is a minor character who is psychologically alienated in the novel. The doctor and his wife have left their house because of the spread of violence. The absence of the

government has a detrimental impact on the environment since it causes the rise of crime, corruption, drug addiction, and illegal gangs. Their friends were killed, while others disappeared. In this sense, Barnes (2019) writes, “but the violence at home had gotten to where they could no longer stay... Homes near theirs were firebombed in the night” (p. 100). This causes their displacement to another place. The doctor wants to live in a camp because he prioritizes their safety. He has chosen one camp in the South End “to buy protection for himself and, especially, his wife” (Barnes, 2019, p. 98). This entails that the doctor and his wife grapple to find good living conditions in a post-apocalyptic world because they have to look for a safe place.

The wife does not like the camp because she is aware that it is extremely dangerous. In fact, she is the daughter of a previous gang lord who was killed at an early age. The wife was only fourteen years old. In this context, Barnes (2019) writes, “That the daughter, his wife, was only thrown out to live in the street is hard to believe. Just fourteen. Most like her, the fallen families of drug lords deposed, are raped, and tortured, and eventually also killed” (p. 101). In other words, the wife does not like the idea of camps owing to their danger. She is afraid of facing prostitution, torture, abuse, and rape by gang leaders. Therefore, she psychologically alienates herself. She relies on the Spanish language rather than the English language. In this respect, Barnes (2019) writes, “his wife refuses to speak in English. Even though she’s long spoken it better than him” (p. 97). This is the first instance of self-estrangement in the novel since the wife refuses her husband’s mother tongue. She also remains alone in their new tent without any companion.

The doctor works for the leaders of the camps and spends most of his time taking care of his patients. He cares only about their safety and “better food” (Barnes, 2019, p. 105). He is involved in an illegal work since he treats the gangs’ prostitutes and boys. He also provides them with all medicines because he has the privilege to get them. At this stage, the doctor and

his wife have a normal relationship. One evening, she pretends that she is asleep in order to avoid communication. In this regard, “Pretending to sleep. But she is only thinking. Waiting to leave this horrific place” (p. 101). Despite their love, she becomes self-alienated from her husband. Their dwelling in the camps makes her feel terrible; therefore, she distances herself from her husband. This may maintain that the environment of the post-apocalypse has an effect on the couple’s lives and creates deficiencies, mainly self-estrangement.

In a new chapter, Barnes gives hints to the couple’s daily routine. One afternoon, the doctor and his wife rarely communicate. At night, some gangs call the doctor for an urgent consultation. The doctor leaves the house while his wife remains alone. Barnes describes their relationship after this incident. He writes, “Back at his tent, his wife sits in bed. Lamp on... he notices her knife sits close to her, on the wooden crates they’ve turned into her bedside table” (pp. 127-8). Her reliance on her knife accentuates her feeling of fear of the gangs and their possible actions. This may also entail that the wife no longer trusts the doctor’s words because she feels unsafe. Consequently, she alienates herself from her husband since she ignores his news.

Before the apocalypse, the wife was sad because she could not give birth to children. During the post-apocalypse, she feels sad because of her inability to get a visa and escape from the camp. In this sense, Barnes writes, “It’s okay. Just sadness. But not sadness about you... no visas will be announced today. The end of the month. The reason for her crying” (p. 131). After the apocalypse, her feeling of loneliness become intense because she cannot have children and has to spend her time in the camp. While her husband insists on remaining there, her sadness increases; hence, her isolation from her background and her husband increases. She thinks only about her freedom from the camps and their leaders.

Once they do not get a visa, she experiences heightened self-estrangement. She refuses to join her husband for dinner. Barnes writes, “He sits now, in the evening, in one of the restaurants in the camps. His wife didn’t want to join him tonight. This happens. More and more. *It is not about you*, she says. She does not want to go out” (emphasis original, p. 148). This showcases the impact of the environment on his wife. She alienates herself from her husband because she hates the camp. The doctor, however, eats his food and watches news on climate change. This demonstrates her loneliness as she does not have family, friends, or a husband to talk with. Therefore, the wife is a self-alienated character in a post-apocalyptic world. This can also reveal that she suffers from schizoid personality disorder owing to the character’s severe self-alienation.

