

Ecological Consciousness in Literary Landscapes: Spatial Narratives and Environmental Imagination in *The Overstory*, *The Man with the Compound Eyes* and *The Great Derangement*

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Abstract - Climate change, predominantly driven by anthropogenic activities, remains one of the most critical existential crises facing humanity today. With its sweeping and often irreversible impacts on ecosystems, economies, and human life, the global urgency to counteract environmental degradation has intensified. This urgency has catalyzed interdisciplinary efforts aimed at enhancing awareness and catalyzing meaningful action. Among these, literature-particularly in the form of Climate Fiction (Cli-fi), a genre grounded in ecocriticism-emerges as a compelling vehicle for disseminating complex environmental concerns. Cli-fi passionately interrogates the nuanced dimensions of climate change and global warming, presenting them not only as scientific phenomena but also as deeply cultural and philosophical quandaries. As international debates surrounding environmental policies escalate, there arises a pressing imperative to reassess these policies in light of broader cultural narratives.

This research endeavors to examine the geographical nuances embedded within Cli-fi literature-landscapes, spatial narratives, and the cultivation of environmental consciousness. It elucidates the manifold challenges represented in such narratives, uncovering the intricate interrelations between scientific inquiry, socio-political structures, and cultural imagination. Furthermore, these literary texts serve as scaffolding for envisioning alternative societal paradigms, sparking vital conversations that encourage introspection and a re-evaluation of anthropocentric lifestyles amidst intensifying climate threats. The study draws on three seminal works: *The Overstory* by Richard Powers, which intricately portrays the symbiosis between trees and human existence; *The Man with the Compound Eyes* by Wu Ming-Yi, a literary mosaic that fuses indigenous knowledge systems with ecological anxieties; and *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* by Amitav Ghosh, a compelling nonfictional critique urging the literary sphere to reckon with environmental themes. Collectively, these texts are examined for their capacity to generate and deepen geographical awareness, ultimately championing literature's transformative role in confronting the climate emergency. The research aspires to identify practical insights that can be adopted for the collective betterment of both planet Earth and the universe at large.

Keywords: Climate Change, Cli-fi, Geographical Dimensions, Environmental, Ecocriticism

INTRODUCTION

In the dynamic and ever-shifting landscape of literary expression, some works transcend their narrative confines to become clarion calls addressing the urgent dilemmas of the contemporary world. This research undertakes a critical exploration of three distinguished authors-Richard Powers, Wu Ming-Yi, and Amitav Ghosh-whose literary interventions offer profound insights into the convergence of geography, environmental thought, and literature. Through their respective works-*The Overstory*, *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, and *The Great Derangement*-these writers bring forth a vivid interplay between narrative form, geographical consciousness, and ecological sensitivity.

These novels stand as powerful testaments to the inextricable link between human lives and environmental systems, mediated through geographic particularities. They compel readers to confront region-specific ecological crises, embrace indigenous epistemologies rooted in local geographies, and re-evaluate human-nature relationships from a spatial and philosophical standpoint.

Environmental consciousness has progressively assumed a central thematic position in English literature, signaling a significant transformation in the portrayal of the natural world and the ethical discourses surrounding it. This evolution aligns with the intensification of global ecological concerns and the concomitant necessity for sustainable practices. It also illuminates the deeply entwined nature of human existence and ecological balance. The shift can be traced through the literary contributions of canonical figures whose works reflect an awakening to environmental awareness and responsibility.

Henry David Thoreau, a pivotal voice in this discourse, laid early foundations through his transcendentalist masterpiece *Walden*. Thoreau's reflections on solitary life amid nature promote an ethos of simplicity and sustainable living, cultivating an immersive environmental consciousness. His philosophy underscores humanity's embeddedness in natural ecosystems and highlights the ethical challenges of environmental exploitation. As Thoreau writes, "Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads" (Thoreau 143).

