Deep Time and the Novel: Rethinking Human Scale through Ecology and Geologic Memory

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Abstract

This article explores how contemporary fiction reconfigures narrative temporality by extending it beyond human-centered timeframes to encompass ecological and geological scales. Drawing on the theoretical perspectives of deep time, posthumanism, and ecocriticism, the study presents a comparative close reading of Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018), Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). It examines how nonhuman forces—trees, tides, and ruins—are not merely depicted as narrative backgrounds but function as temporal agents that reshape narrative structure and ethical meaning. The analysis demonstrates that these novels challenge anthropocentric storytelling by foregrounding slow duration, cyclical rhythms, and material persistence that exceed individual human lifespans. In *The Overstory*, arboreal life embodies ecological memory and endurance; in *The Hungry Tide*, tidal movements disrupt linear temporality through repetition and ecological responsiveness; and in *The Road*, post-apocalyptic remnants operate as fossilized traces within deep planetary time. Building on insights from Dipesh Chakrabarty, Timothy Morton, and Wai Chee Dimock, the article argues that deep time functions simultaneously as a narrative technique and an ethical framework. By situating human experience within extended ecological and geological temporalities, these works redefine moral responsibility as distributed across nonhuman systems and future generations, highlighting the capacity of narrative form to expand ethical imagination beyond the human scale.

Keywords: Deep Time; Ecocriticism; Posthumanism; Narrative Temporality; Environmental Fiction

الزمن العميق والرواية: إعادة التفكير في المقياس الإنساني من خلال البيئة والذاكرة الجيولوجية

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الملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في الكيفية التي تعيد بها الرواية المعاصرة تشكيل الزمن السردي من خلال توسيعه خارج الأطر الزمنية المتمركزة حول الإنسان ليشمل مقاييس بيئية وجيولوجية أوسع. وانطلاقًا من مناهج الزمن العميق، وما بعد الإنسانية، والنقد البيئي، تقدّم الدراسة قراءة تحليلية مقارنة لثلاث روايات هي *The Overstory* لريتشارد باورز (2018)، و *The Hungry Tide* لأميتاف غوش (2004)، و *The Road* لكورماك مكارثي (2006). وتتناول الدراسة كيفية توظيف القوى غير البشرية——مثل الأشجار، والمدّ والجزر، والخرائب——بوصفها عناصر خلفية في السرد، بل باعتبارها عوامل زمنية فاعلة تُعيد تشكيل البنية السردية والدلالة الأخلاقية للنص. ويبيّن التحليل أن هذه الروايات تتحدى السرديات المتمركزة حول الإنسان من خلال إبراز مفاهيم الامتداد الزمني البطيء، والإيقاع الدوري، واستمرارية المادة، وهي جميعها أنماط زمنية تتجاوز حدود العمر البشري الفردي. ففي *The Overstory* تمثّل الحياة الشجرية ذاكرة بيئية واستمرارية طويلة الأمد، بينما تُحدث الحركات المدّية في *The Hungry Tide* خلخلة للزمن الخطي عبر التكرار والاستجابة البيئية، في حين تتحول بقايا ما بعد الكارثة في *The Road* إلى آثار متحجرة ضمن زمن كوكبي عميق. واستنادًا إلى أطروحات ديبيش تشاكرابارتي، وتيموثي مورتون، وواي تشي ديماك، تخلص الدراسة إلى أن الزمن العميق يعمل في السرد الروائي بوصفه تقنية سردية وإطارًا أخلاقيًا في آنٍ واحد، إذ يعيد تعريف المسؤولية الأخلاقية بوصفها ممتدة عبر النظم غير البشرية والأجيال القادمة، ويبرز قدرة الشكل السردي على توسيع الخيال الأخلاقي إلى ما وراء المقياس الإنساني الضيق.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الزمن العميق؛ النقد البيئي؛ ما بعد الإنسانية؛ الزمانية السردية؛ السرد البيئي

Introduction

The time span in narratives is most of the time quite close to the actual human life, brief, goal-oriented, and always progressing. Art pieces quite often refer to life as it is, through the lens of family lines, the cycle of nature, or fights confined to a certain realm. But the history of our planet goes far beyond any single person's lifetime. The term "deep time," which was borrowed from geology, is used to indicate this incredibly vast and barely understandable extension of the Earth's past, millions of years

characterized by the movement of continents, the emergence of new species, and the endurance of life that is not human (Chakrabarty 197–98).

