

# Eco-Marxist Perspectives on Labour and Environmental Crisis in *Gun Island* and *The Overstory*

Author A: **Mrs. A. Riswana Parveen**, Research Scholar, Department of English, Sri Krishna Arts and Science College, mail id: [risuahmed2205@gmail.com](mailto:risuahmed2205@gmail.com)

Author B: **Dr. I.J. Kavitha**, Associate Professor & Head, Department of English, Sri Krishna Arts and Science College, mail id: [kavithaij@skasc.ac.in](mailto:kavithaij@skasc.ac.in)

## Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of ecological degradation and labour exploitation through an Eco-Marxist reading of *Gun Island* by Amitav Ghosh and *The Overstory* by Richard Powers. Framing the climate crisis within the concept of the Capitalocene—an epoch shaped not by humanity at large but by the extractive forces of global capitalism—it argues that both novels reveal how environmental collapse and social injustice are structurally intertwined. Drawing on concepts such as fossil capital, metabolic rift, green extractivism, and slow violence, the analysis highlights how both human and non-human life are commodified, displaced, and erased within capitalist systems of value. Ghosh's novel foregrounds the plight of climate refugees and subaltern labourers navigating ecological catastrophe and transnational precarity, while Powers's narrative centres on eco-activists, loggers, and trees resisting systemic deforestation in North America.

Both texts bring to light the emergence of a global climate precariat—marginalised communities forced to bear the brunt of environmental instability and economic exploitation. By portraying resistance through myth, storytelling, activism, and interspecies solidarity, the novels insist on the urgent need for a justice that encompasses both labour and land. This study positions literature as a critical site for confronting the Capitalocene and imagining post-capitalist ecological futures.

## Keywords

Eco-Marxism, Capitalocene, climate precariat, green extractivism, fossil capital, slow violence, *Gun Island*, *The Overstory*.

## Introduction

The twin crises of environmental degradation and socio-economic exploitation define the 21st century in unprecedented ways (Buell 1). From climate-induced displacement to deforestation, pollution, and biodiversity loss, the planet is increasingly shaped by extractive systems that commodify both nature and human labour. In literary studies, these concerns have catalysed new critical frameworks such as Eco-Marxism, which foregrounds the role of capitalism in driving ecological and social collapse (Foster xv; Malm 19). This paper examines Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) and Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018) as pivotal climate novels that illuminate the entanglement of ecological breakdown and labour precarity.

While *Gun Island* charts the migratory movements of subaltern communities impacted by climate change in the Sundarbans and across Europe, *The Overstory* focuses on forest destruction, ecological activism, and capitalist violence in North America. Both novels offer more than just environmental commentary—they interrogate the underlying economic and ideological structures that produce ecological ruin and human disposability. Drawing on key Eco-Marxist concepts such as the *Capitalocene*, *fossil capital*, *slow violence*, and *green extractivism*, this paper explores how literature can not only critique the environmental costs of capitalism but also imagine alternative modes of existence (Moore 173; Malm 7; Nixon 2). In doing so, it positions these works as literary interventions that speak to our shared global condition in the age of climate precarity.

Eco-Marxism is a theoretical paradigm that extends traditional Marxist analysis to include ecological concerns (Foster, *Marx's Ecology* 24). It emphasizes how capitalism, through its endless pursuit of profit, not only exploits labour but also extracts value from nature in unsustainable ways. One of the foundational concepts in this field is John Bellamy Foster's *metabolic rift*, which refers to the rupture between human society and nature caused by capitalist modes of production. Under capitalism, nature is not a living system but a resource to be consumed and commodified.

Jason W. Moore's concept of the **Capitalocene** builds on this foundation by arguing that the environmental crisis cannot be blamed on humanity as a whole (*Anthropocene*) but rather on the specific systems of colonialism, industrialisation, and capital accumulation. In Moore's view, capitalism restructured planetary life by cheapening nature, labour, and energy, thus laying the groundwork for global ecological instability (Moore 53).

