

Original Article

Climate, Culture and Consciousness: Modern Literature as a Response to SDGs

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Abstract

The escalating global climate crisis has prompted scholars across disciplines to revisit literature as a vital cultural site for ecological reflection and activism. This paper explores how modern literature responds to and engages with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 15 (Life on Land), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). Through an eco-critical lens, the study examines selected works such as Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* and *Gun Island*, and Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* to demonstrate how narratives articulate human–nature interconnections, climate anxieties, and the cultural consciousness necessary for sustainable futures. These texts not only dramatize the consequences of ecological exploitation but also cultivate environmental awareness, empathy for nonhuman life, and a re-imagining of humanity's ethical responsibilities toward the planet. By linking narrative strategies with global sustainability frameworks, the paper argues that modern literature functions as both cultural witness and activist tool, bridging science and humanities in shaping environmental consciousness. Ultimately, the discussion highlights literature's capacity to contribute to the global SDG agenda by fostering ecological imagination, inspiring civic engagement, and promoting a multidisciplinary response to climate challenges.

Keywords: Eco-criticism; Sustainable Development Goals; Climate Fiction; Environmental Humanities; Modern Literature; Climate Change; Cultural Consciousness

Introduction

The twenty-first century has been marked by an unprecedented awareness of environmental crises that transcend geographical, cultural, and political boundaries. From intensifying climate change to widespread biodiversity loss, ecological disruptions are reshaping the conditions of human life. In response to these challenges, the United Nations launched the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, setting forth seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) designed to ensure ecological balance, social justice, and economic equity (United Nations 3). Among these, SDG 13: Climate Action, SDG 15: Life on Land, and SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions hold particular significance for environmental discourse, urging societies to rethink their relationship with nature and culture.

While policy documents and scientific reports highlight the urgency of the ecological crisis, literature plays a parallel yet distinct role by shaping collective consciousness. As Lawrence Buell observes, "literature has the capacity to enlarge our imaginative sympathies beyond the human species and into the environment" (Buell 4). Modern literature increasingly functions as a cultural witness to climate anxieties, dramatizing both the human and nonhuman dimensions of ecological collapse. Emerging genres such as climate fiction (cli-fi) underscore the need to narrativize environmental futures that science alone cannot capture. This paper examines how modern literature contributes to the global sustainability discourse by fostering climate consciousness through narrative, metaphor, and cultural imagination. Texts such as Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018), Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* (2016) and *Gun Island* (2019), and Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* (2012) demonstrate how narratives of climate crisis and ecological interdependence contribute to the SDGs by raising awareness, evoking empathy, and mobilizing ethical responsibility.

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Through an eco-critical framework, the discussion argues that literature functions not only as cultural reflection but also as an activist tool that bridges science and humanities in shaping a multidisciplinary response to global climate challenges.

Literature Review

The intersection of literature and environmental discourse has been most prominently theorized within the field of ecocriticism. Greg Garrard defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Garrard 3). This critical approach has expanded beyond Romantic celebrations of nature to encompass urgent contemporary issues such as climate change, deforestation, industrial pollution, and ecological justice. It recognizes literature not merely as a cultural artifact but as a mode of ecological consciousness capable of shaping attitudes toward sustainability. Rob Nixon's influential concept of slow violence has further deepened this discourse. He describes environmental degradation as a form of violence that is "neither spectacular nor instantaneous but incremental and accretive" (Nixon 2). Such a framework is essential to understand how literature articulates the long-term and often invisible consequences of ecological collapse—consequences that align directly with the global vision of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those addressing climate action and biodiversity.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* critiques the inability of modern literature to adequately address the scale of climate change. He argues that the climate crisis "is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (Ghosh 9). This observation situates literature as a critical site where scientific facts and human narratives converge, urging scholars and readers alike to reconsider the imaginative possibilities of fiction in relation to sustainability. Ghosh's intervention has been pivotal in shaping the field of climate humanities, a branch of scholarship that examines how cultural texts engage with environmental futures. Postcolonial ecocriticism also provides vital insights into how ecological degradation is tied to histories of colonialism, resource extraction, and global inequities. Nixon's emphasis on marginalized communities aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), highlighting how literature foregrounds voices often silenced in climate debates. Likewise, ecofeminist critics such as Greta Gaard argue that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are interconnected systems of domination (Gaard 118). This perspective strengthens the claim that literature provides a multidisciplinary