Theoretically, scholars like Dipesh Chakrabarty and Wai Chee Dimock argue that the notion of deep time undermines anthropocentric stories which are dominant in both historical and fictional accounts. Chakrabarty suggests that climate change erases the boundary between conventional historical narratives and the geological processes that underlie them, forcing a view of history in which human and natural timeframes overlap (Chakrabarty 199–201). In a very similar way, Dimock claims that the study of literature should not be confined to the national or generational aspects but rather it should work with the long temporal curves that link human culture to the past of the earth and nature (Dimock).

In a similar vein, ecologist Timothy Morton argues that being ecologically conscious means being temporally humble. This means understanding that the earth has been there well before humans and will stay long after them (Morton). Such a view impugns the usual storytelling modes which are based on the power of humans and the idea of progress and, instead, it opens the way for the interaction with time spans that go beyond the human capability to sense and control.

Modern writers have begun to experiment with the idea of their stories reflecting this vastness. Rather than focusing solely on the straightforward lives of characters or offering neat narrative closure, such works increasingly foreground nonhuman forces, forests, oceans, and ruins as carriers of meaning and memory. These writers take on a formal and ethical challenge: to use narrative as a means of resonating with geological and ecological durations, thereby broadening literary understanding beyond the human timescale.

In *The Overstory*, plants function as living records of multiple eras, bearing witness to processes that unfold far more slowly than individual human lives. In *The Hungry Tide*, the ceaseless movement of the sea renders human habitation provisional, situating people as temporary visitors within a landscape governed by tidal rhythms. In *The Road*, silence and material decay following destruction take on the quality of a moving fossil record, where remnants of human life become embedded within a

longer planetary memory. Each narrative reflects on what it means to live, or to disappear, within the Earth's enduring temporal archive.

The research questions that guide this study are therefore as follows:

1.   How do these novels represent forms of time that exceed personal human experience?
2.   How does this expanded sense of time alter the novel's narrative function in relation to the Earth?

By analyzing these texts through the lenses of posthumanist ecocriticism and deep time theory, this article contends that deep time operates not merely as a thematic backdrop but as a narrative agent, reshaping the concept of humanity as one presence among many within a world whose temporal scale fundamentally transcends the human (Chakrabarty; Morton; Dimock).

Literature Review

The matter of time has always been the core of narrative structure in literature. Currently, ecological criticism has brought renewed focus to time scales that are not human but rather those of the planet. In his influential article *"The Climate of History: Four Theses"* (2009), Dipesh Chakrabarty claims that the Anthropocene, a term describing human influence on the Earth, presents a challenge for historians and writers to rethink their ideas of time. According to Chakrabarty, climate change dissolves the boundary between human history and natural history, rendering human actions part of a broader planetary chronology (Chakrabarty 199–201). This idea has become central to contemporary literary theory on time, with Wai Chee Dimock arguing that literary study should not be confined to national or generational histories but should instead attend to "long loops" of time that connect human narratives with geological and ecological processes (Dimock).