Andreas Malm's theory of *fossil capital* further critiques how capitalist modernity is inherently tied to fossil fuel use and environmental destruction (Malm 27-29). Other key terms shaping this discussion include *green extractivism*—the exploitation of land and labour under the guise of sustainability—and *climate precariat*, referring to the growing population whose economic and ecological lives are destabilised by climate change. These frameworks allow for a critical understanding of how literary texts mirror, resist, and reimagine the crisis of the Capitalocene (Trexler 75).

Over the last decade, climate fiction (or "cli-fi") has emerged as a vital literary form that addresses ecological anxieties and envisions alternative futures. Amitav Ghosh, in *The Great Derangement* (2016), laments the failure of mainstream fiction to represent climate change and urges writers to engage with planetary transformations (Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 33-34). Ghosh's own novel *Gun Island* responds to this call by blending myth, migration, and climate chaos. Meanwhile, Richard Powers' *The Overstory* is hailed as a landmark work of ecocentric storytelling, where trees become central characters and non-human agency is foregrounded (Powers 129; Buell 139).

Scholars such as Rob Nixon have introduced the idea of *slow violence* to describe environmental harm that is dispersed across time and space, often escaping immediate visibility. His work has been crucial in understanding how climate change disproportionately affects the poor and marginalised (Nixon 7-8). Ursula Heise's concept of *eco-cosmopolitanism* further expands literary ecocriticism by insisting on transnational perspectives in environmental discourse.

More recent contributions from Thea Riofrancos, Malcom Ferdinand, and T.J. Demos have deepened our understanding of green extractivism, environmental racism, and the global implications of "green" capitalism (Ferdinand 202; Demos 52). Together, these thinkers provide the scholarly foundation for reading

*Gun Island* and *The Overstory* not merely as environmental texts, but as politically engaged responses to the global crises of labour and climate.

This paper employs a qualitative, interpretive method rooted in **Eco-Marxist literary criticism**. Through close reading, the analysis focuses on how each novel represents the socio-ecological impact of capitalism—paying particular attention to themes such as displacement, forest destruction, labour exploitation, and resistance (Foster 152; Trexler 47). Primary texts (*Gun Island* and *The Overstory*) are read in conjunction with theoretical frameworks from Eco-Marxism, political ecology, and environmental humanities.

Secondary sources including journal articles, books, and essays by scholars such as Foster, Moore, Nixon, and Ghosh are used to contextualise the literary narratives within larger debates about climate justice and capitalist modernity. The paper also draws upon **transnational ecocriticism**, analysing how both novels engage with global flows of migration, capital, and resistance (Heise 77). By integrating these approaches, the methodology aims to uncover how literature can illuminate the structural entanglements of labour and land, and offer alternative imaginaries of justice and survival.

### **Labour and Environmental Crisis in *Gun Island***

In *Gun Island*, Amitav Ghosh intricately weaves climate change, forced migration, and economic precarity into a mythologically-infused narrative. The novel centres on Deen, a rare book dealer, whose encounter with a Bengali legend leads him into an unfolding global crisis marked by cyclones, wildfires, and the mass movement of displaced people. Through characters like Rafi and Tipu—migrants fleeing environmental devastation in the Sundarbans—Ghosh reveals how climate change disproportionately affects the poor, forcing them into hazardous labour markets across continents.

Ghosh's portrayal of the Sundarbans as a "borderland of life and death" brings out the metabolic rift—the rupturing of sustainable relationships between humans and ecosystems (Foster, *Marx's Ecology* 157; Ghosh, *Gun Island* 46). As storms intensify and land becomes uninhabitable, labourers are cast into the role of what some scholars call the **climate precariat**: a globally expanding underclass rendered vulnerable by both ecological and economic instability. The myth of Manasa Devi and the tale of the "Gun Merchant" act as allegorical devices to critique how capitalist modernity suppresses traditional ecological knowledge and transforms climate catastrophes into opportunities for profit and control (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 8; Buell 54).

Furthermore, Ghosh critiques **green extractivism** by showing how supposedly sustainable development projects—like shrimp farming or eco-tourism—still commodify land, marginalise locals, and displace labourers (Riofrancos 41; Ghosh, *Gun Island* 211). We see characters experience signs of impending mass exodus due to climate change for many years; Rafi, a seventeen-year-old fisherman reiterates the observation of his grandfather:

There was much that he didn't want to teach me. He'd tell me that I didn't need to learn what he knew because the rivers and the forest and the animals are no longervas they were. He used to say things were changing so much, and so fast (...) that one day I would have no choice but leave.