Building upon this legacy, the late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the emergence of naturalist thinkers such as John Muir and Aldo Leopold. Muir's impassioned prose in *My First Summer in the Sierra* vividly captures the majestic beauty of the American wilderness, fostering a deep-seated sense of ecological reverence. Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, meanwhile, articulates a land ethic predicated on mutual respect and ethical responsibility between humans and the natural world. Their literary and philosophical contributions were instrumental in shaping the ecological consciousness that permeates contemporary environmental

literature. Leopold famously asserts, “We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect” (Leopold 17).

This research sets out to fulfil three primary objectives. Firstly, it seeks to investigate how the selected novels incorporate and respond to geographical contexts, reinforcing the interconnectedness between human experience and environmental setting. Secondly, it aims to analyze the representation of ecological crises within these texts and to assess literature’s potential to mediate public discourse on climate change. Lastly, the study aspires to underscore the catalytic role of literature in fostering environmental stewardship and advocacy.

In navigating these texts, the research interweaves themes such as environmental preservation, the symbiotic relationship between human beings and natural ecosystems, the value of indigenous knowledge, the resilience of communities in crisis, and the metamorphic power of storytelling. These themes are intricately shaped by geographic settings that inform both narrative direction and ecological interpretation. Collectively, the novels urge a re-evaluation of human agency in environmental degradation and advocate for a renewed ethical engagement with the planet’s diverse landscapes and ecosystems.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS WITH DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

In our discussion, we begin with a comprehensive exploration of three remarkable literary works that interlace the realms of literature and the environment. Our journey begins with Richard Powers’ *The Overstory*, highlighting the intricate relationships between trees, humanity, and the geographical landscapes shaping them. Diverse characters, deeply caring about nature, advocate for environmental conservation influenced by the geographic conditions. Next, in Wu Ming-Yi’s *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, ecological themes are skillfully woven with area-specific scenarios, reflecting on environmental degradation, human-nature connections, and indigenous wisdom in Taiwan’s unique landscape. The stories of Alice Shih and Atilé’i reveal the profound impact of human actions on the environment of this place. Finally, Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement* explores climate change’s implications on society, culture, and literature, underlining the influence of geographical contexts on this global issue and the essential role of literature in addressing it. Ghosh eloquently discusses how different geographical settings and their unique environmental challenges significantly shape our understanding of climate change, making it a critical factor in addressing this pressing global concern.

THE OVERSTORY BY RICHARD POWERS

Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* is a profound exploration of the intricate connections between trees and human lives. This expansive narrative delves into the ecological and cultural significance of trees, emphasizing their indispensable role in sustaining life on Earth. The story revolves around characters with unique relationships with trees and the natural world, evolving into committed environmental stewards.

The novel underscores the ecological significance of trees, emphasizing their vital role in the web of life. Trees provide essential ecological services, from oxygen production to carbon dioxide absorption, making them crucial in mitigating climate change. Instead of seeking complex technological solutions, the novel suggests a simpler answer: protecting trees. Powers portrays a character who made breakthrough research about collaboration and sharing between trees: “She could tell them about a simple machine needing no fuel and little maintenance, one that steadily sequestered carbon, enriched the soil, cooled the ground, scrubbed the air, and scaled easily to any size. A tech that copies itself and even does so for free. A device so beautiful it’s the stuff of poems. If forests were patentable, she’d get an ovation” (Powers 320; Panaro).

This insight from the novel underscores the profound potential of trees as nature’s solution to many of the challenges we face. The narrative’s structure-branching, interconnected, and rhizomatic-mirrors the networks of roots and mycorrhizal fungi that sustain forest ecosystems. As Powers himself notes, “The real protagonist of the novel is the forest itself, with its own agency, intelligence, and history” (Powers, qtd. in Alter). This chapter explores the pivotal role of trees, including their ecological services, interconnectedness, biodiversity, habitats, carbon sequestration, longevity, and resilience. It emphasizes their critical significance in addressing climate change and environmental conservation. “*The Overstory*” weaves the stories of scientists, activists, and ordinary individuals who become environmental stewards, advocating for tree protection. It highlights the interconnectedness of all life forms, emphasizing trees as habitats for numerous species, fostering biodiversity essential for ecosystem resilience. The novel also emphasizes the remarkable longevity and resilience of trees. They endure for centuries, witnessing a changing world. In the face of environmental challenges like deforestation and climate change, their resilience offers hope. Their ability to adapt and recover showcases the potential for mitigating climate change’s impacts.