The Overstory has been, fairly, the focus of much ecocritical attention, as the work delves deeply into the complex network of arboreal life intertwined with human stories. In her article, Megan Donnelly (2020) studies how the author, Richard Powers, arranges his work following natural timing of trees, thus implying that the novel's fragments could be

interpreted as growth rings that connect past, present, and future (Donnelly 47, 52). A number of researchers argue that Powers accentuates the idea of the temporal endurance of nonhuman nature and hence, shifts the focus to those beings that live on for hundreds of years rather than for individual human lifespans. In that case, the trees in *The Overstory* serve the functions of living frameworks through which the concepts of history, inheritance, and care are changed, besides being the components of the scenery. These interpretations are mostly in line with Timothy Morton's idea of "hyperobjects, " which refer to phenomena that are so enormously large in terms of time and space that they cannot be directly grasped by humans (Morton).

The Hungry Tide has similarly been examined within the contexts of climate fiction and postcolonial ecocriticism. Janet Hsu (2017) argues that Ghosh's depiction of the Sundarbans as an environment shaped by continuous cycles of erosion, flooding, and sedimentation reflects a form of mutable temporality associated with deep time (Hsu 79–83). The characters in the novel, situated between inherited social obligations and the rhythms of tides and seasons, face ethical tensions between short-term survival and long-term ecological sustainability. Postcolonial ecocritical readings, such as those developed by Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, emphasize that Ghosh's narrative resists linear models of progress by foregrounding environmental rhythms that challenge developmental and anthropocentric temporal frameworks (Mukherjee).

Although differing in tone and setting, *The Road* has also been widely discussed in ecocritical scholarship. Patricia Holland (2018) interprets McCarthy's post-apocalyptic landscape as a form of sedimented time, in which ash, ruins, and discarded objects accumulate as layers that resemble geological strata (Holland 434–38). Similarly, Gerry Canavan (2020) reads the novel through the lens of post-apocalyptic geology, arguing that its bleak temporality reflects Anthropocene anxieties about extinction and the durability of human traces beyond civilization (Canavan 108–12). In these readings, the end of social order does not signal temporal closure but rather a shift toward deep, nonhuman time in which humanity becomes one layer among many.

Although research has been done on each of these novels individually to a great extent, there are still very few publications that consider them in conversation through the shared conceptual framework of deep time. Most of the existing readings of the works tend to see the novels only as one of the environmental critiques while neglecting the fact that these are also formal explorations of temporality. As a result, the issue of how narrative form can serve as a means of accessing the time span beyond human existence in terms of structure, rhythm, and perspective is still insufficiently researched. This dissertation moves these three works, *The Overstory, The Hungry Tide*, and *The Road*, to this point, claiming that each novel uses narrative temporality to turn the reader's immersion in deep time into an actual experience

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This research relies on a posthumanist ecocritical theoretical framework, a deep time (long time) perspective derived from Dipesh Chakrabarty, and a focused consideration of narrative structure. Posthumanist ecocriticism provides the means through which the emphasis shifts from human beings to nonhuman forces, such as trees, tides, and ruins (Timothy Morton; Rosi Braidotti). Within this framework, nonhuman forces are considered as co-agents, alongside humans, in the generation of meaning (Morton; Braidotti).

A long-term inquiry, as defined by Chakrabarty and further elaborated by scholars including Wai Chee Dimock, holds that the timeline of human history is now inseparable from geological time. In the context of the Anthropocene, the interaction between human historical narratives and earth systems is altered to such an extent that clear distinctions between the two become increasingly difficult to maintain (Chakrabarty; Dimock). Timothy Morton's concept of "hyperobjects" further supports this view by describing entities such as climate systems or forests as phenomena extended across vast temporal and spatial scales, beyond direct human perception. These entities, according to Morton, call for new moral and representational approaches within both philosophy and literature (Morton).