approach to sustainability by integrating environmental, social, and ethical dimensions. Thus, the critical frameworks of ecocriticism, slow violence, postcolonial studies, and ecofeminism collectively affirm that modern literature is not only a site of cultural representation but also an active participant in the discourse of sustainable development. By situating literary texts within the framework of the SDGs, scholars can demonstrate how narrative strategies advance ecological awareness and ethical responsibility.

Climate and Consciousness in Selected Modern Works

A. Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018)

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* foregrounds the intricate interconnections between human lives and the life of trees, positioning forests as central characters rather than mere settings. The novel dramatizes ecological activism through characters whose lives intersect with trees in transformative ways, thereby re-centering human consciousness around the nonhuman world. Powers portrays trees as "a community, a network, a vast living system" that resists reduction to economic commodities (Powers 142). The narrative's focus on activism, particularly the struggle against deforestation, resonates strongly with SDG 15: Life on Land, which emphasizes the protection, restoration, and sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems. Powers underscores the ethical imperative of preserving biodiversity by showing the devastating consequences of ecological exploitation. The novel also contributes to SDG 13: Climate Action by reminding readers of the role forests play in mitigating climate change through carbon absorption. In its polyphonic structure, the novel itself becomes a metaphor for the interconnectedness necessary to achieve sustainability.

B. Amitav Ghosh – *The Great Derangement* (2016) and *Gun Island* (2019)

Amitav Ghosh's environmental imagination extends across nonfiction and fiction, providing a unique contribution to climate consciousness. In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh critiques modern literature's failure to engage adequately with the enormity of climate change, calling it a "crisis of imagination" (Ghosh, Great Derangement 9). He argues that the marginalization of ecological disaster in literary fiction reflects cultural denial, thereby deepening humanity's vulnerability to climate collapse. His novel *Gun Island* translates this critique into narrative form. The text interweaves myth, migration, and climate change, depicting a world where human displacement mirrors environmental displacement. Rising seas, cyclones, and the shifting habitats of animals function as

literary reflections of global warming. The narrative resonates with SDG 13: Climate Action and SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, as it addresses the ethical responsibilities of nations and individuals in confronting ecological migration and justice. Ghosh thus demonstrates that literature is not merely a cultural artifact but an active participant in sustainability discourse.

C. Barbara Kingsolver – *Flight Behavior* (2012)

Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* dramatizes the lived experience of climate change through the unexpected migration of monarch butterflies to rural Tennessee. The protagonist, Dellarobia Turnbow, becomes a witness to environmental disruption as shifting ecosystems transform her community's way of life. Kingsolver writes that the butterflies' arrival is "a continental upheaval, an atmospheric undoing" (Kingsolver 107), symbolizing the profound consequences of climate change on both human and nonhuman life. The novel aligns with SDG 13: Climate Action by highlighting the ecological disruptions caused by global warming and the human tendency to deny scientific evidence. It also reflects SDG 15: Life on Land, drawing attention to the fragility of species and ecosystems. Kingsolver portrays rural poverty alongside ecological change, illustrating the intersectionality of environmental and social justice. By embedding climate science within a human story, *Flight Behavior* embodies literature's ability to cultivate empathy and ethical reflection.

