

Imagining Justice: Environmental Humanities, Intergenerational Ethics, and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions)

Shubham Bhattacharjee

Abstract

In an era marked by ecological crises, social unrest, and widening intergenerational inequities, literature has emerged as a critical site for imagining justice and sustainable futures. This paper examines how the Environmental Humanities intersect with the moral imperatives of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) by reconfiguring ethical and aesthetic paradigms. Through an interdisciplinary lens that draws from ecocriticism, posthumanism, and justice theory, the study explores how literary narratives articulate intergenerational responsibility, ecological consciousness, and institutional critique. Texts by Amitav Ghosh, Richard Powers, Alexis Wright, and Margaret Atwood serve as case studies to reveal how fiction not only mirrors environmental and political crises but also envisions restorative frameworks of peace and sustainability. The paper argues that literature performs an act of “ethical world-making,” fostering both planetary empathy and civic imagination central to achieving SDG 16.

Introduction

Sustainable Development Goal 16—“Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions”—recognizes that global sustainability depends not only on environmental management but also on ethical, cultural, and institutional transformation. The Environmental Humanities, as an emergent field, has become crucial in articulating this interconnected vision of justice—one that moves beyond technocratic solutions to address the affective, moral, and imaginative dimensions of human existence. Literature, in particular, offers a narrative

terrain where environmental degradation, social inequality, and institutional corruption converge as moral questions demanding reflection and redress.

In recent decades, climate fiction, postcolonial eco-narratives, and Indigenous storytelling traditions have expanded the concept of justice beyond the human-centred paradigm. By tracing the voices of those historically marginalized – both human and non-human – these works propose a radical ethics of care that extends across generations and ecosystems. Thus, the Environmental Humanities not only critique existing structures of power but also contribute to reimagining peace and justice as ongoing, relational practices grounded in empathy, sustainability, and moral responsibility.

Theoretical Framework: Environmental Humanities and Intergenerational Ethics

The Environmental Humanities (EH) synthesizes insights from literature, philosophy, cultural studies, and environmental science to explore how stories shape our ecological and ethical consciousness. Scholars such as Rob Nixon (2011), Ursula Heise (2016), and Amitav Ghosh (2016) have highlighted the narrative invisibility of “slow violence” – the gradual, often unseen ecological and social damage that disproportionately affects marginalized communities. SDG 16, with its call for peace and justice, demands attention to precisely these forms of systemic harm that elude immediate political or economic recognition.

Intergenerational ethics, meanwhile, engages the moral responsibility owed to future generations. Hans Jonas’s “The Imperative of Responsibility” (1979) argues that ethical action must consider the long-term consequences of technological and environmental decisions. Similarly, Val Plumwood’s ecofeminism and Donna Haraway’s “Chthulucene” propose forms of kinship and care that de-centre the human while emphasizing planetary interconnectedness. Within literature, these frameworks are embodied through narrative empathy and symbolic reparation – by imagining futures where justice extends temporally (to future generations) and spatially (across species and ecosystems).

Environmental Justice and the Literary Imagination

Literature's power lies in its capacity to humanize data, transforming abstract ecological or political crises into experiential narratives. Environmental justice, as a literary theme, foregrounds inequality—how environmental burdens and benefits are unevenly distributed along lines of class, gender, race, and geography. The Environmental Humanities, thus, not only interpret environmental harm but interrogate its socio-political roots.

In Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* (2016), the author criticizes the modern novel's failure to represent the scale and urgency of climate change, arguing that literature must reclaim its moral function. Similarly, Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) constructs a polyphonic narrative that connects human destinies to the lifecycles of trees, revealing both ecological trauma and the possibility of collective healing. Both texts embody SDG 16's ethos: peace and justice are inseparable from ecological awareness and institutional accountability.

Indigenous narratives such as Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013) and N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) contribute another dimension—restoring cosmological justice by reclaiming Indigenous epistemologies suppressed by colonial institutions. In these narratives, peace is not a political abstraction but an ecological relationship; justice, not retribution, but balance. Such stories unsettle anthropocentrism and institutional violence by positing community, land, and spirituality as inseparable.