Combining these theoretical elements yields two practical propositions for this study. Firstly, narrative strategies such as perspective, chronology, focalization, and structural rhythm are capable of invoking alternative experiences of time, as they shape the reader's engagement and shift perception beyond conventional human temporal frameworks. Secondly, these formal strategies carry ethical implications: fiction, through its portrayal of nonhuman endurance or geological memory, alters the moral framework within which human responsibility is understood. The present study undertakes a qualitative, interpretive analysis of three contemporary novels; *The Overstory* by Richard Powers, *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh, and *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy in order to provide support for these claims. Close reading attends to both micro-level formal elements, such as sentence cadence, narrative pauses, and parataxis, and macro-level temporal structures, including multigenerational narratives, cyclical sequences, and layered imagery.

The methodological framework proceeds through three stages. First, it identifies recurring signals within each work that signify nonhuman time, such as detailed portrayals of arboreal processes, continuous tidal rhythms, and complex imagery of decay. Second, it examines how these signals alter narrative temporality by slowing narrative pace, reshaping causality, or blending past and present. Third, it considers the ethical consequences of these temporal shifts by locating moments in which human characters encounter, resist, or are transformed by nonhuman temporal scales. This method does not rely on quantification; rather, it emphasizes resonance and theoretical consistency across the three texts.

Analysis

1. Forests and Geologic Memory in *The Overstory*: Narrative as Arboreal Time

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* is an extensive exploration of the biological lives of trees and how their time, bound existence is deeply interwoven with the histories of humans. The plant metaphor which runs through the novel, where many narratives slowly combine into one, may be seen as a literary performance of the time of trees. Trees are not at all depicted as mere decorative elements but as beings that live, breathe, and

change, and that can be considered as having in them the qualities of duration, memory, and continual transformation. Such a result is accomplished by the novel's mode of composition and its narrative tempo (Powers).

The novel, in its first few chapters, keeps on breaking the flow of human life stories with facts about the life of trees that are very old. After going through the typical human stories of birth, work, and death, the story changes to long descriptions of roots, the joining of one plant with another, and the changing of the seasons. These moments redirect attention away from episodic human experience toward processes measured in decades and centuries rather than individual lifetimes. As critics have observed, such structural shifts situate human actions within temporal frames defined by growth rings and slow biological accumulation rather than by linear progress (Powers; Donnelly 49–51).

The rhythm of the prose further reinforces this arboreal temporality. Powers frequently modulates sentence structure, moving from concise, report-like narration to extended, multi-clausal sentences that mirror organic growth and continuity. This stylistic movement produces what can be described as a form of narrative "dendrology," in which the prose itself adopts characteristics associated with living systems. The effect is not merely mimetic. By slowing narrative momentum through syntactic expansion and parenthetical elaboration, the text encourages a mode of attention attuned to gradual change and sustained observation rather than immediate resolution (Powers).

Trees in *The Overstory* are also repeatedly represented as archival beings, preserving material records of environmental and human history. Fire scars, graft marks, coppicing traces, and growth rings function as inscriptions of past events, rendering forests as repositories of memory that exceed conventional historical documentation. In this sense, the novel proposes an alternative archive, one in which human actions are registered within nonhuman bodies and extended across deep temporal spans. As Donnelly notes, this archival function complicates conventional notions of heritage by relocating memory within living ecological systems rather than human institutions (Donnelly 52–54).

This reconfiguration of memory has ethical implications. If trees bear the material traces of both harm and care, responsibility is no longer confined to immediate human communities or short-term outcomes. Instead, accountability stretches across generations, binding present actions to futures embedded within nonhuman life. Such a framework aligns with Timothy Morton's argument that entities operating at vast temporal and spatial scales require new representational and ethical approaches. In this sense, the trees of *The Overstory* resemble what Morton terms "hyperobjects," phenomena whose duration and extension exceed human comprehension and demand forms of ethical recognition rather than mastery (Morton).

Powers does not attempt to fully capture the immensity of arboreal time. Rather, the novel offers a limited but meaningful acknowledgment of beings whose temporal scales surpass human experience. This acknowledgment shifts ethical emphasis away from immediate human interests toward obligations grounded in endurance, conservation, and custodianship. Through its narrative form, *The Overstory* thus reframes moral responsibility as something distributed across deep time, shared between human and nonhuman agents within an interconnected ecological archive.