The wife spends most of her time alone in her tent. Hence, she goes out for a walk and leaves a note for her husband. The doctor finds the first note when he comes back home from the restaurant. One day, he comes back to the tent after his work. In this sense, Barnes (2019) writes, “His wife is gone again. The note says she’s gone for a walk. It’s the same note, in fact. One she’s written before. He knows he should not worry but he does” (p. 153). The wife does not want to inform her husband about her walk. She says, “Nowhere... I just walk” (Barnes, 2019, p. 153). From the above-mentioned words, it is clear that the wife does not want to share her solitary experiences with the doctor. Therefore, she gets into bed. This mirrors the doctor’s wife as a self-alienated character since she does not intend to tell her husband about her walks. More significantly, the couple’s connection is characterized by a high degree of self-estrangement from each other.

The wife remains a self-alienated character who focuses on herself and how she can get out of the camp. In this regard, Johnson (1975) argues that “introspection can lead to the experiencing of threatening or dangerous thoughts” (p. 375). In *Above the ether*, due to her high levels of anxiety, the wife plans to murder the camp guards. Then, she kills four men to

escape the camp. After committing the crime, she comes back to the tent, “her hands dark with blood, rest on her bare knees. His wife. The drug lord’s daughter. Dark with blood” (Barnes, 2019, p. 155). This explains that the wife does not think about the dangerous action because she cares only about their flight. This may imply that she believes that her sadness and self-alienation will disappear once she is free. Besides, she speaks to her husband as a “stranger” because “he hardly knows her” (Barnes, 2019, p. 156). Hence, the wife becomes a stranger to herself and her husband because of the crime. This shows that a self-alienated individual can unconsciously and unwillingly generate dangerous ideas and commit crimes. It seems that she does not regret her action because she is obliged to move on. Subsequently, they are in search for safety. Barnes writes, “There’s a city they’ve been sent to. A city where they are allowed to live” (p. 173). They struggle with displacement because of natural disasters.

The doctor’s wife feels calm after their departure; however, there is no sign of any form of communication. The wife’s self-alienation during their journey entails that she grapples with schizoid personality disorder. Barnes writes that “he leans close to her. He can smell her hair. She kisses him. “There are people to help,” she says. He kisses her. “Yes,” he says. “Please you go and help them”” (Barnes, 2019, p. 236). The wife rejects her husband because she asks him to take care of other people. It may also denote that she avoids close relationships with her husband. Put differently, the wife refuses sexual relations with him because of her mental problems.

C. The Representation of the Carousel Operator as a Psychologically Alienated Character

The carousel operator was a violent teenager because he lived in a violent environment. As a teenager, he is aware of his violence. He hates his environment and feels guilty about his past experiences. Therefore, he appreciates his social alienation. He becomes a self-estranged

teenager who lives alone, leaving his family, friends, and girlfriend. From the opening of his chapters, he remains alone without any companions. One day, he helped an epileptic because he was in a critical situation due to his illness. He informs the epileptic, “I was a bad person there... I can promise you I was worse” (Barnes, 2019, p. 87). This may demonstrate the effects of the environment on his behavior since he was a violent character. He is self-aware of his bad actions; therefore, he is a self-reflective person. Besides, he deeply regrets causing injury or killing another person. In this regard, Barnes (2019) writes, “he would like to never fight again. He would like to never inflict damage of any sort. He would like for his willingness to harm to dissipate. Disappear” (p. 176). Put simply, he wants to change his life and live in an environment where violence has no place. Consequently, he self-alienates himself from other people as much as possible. This pushes him to spend most of his time alone. This may entail that the environment has a detrimental impact on some individuals’ psyches, like the carousel operator.

The carousel operator experiences a sense of alienation from both society and family; hence, he decides to move alone. Once he meets the epileptic, one discovers that the carousel operator does not communicate with other people. The epileptic is the only person who opens discussions and asks questions, while the carousel operator is usually silent. Barnes says, “The carousel operator hasn’t talked this much in many months. It makes his mouth ache a little. But somehow, this guy makes him talk” (p. 87). This shows that the carousel operator is a self-alienated teenager who tries to save his life from his violent surrounding. The epileptic is the only character who makes him utter some sentences from time to time. Throughout the novel, it seems that the carousel operator leaves his environment behind. In this sense, Barnes writes, “he has left the place where he grew up. He won’t go back. Not ever. That is all there is” (p. 118). He withdraws from his family and background to lower his anxiety. The carousel operator is a self-estranged teenager because he isolates himself from his background because

he does not belong to it. His self-alienation emerges once he feels lost in places he does not know. This marks his early symptoms of schizoid personality disorder.