Institutional Critique and the Politics of Peace

Peace and justice cannot be achieved through policy alone; they require institutional introspection and cultural transformation. Literature provides a mirror and a critique of institutional decay—be it state violence, corporate exploitation, or bureaucratic apathy. Margaret Atwood's *Madd Addam* trilogy (2003–2013) dramatizes the collapse of political and ecological systems under corporate greed, envisioning dystopian futures born from present injustices. Yet, even in its bleakness, Atwood's fiction articulates an ethical call to action: the restoration of trust, empathy, and collective resilience.

In South Asian contexts, writers like Arundhati Roy link environmental destruction to political corruption. *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) both expose how caste, gender, and state power intertwine to perpetuate structural violence. Here, “strong institutions” are not simply bureaucratic entities but ethical infrastructures—rooted in transparency, inclusion, and ecological consciousness. Roy’s narratives align with SDG 16’s holistic vision: peace is inseparable from social justice and environmental balance.

The postcolonial environmental humanities thus foreground the historical dimensions of injustice. Environmental degradation often continues the colonial logic of extraction and displacement. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2019) notes, the Anthropocene must be decolonized by acknowledging that global ecological crises are unequally caused and unequally suffered. Literature performs this decolonial task by recovering silenced voices and envisioning plural, sustainable futures.

Intergenerational Ethics and the Crisis of Care

A critical strand in contemporary Environmental Humanities is the ethics of care, particularly in relation to intergenerational equity. Climate fiction, for instance, often explores the tension between short-term survival and long-term responsibility. In Charlotte Mc Conaghy’s *Migrations* (2020), the protagonist’s journey across dying oceans becomes a metaphor for mourning both personal loss and planetary collapse. The novel dramatizes the intergenerational contract implicit in SDG 16: our moral duty to preserve conditions for peace, justice, and life for those who come after us.

This ethic of care is also evident in Indigenous and feminist ecologies. Vandana Shiva argues that ecological destruction mirrors patriarchal domination, and that restoring peace requires valuing nurturing, interdependence, and community-based knowledge. Similarly, Greta Gaard’s ecofeminist theory connects reproductive justice with environmental sustainability—suggesting that the same logic of exploitation governs both nature and the marginalized body.

Through these frameworks, the Environmental Humanities reveal how literature fosters “slow ethics” – a mode of moral reflection attentive to deep time, intergenerational continuity, and ecological fragility. SDG 16’s emphasis on institutional resilience resonates with this vision: strong institutions are those capable of moral imagination and long-term care.

Narrative as Ethical World-Making

The narrative imagination, according to Martha Nussbaum, is central to the cultivation of justice. By enabling readers to inhabit other lives, literature nurtures empathy—the foundation of any peaceful and just society. In the context of the Environmental Humanities, narrative functions as ethical world-making: creating spaces of hope, critique, and coexistence amid crisis.

Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* exemplifies this function by constructing a narrative forest—a network of interdependent lives mirroring ecological systems. Similarly, Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island* (2019) fuses myth and migration to depict climate change as both ecological and spiritual dislocation. In both, storytelling becomes an act of restitution—bridging the gap between fragmented human institutions and the planet’s continuous life-world.

The intergenerational motif—youth activists, ancestral wisdom, ecological inheritance—recurs throughout climate and justice fiction. These narratives engage SDG 16’s vision by positing that peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of equity, empathy, and sustainability. Literature thus complements the policy framework of the SDGs by offering a moral grammar for planetary citizenship.

Conclusion

The Environmental Humanities provide a vital framework for realizing SDG 16 through cultural imagination. By intertwining ecological consciousness with social justice and institutional accountability, literature serves as both mirror and catalyst—reflecting crisis while envisioning transformation. From Ghosh’s climate essays to Atwood’s dystopias, from Wright’s Indigenous cosmologies to Mc

Conaghy's elegiac oceans, writers across the globe articulate a shared ethics of peace, care, and continuity.

In an age where political systems falter and ecological systems collapse, the task of imagining justice falls increasingly to the arts and humanities. The stories we tell shape the institutions we build and the futures we inherit. To read ethically, then, is to act responsibly; to write imaginatively is to legislate for the world. Through the lens of the Environmental Humanities, SDG 16 becomes not only a developmental goal but a literary imperative—a call to restore balance between human aspiration and planetary survival.

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