Throughout the pages of the novel, readers are not only invited but compelled to contemplate the intricate web of life that trees support and the far-reaching consequences of human actions on the natural world. “We fall victim to groupthink and the bystander effect. As we watch forests burn and animals go extinct at record rates and natural disasters get even worse, most of us assume that the circumstances must not be that dire ... or else someone else would be doing something ... right?!” (Panaro 22). We may forget that each of us plays a part in this degradation, some more, others less. It’s only through the collective effort of everyone that we can genuinely improve the situation.

Moreover, Powers’s narrative challenges anthropocentric assumptions and invites readers to decenter the human. As Serpil Oppermann observes, “Powers’s novel invites readers to decenter the human and recognize the agency of nonhuman beings, whose lives and histories are intimately connected to our own” (Oppermann 47). The ethical and political dimensions of environmental activism are also foregrounded, as characters risk their lives to protect old-growth forests, echoing real-world environmental struggles.

In conclusion, *The Overstory* by Richard Powers delivers a compelling narrative about the profound relationship between trees and human lives. It highlights the ecological services, interconnectedness, biodiversity, longevity, and resilience of

trees, setting the stage for further exploration of these themes in the subsequent chapters of this research paper.

THE MAN WITH THE COMPOUND EYES BY WU MING-YI

Moving from the world of *The Overstory*, we transition to Wu Ming-Yi's *The Man with the Compound Eyes*. In this unique narrative, the geographical features of Taiwan play a significant role. This chapter will transport us to this island's geography, exploring the consequences of environmental degradation, the human-nature connection, and the celebration of indigenous wisdom interwoven with Taiwan's unique landscape. We'll witness how geography shapes the narrative in Wu Ming-Yi's remarkable work.

Wu Ming-Yi's *The Man with the Compound Eyes* is a remarkable ecological fiction novel set against the backdrop of Taiwan. It explores core themes, including environmental degradation, the profound connection between humans and the natural world, the celebration of indigenous wisdom, the resilience of nature, and a unique narrative perspective emphasizing interconnectedness among all life forms. Through the story, Wu Ming-Yi draws attention to human impact on the environment and the potential for reconciliation between humanity and the natural world.

The novel vividly portrays the impact of environmental degradation on Taiwan's coastline, exemplified by discarded items in the sea, each carrying a story of human indifference to the environment as is presented in the quote, "Each piece of trash that floated here seems to have brought a story with it across the sea because anything that's been thrown away has its own tale" (Wu 56). Atile'i, the protagonist, embodies the deep connection between humans and the natural world, emphasizing that our actions have far-reaching consequences, particularly in Taiwan's unique geography.

Wu Ming-Yi's work celebrates indigenous wisdom inherent to Taiwan's specific geography. His words, "Only if you go to places nobody's ever been can you see the colors nobody's ever seen," reflect the reverence for nature and the environment held by the island's indigenous communities (Wu 102). The indigenous communities possess a profound understanding of the land and its ecological intricacies, emphasizing the need for environmental preservation. This wisdom underscores the resilience of nature, especially within Taiwan's unique ecosystems.

The narrative perspective of the novel highlights the interconnectedness of all life forms on Earth within Taiwan's geography. The rich biodiversity of the island is intricately linked to its geographical features. The stories of various species, including humans, animals, and plants, emphasize the delicate balance essential for ecosystem resilience. This interconnectedness gains significance through the lens of Taiwan's specific geography.

Furthermore, the novel's structure-shifting between perspectives, timelines, and genres-mirrors the complexity and dynamism of island ecologies. As Chia-ju Chang notes, "Wu Ming-Yi's novel offers a powerful critique of anthropocentrism and a vision of multispecies justice, in which the fates of humans, animals, and ecosystems are inseparably linked" (Chang 89). The island's geography is not merely a setting, but a living presence that shapes the characters' fates.