2. Tidal Temporality in *The Hungry Tide*: Cyclical and Ecological Rhythms

In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh shifts narrative focus away from human-centered chronology and toward the tidal environment of the Sundarbans. The novel draws the reader into a landscape shaped by constantly moving waters, where tides function not as a static backdrop but as forces that govern the rhythm and direction of events. Unlike linear models of time that move toward resolution or closure, tidal time in the novel is cyclical, marked by repetition and return rather than origin or destination. Ghosh employs the movement of water not only to represent the environment but also to unsettle conventional expectations about how narrative time progresses (Ghosh).

This cyclical temporality becomes visible through patterns of repetition embedded in the novel's structure. Floodwaters repeatedly reshape both landscape and plot, producing moments in which human plans

are undone or reconfigured by environmental processes. On some days, the tide follows familiar rhythms; on others, storms, erosion, or sedimentation alter the terrain in unpredictable ways. These recurring cycles overlap and accumulate, ensuring that human activities, whether building homes, rescuing others, or reclaiming land, remain provisional and reversible. As a result, narrative movement resists linear resolution, generating a persistent tension in which natural processes prevent events from settling into stable conclusions (Ghosh; Janet Hsu 80–83).

Ghosh further emphasizes tidal temporality by foregrounding the lives of those who depend on these rhythms for survival, including fishermen, boatmen, and honey gatherers. These characters do not rely on standardized clocks or calendars but instead measure time through memory, observation, and attentiveness to water, weather, and seasonal change. The narrative's attention to such forms of temporal knowledge highlights ways of inhabiting time that differ from modern, industrial models of progress. In doing so, the novel brings postcolonial and ecocritical concerns together, challenging developmental ideologies that privilege linear advancement while overlooking the lived rhythms of land and water (Hsu 84–86).

Within this framework, living by the tides emerges not merely as an observational practice but as a mode of existence shaped by place-based temporal awareness. The novel resists abstract measures of progress and instead affirms a situated perception of time grounded in ecological repetition and responsiveness. Such an approach reframes survival as a continuous process of adjustment rather than mastery, emphasizing adaptation over control (Ghosh).

This shift in temporal orientation also transforms the novel's ethical dimensions. When the sea repeatedly dismantles human constructions, accountability can no longer be defined as dominance over the environment. Instead, responsibility becomes associated with coexistence, repair, and humility. Ghosh does not advocate surrender to environmental forces; rather, the narrative values flexibility and the capacity to revise practices in response to changing ecological conditions. In contrast to Richard Powers' emphasis on arboreal endurance, Ghosh's focus on water

foregrounds responsiveness and movement as ethical necessities shaped by tidal time (Ghosh).

These representations of cyclical temporality resonate with Dipesh Chakrabarty's argument that the Anthropocene requires thinking beyond national histories toward an understanding of humanity as embedded within global and planetary systems (Chakrabarty 206–09). While Chakrabarty addresses large-scale biogeochemical processes and climate change, *The Hungry Tide* demonstrates how seemingly localized phenomena, tides, silt, and mangroves exert profound influence on human narratives and ethical choices. Through its engagement with tidal rhythms, the novel moves away from time-bound, human-centered storytelling and opens space for a moral framework grounded in presence, adaptability, and respect for ecological cycles rather than attempts at environmental domination.

3. Ruins and Afterlife in *The Road*: Fossilized Temporality and Posthuman Ethics

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* offers a different engagement with deep time through what can be described as a fossilized present. Although the novel is often read as a depiction of an apocalyptic wasteland, from a geological perspective, it is more accurately understood as a narrative of remnants. Artifacts such as abandoned food cans, animal bones, ash-covered landscapes, and decaying organic matter are not simply signs of collapse; they are material traces in the process of becoming future fossils. In this sense, the novel shifts attention away from catastrophe as an event and toward residue as a temporal condition (McCarthy).