Section Summary

Together, these texts exemplify how modern literature actively responds to the climate crisis. Powers emphasizes biodiversity and ecological activism, Ghosh critiques cultural silences and envisions climate migration, and Kingsolver dramatizes climate denial and environmental justice. Their narratives intersect with the SDGs by shaping ecological imagination, mobilizing ethical responsibility, and bridging the gap between scientific discourse and cultural consciousness.

Discussion

Modern literature's engagement with ecological crises demonstrates its crucial role in advancing sustainability discourse. By narrativizing environmental challenges, literary texts expand the scope of climate conversations beyond science and policy, making them accessible to broader cultural audiences. As Ursula Heise observes, literature fosters a "sense of planet" by situating local ecological struggles within global contexts (Heise 21). The narratives explored—Powers' *The Overstory*, Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* and *Gun Island*, and Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*—exemplify how stories cultivate empathy, moral responsibility, and collective action, all of which are

essential to achieving the SDGs. A key contribution of literature lies in its ability to articulate interconnectedness. Powers' polyphonic novel emphasizes biodiversity and collective resistance, aligning with SDG 15: Life on Land. Ghosh's critique of cultural silences around climate change foregrounds the ethical imperative of SDG 13: Climate Action. Kingsolver highlights how ecological collapse intersects with rural poverty, illustrating the multidisciplinary nature of SDG 1: No Poverty and SDG 13. In each case, literature dramatizes the human dimensions of climate change while simultaneously giving voice to the nonhuman world. Postcolonial ecocriticism also reveals how ecological crises are entangled with histories of empire and globalization. Rob Nixon's idea of slow violence underscores that environmental damage disproportionately affects marginalized communities (Nixon 10). Ghosh's representation of climate migrants in *Gun Island* exemplifies this intersection, showing how ecological disruption fuels displacement and injustice. Such narratives echo SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, emphasizing the need for equitable responses to climate challenges. Ecofeminist perspectives deepen this discourse by highlighting the links between gender and environmental degradation. As Greta Gaard argues, "the domination of women and the domination of nature are interconnected forms of oppression" (Gaard 118). Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* reflects this through Dellarobia's marginalized position as a rural woman confronting both patriarchal constraints and ecological upheaval. By foregrounding female experience within climate discourse, the novel aligns with SDG 5: Gender Equality while maintaining focus on ecological justice. The integration of these perspectives demonstrates that literature contributes to sustainability not only by representing ecological themes but also by offering ethical frameworks. It invites readers to imagine new relationships with nature, to critique systems of domination, and to recognize the cultural dimensions of the climate crisis. In this way, literature becomes a form of cultural activism, reinforcing the global SDG agenda through narrative imagination and moral engagement.

Conclusion

The climate crisis is not solely a scientific or political issue; it is also a cultural and imaginative challenge that requires new ways of thinking, narrating, and acting. Modern literature plays a pivotal role in this process by dramatizing the consequences of ecological exploitation, amplifying marginalized voices, and fostering ethical reflection on humanity's relationship with nature. Through

works such as Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* and *Gun Island*, and Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*, literature emerges as both witness and participant in global sustainability discourse. These texts demonstrate that literature does not merely represent environmental concerns; it actively contributes to the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals. By aligning with SDG 13: Climate Action, SDG 15: Life on Land, SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, and even intersecting with SDG 5: Gender Equality, literature illustrates the multidisciplinary nature of ecological awareness. Narrative imagination expands public understanding of climate change, while cultural consciousness mobilizes empathy and action in ways that policy and science alone cannot achieve. As Amitav Ghosh reminds us, the climate crisis is also a "crisis of culture" (Ghosh, Great Derangement 9). Literature, therefore, offers a vital corrective to this crisis by restoring the imaginative capacity to envision sustainable futures. By bridging the divide between humanities and sciences, literature provides not only stories of environmental degradation but also frameworks of resilience, responsibility, and hope. In doing so, modern literature asserts itself as an indispensable partner in the global effort to achieve the SDGs and to cultivate a climate-conscious culture for the future.

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The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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