The carousel operator is currently without friends since he has distanced himself from his three former friends. When the epileptic asks about the most regrettable action he has ever done, the carousel operator says, “Having to leave my friends behind” (Barnes, 2019, p. 123). This reveals his sadness and guilt since he does not have friends. Their loss makes him feel bad and exhausted. Barnes therefore emphasizes the carousel operator’s extreme self-alienation in the post-apocalyptic world. Moreover, he has left his girlfriend. Sometimes, he remembers her and wonders if she is alive. Barnes (2019) writes, “He thinks for a moment about the girl. Back home. He barely knew her. Quiet girl. Certain of something, though he didn’t know what. They had sex. Different sex than he had ever had before” (p. 145). This may entail that he also self-alienates himself from his lover because he doubts his feelings about love. He also cuts all his ties with her because he fails to express his emotions. This may entail that he struggles with schizoid personality disorder.

After the death of the epileptic, the carousel operator screams and cries. He cannot believe that he has recently lost his new companion and now must travel alone aimlessly. Owing to a storm, he has to move to a new place, but he is unable to decide. In this sense, Barnes (2019) writes, “The noise of the cars and trucks below him is such that there’s nothing else he can hear. But he feels it. Then sees it. A black wall just a mile away. Coming toward him. All of them. He has to remind himself. *You are not alone*” (p. 212). Basically, Barnes portrays the impact of loneliness on his psyche. Once he feels unable to act, he tries to support himself. He convinces his mind that he is not the only person who is facing a natural disaster. Then, he runs away when the storm gets stronger. This might also reveal the negative effects of natural disasters on the individual.

In another subsection, the carousel operator reaches an overpass that separates the North End and the South End. Like numerous refugees, the carousel operator enters the North End. While the refugees climb the ladders to save their lives, the carousel operator cannot act. In this sense, Barnes (2019) writes, “He stands. People moving all around him. But still he can only stand. Watching the others help” (p. 232). He fails to interact with other people owing to his self-alienation. This shows his inability to socialize in the post-apocalyptic world to the extent that he cannot help in a critical situation. It is evident that he is stuck and unable to move from his place. Furthermore, he follows the crowd to reach a safe place. By the end of the novel, he thinks about his friends for the first time. Barnes (2019) writes, “*Why? He tries to remember. Why did I leave my three friends behind? What, he wonders, is the girl maybe doing now?*” (emphasis original, p. 235). It seems that he regrets his self-alienation from his friends because he feels lonely and does not know if they are safe. He finds a cell phone that works in the post-apocalyptic setting. He calls his father but he is unable to respond. The father asks, “tell me all you have chosen to do” (p. 239). Although he does not communicate with his father and family for many years, he cannot find the right things to say. This latter accentuates the carousel operator’s severe self- alienation. The father informs him that a girl has left a phone number for him. This demonstrates that the carousel operator grapples with schizoid personality disorder that cannot be healed in a post-apocalyptic environment.

D. The Representation of the Restaurant Manager as a Psychologically Alienated Character

The restaurant manager develops psychological alienation as a result of his traumatic childhood experiences. His parents expressed no sign of affection during his childhood. His mother was not close to her children. In this vein, Barnes writes, “the restaurant manager’s mother is very old. She lived longer than he or his brother ever thought was possible. A good woman. Who did her best for them. He is not close to her. She hasn’t ever allowed that to be

possible” (p. 164). This shows that the mother did not have a close connection before the apocalypse. The narrative also highlights the absence of the father. Consequently, the absence of parents can have a negative effect on children’s emotions since it creates a kind of estrangement among them. Besides, he usually watches documentaries in the North End that revolve around the rise of violence and natural disasters. As teenagers, they “live in the South End. Across the high way is the North End. Don’t go there. Don’t play there. Don’t let your friends dare you enter that place” (p. 164). Therefore, they are afraid of the North End. While staying home, he remains alone, watching documentaries. It seems that the restaurant manager alienates himself because of his past family problems and social alienation. These are the character’s first signs of self-alienation in the novel.