In summary, *The Man with the Compound Eyes* explores environmental consequences, the human-nature connection, indigenous wisdom, nature's resilience, and interconnected narratives within Taiwan's geography. These themes underscore the profound influence of geography on the novel's narrative, prompting readers to reflect on environmental challenges and the wisdom that can guide us in preserving the planet within the context of Taiwan's geography.

THE GREAT DERANGEMENT: CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE UNTHINKABLE BY AMITAV GHOSH

As we transition from Taiwan's unique geography in *The Man with the Compound Eyes* by Wu Ming-Yi, we shift our focus to the global stage in *The Great Derangement* by Amitav Ghosh. This chapter delves into the implications of climate change on society, culture, and literature, all deeply impacted by geographical contexts. Ghosh's work challenges the absence of climate change from mainstream literature, urging us to consider how geography shapes the narrative of this global crisis.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* offers a thought-provoking exploration of climate change's profound implications on society, culture, and literature. This chapter emphasizes the critical need for Ghosh's book, its focus on the geographical dimensions of climate change, and the transformative power of literature in addressing this global crisis. Ghosh's motivation is rooted in the urgent necessity to address climate change within literature. He writes, "The climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination. If there is to be an answer to the problem of climate change, it will have to be, in part, a literary answer" (Ghosh 9).

Ghosh begins by noting the conspicuous absence of climate change from the "serious" literary novel. He writes, "When future generations look back on the Great Derangement, they will certainly blame the leaders and politicians of this time for their failure to address the climate crisis. But they may also blame the writers of the time for their imaginative failure" (Ghosh 11). For Ghosh, the conventions of modern fiction-its focus on individual psychology, domestic drama, and linear causality-are ill-suited to representing the nonhuman agency, temporal scales, and planetary interconnectedness of climate change.

The book is structured in three parts: "Stories," "History," and "Politics." In "Stories," Ghosh examines the limitations of narrative form in capturing the "uncanny" events-floods, storms, droughts-that characterize the Anthropocene. He argues that "the extreme improbability of such events makes them resistant to literary representation" (Ghosh 24). In "History," he traces the entanglement of imperialism, capitalism, and fossil fuel extraction, noting that "the carbon economy is inseparable from the histories of colonialism and global inequality" (Ghosh 87). In "Politics," he calls for a new, collective politics of climate justice, grounded in solidarity, humility, and care.

Ghosh is particularly attentive to the geographic dimensions of climate change. He writes, "The impacts of climate change are always experienced in particular places, by particular

communities. The global is always, in the end, local” (Ghosh 62). He challenges the Eurocentric bias of much environmental discourse, insisting on the importance of voices from the Global South and the need to recognize the uneven distribution of environmental harm.

As Ghosh concludes, “The climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination. If there is to be an answer to the problem of climate change, it will have to be, in part, a literary answer” (Ghosh 9). The task of literature, then, is not only to represent ecological crisis, but to imagine new forms of collective life, new ethics of care, and new narratives of belonging.

CONCLUSION

The works analyzed in this study—*The Overstory*, *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, and *The Great Derangement*—offer powerful models for reimagining ecological realities through the lens of geographic consciousness. Each text, in its own way, challenges readers to move beyond anthropocentric perspectives, to recognize the agency and value of nonhuman beings, and to situate environmental crisis within specific landscapes, histories, and cultures.

By foregrounding the spatial, ethical, and imaginative dimensions of climate change, these works contribute to what Rob Nixon calls “slow violence”—the incremental, often invisible, forms of environmental harm that shape the lives of vulnerable communities (Nixon 2). They also enact what Ursula K. Heise terms “eco-cosmopolitanism”—a mode of planetary consciousness that reconciles the local and the global, the particular and the universal (Heise 61).

As the climate crisis intensifies, the need for such literary interventions becomes ever more urgent. Literature, as Amitav Ghosh reminds us, is not a luxury but a necessity—a space for imagining alternative futures, for cultivating empathy and solidarity, and for confronting the “unthinkable” realities of our time. In the words of Richard Powers, “The best arguments in the world won’t change a person’s mind. The only thing that can do that is a good story” (Powers 336).

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