Through this, *Gun Island* positions climate change not as an abstract or scientific event, but as a lived, unevenly distributed crisis embedded in global capitalism.

### **Eco-Activism and the Labour-Nature Nexus in *The Overstory***

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* uses a polyphonic narrative structure to trace the lives of nine characters, all linked by their connection to trees. The novel makes a powerful argument against the human-centered

logic of capitalism by showing how trees are sentient, social beings whose fates are deeply intertwined with human survival (Powers 127-28; Buell 142). The logging industry in the American Pacific Northwest becomes a symbol of **fossil capital**—an economic system that treats forests, like workers, as expendable fuel for endless growth.

Characters such as Patricia Westerford (a dendrologist) and Olivia (an eco-activist) embody a resistance to this ideology. Their commitment to defending forests, even through radical direct action, highlights the novel's investment in what scholars call **multispecies justice**—a recognition of the rights and agency of non-human life. The eco-activist arc culminates in scenes of protest and sabotage that question the legitimacy of laws protecting corporate interests over ecosystems.

Powers skillfully explores slow violence in the form of clearcutting, erosion, and species extinction—environmental harms that unfold too gradually to provoke urgent media attention, yet devastate generations. The working-class loggers, too, are victims of this violence, caught between job insecurity and ecological loss. *The Overstory* thus critiques not only environmental destruction but also the neoliberal economy that sacrifices both trees and labourers for profit (Foster, *Marx's Ecology* 175; Powers 251).

Despite their vastly different settings, *Gun Island* and *The Overstory* converge in their portrayal of ecological degradation as inseparable from the structures of global capitalism. Both narratives confront the **Capitalocene**, an era shaped not by “humanity” in general but by the historical forces of colonisation, industrialism, and commodification.

By foregrounding labourers—whether displaced Sundarbans migrants or exploited American loggers—these novels challenge dominant Anthropocene narratives that erase class, race, and geopolitical difference. They reveal a world shaped by **uneven ecological exchange**, where the Global South bears the environmental costs of a Global North-driven economic model (Chakrabarty 214; Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 113). Moreover, both texts expose the failures of mainstream sustainability, critiquing **green extractivism** as a rebranding of old capitalist habits in “eco-friendly” terms. Whether through mythic retellings or multispecies narratives, the novels push us to rethink what resistance looks like in a world where both trees and people are made disposable.

## Conclusion

*Gun Island* and *The Overstory* are not just climate novels—they are literary acts of resistance against the logic of capitalist extraction that defines the Capitalocene. Through characters who witness, suffer, and resist ecological collapse, these texts highlight the interconnectedness of labour, land, and life. Their narratives urge readers to look beyond superficial solutions and to confront the economic structures that perpetuate both environmental and social injustice.

By drawing on key Eco-Marxist concepts such as *metabolic rift*, *fossil capital*, *slow violence*, *green extractivism*, and the *climate precariat*, this paper has shown how literature can critique capitalist modernity while offering radical new imaginaries. These works call for a future rooted in justice—for workers, for ecosystems, and for all life.

In this way, literature becomes not only a mirror to the crisis of our times but also a tool for ecological and political transformation.

## References

- Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Blackwell, 2005.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2009, pp. 197–222.
- Ferdinand, Malcom. *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*. Polity, 2022.
- Foster, John Bellamy. *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature*. Monthly Review Press, 2000.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- . *Gun Island*. Hamish Hamilton, 2019.
- Heise, Ursula K. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Malm, Andreas. *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*. Verso, 2016.
- Moore, Jason W. *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. Verso, 2015.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Powers, Richard. *The Overstory*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.
- Riofrancos, Thea. "On Resource Extraction and Green Capitalism." *Dissent*, 2020, pp. 40-48.
- Trexler, Adam. *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*. University of Virginia Press, 2015.
- Demos, T.J. *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today*. Sternberg Press, 2017.

### Copyright & License:

© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.