The restaurant manager receives a message from his brother telling him that their mother is dying. He visits his mother in the hospital. Then, he recalls a fight in a bar. In this sense, Barnes (2019) writes, “He sits in the waiting room of the hospital... He’s trying not to cry” (p. 181). This shows that he is a self-alienated character who does not communicate with other people. In the following chapters of the novel, he faces displacement like the other characters. Like the carousel operator, the restaurant manager travels alone without any companion because he is not interested in people. He sits alone in his car watching the other people. In this regard, Barnes (2019) writes, “the restaurant manager sits in his car. Rain falls on his window... he sits. He’s slept unintentionally. Many more hours pass. Around him, people have gotten back into their cars. Ahead of him, he sees people gathered on the overpass... they’re silent now” (p. 222). This showcases the restaurant manager as a self- alienated character as he sits silent and alone despite being surrounded by other people. By the end of the novel, he asks other people if he can help. This is his only uttered sentence in the last part. This may entail that he undergoes severe self-alienation, which is the main characteristic of

schizoid personality disorder. Like the previous characters, he cannot undergo any treatment in the post-apocalyptic world owing to the absence of hospitals and psychiatrists.

To conclude, this chapter investigated the consequences of climate change and social alienation in a post-apocalyptic environment. Several changes occurred at the social and family levels in *Above the ether*. This in turn has a profound impact on the characters' mental condition. The characters are psychologically self-alienated in *Above the ether*. The doctor's wife, the stranger, the carousel operator, and the restaurant manager struggle with schizoid personality disorder due to their self-estrangement. These characters do not have family relations and remain alone for a long period of time. Both female and male characters do not communicate with other people because they love being alienated. Hence, family members embody the psychological disorder that caused their divisions. Throughout this chapter, I have concluded that climate change incidents have a dominant role in shaping the familial relations in the novel.

V. General Conclusion:

This dissertation is entitled “Social and Psychological Alienation in Eric Barnes’s *Above the ether* (2019).” It analyzed the ability of the non-human world to utilize natural disasters as a means to seek retribution against humans. It investigated the impact of climate change and natural disasters on both society and people’s state of mind in the post-apocalyptic environment. This study relied on two theoretical trajectories which are ecocriticism and psychoanalysis.

Chapter one is entitled “Social Alienation in Eric Barnes’s *Above the ether* (2019)”. It is divided into three subtitles to tackle three interconnected themes. This chapter applied ecocriticism as the main theoretical framework. It first explored the society’s excessive exploitation of nature. They used various pollutants, chemicals and numerous natural resources for their economic benefits. This had a detrimental impact on the ecosystem since it led to the exacerbation of climate change. This chapter also addressed *Above the ether* as a climate change fiction, since it explores citizens’ struggle with a series of natural disasters that affect both the North End and the South End. The successive natural disasters induce a post-apocalyptic environment. More significantly, this chapter scrutinized the direct impact of this environment on society. It created a new society and challenged its traditional norms and human values. The human being is no longer a social being who can socially interfere with others. He is also unable to interact with the other members of his society. From the analysis of *Above the ether* (2019), I concluded that Barnes’s characters are models of alienated individuals. The six anonymous characters who are the father, the investor, the stranger, the carousel operator, the restaurant manager and the doctor are socially alienated. They live and communicate only with their partners, children or a friend.

Chapter two is entitled “Psychological Alienation in Eric Barnes’s *Above the ether* (2019).” It argued that the post-apocalyptic environment and social alienation have a detrimental impact on the characters’ psyche. This means that the lack of social interaction can cause severe mental illnesses such as self-estrangement. This chapter delved into some characters’ psychological condition, which is extreme self-alienation from family relatives or society. This chapter depended on Frank Johnson’s “Psychological alienation: isolation and self-estrangement (1975)” to examine characters’ experience of self-estrangement and individual alienation. In *Above the ether* (2019), there are some characters who are psychologically alienated individuals. The stranger, the doctor’s wife, the carousel operator and the restaurant manager embody the characteristics of self-estranged people. More significantly, they all represent specific mental conditions where they entangle with severe anxiety. These characters choose withdrawal from family relatives in order to lower the risks of encountering more anxiety. Therefore, they may struggle with schizoid personality disorder.

To conclude, Eric Barnes’s *Above the ether* has a didactic aim, which is to warn humanity from their actions because they have a dangerous impact on the environment. Through his characters, Barnes describes this effect on both society and individuals. This study focused on one particular theme, which is alienation in climate change fiction. However, this novel can be approached from other perspectives such as Eric Barnes’s use of postmodern techniques in *The city where we once lived* (2018) and *Above the ether* (2019).

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