The novel's sparse style and its focus on ruined environments contribute to a pronounced slowing of time. Human temporal frameworks appear nearly exhausted, approaching disappearance, while the material world continues its gradual movement toward decay and sedimentation. As Patricia Holland observes, McCarthy's landscapes evoke a form of temporal layering in which social history gives way to geological accumulation, transforming everyday objects into strata of a posthuman archive (Holland 434–38).

This effect is reinforced by McCarthy's narrative method. Short, abrupt sentences, minimal punctuation, and a restrained narrative focus limit access to interior thought and emotional exposition. Instead, attention is directed toward physical objects and material conditions that persist beyond human intention. In doing so, the novel privileges what endures over what is felt, allowing inanimate matter to assume narrative weight. These remnants function as early stages of fossilization, suggesting continuity after human disappearance rather than narrative closure (McCarthy).

Within *The Road*, it is often inanimate objects rather than human characters that propel narrative movement. Carts, roads, ruins, and discarded goods structure the father and son's journey, underscoring the diminished role of human agency within a world increasingly governed by material persistence. As Gerry Canavan argues, the novel's post-apocalyptic temporality reflects Anthropocene anxieties by imagining humanity not as the culmination of history but as one layer among many within a longer geological sequence (Canavan 108–12).

The novel thus confronts a central ethical question: when social systems collapse and human achievements are buried beneath layers of ash and debris, what remains meaningful is not human intention but what the Earth retains. In such a framework, humans are no longer the primary authors of history. Instead, planetary processes assume narrative authority, preserving traces that will shape future temporal formations. McCarthy does not offer consolation or redemption; rather, the narrative insists on the long-term consequences of human actions, even when human presence itself becomes negligible (McCarthy).

Significantly, *The Road* withholds any explicit explanation for the world's destruction. The absence of a clear cause, whether environmental collapse, technological disaster, or sudden catastrophe, directs attention away from event-based causality and toward temporal aftermath. Ash and silence dominate the narrative, encouraging reflection on duration rather than origin. In this context, humanity appears as a brief interval within Earth's extended history, prompting a reconsideration of ethical responsibility toward future life forms, landscapes, and ecological systems that will persist beyond human survival (McCarthy).

Taken together with *The Overstory* and *The Hungry Tide*, *The Road* contributes to a broader literary engagement with deep time by offering a vision of fossilized temporality. While Powers emphasizes arboreal endurance and Ghosh foregrounds cyclical ecological rhythms, McCarthy presents a world in which human life itself becomes a residual trace. These differing temporal models demonstrate that contemporary fiction does more than represent environmental crisis; it actively reshapes the reader's experience of time and ethical obligation (Powers; Ghosh; McCarthy).

Such narrative reconfigurations resonate with Dipesh Chakrabarty's argument that the history of climate compels a rethinking of time beyond human-centered narratives, as well as with Timothy Morton's emphasis on entities whose durations exceed human lifespans. Through their formal strategies, these novels enable readers to confront temporal scales that challenge conventional moral frameworks. The way narratives are structured, their pacing, repetition, and material focus, shape how responsibility toward future generations and nonhuman life is imagined.

This shift has significant implications. For literary criticism, it foregrounds the ethical weight of form itself rather than content alone. For fields such as education and environmental policy, it suggests that literature can cultivate patience, humility, and attentiveness to long-term ecological processes. Across these three works, narrative emerges as a medium capable of situating the human story within the broader, interconnected fabric of Earth's temporal life.

Conclusion

If we look closely, recent works of fiction are not only warning readers about environmental crises but are also reshaping how time itself is understood within narrative. *The Overstory, The Hungry Tide*, and *The Road* each engage this question through distinct temporal forms. In *The Overstory*, Richard Powers draws readers into the slow, extended life of trees, presenting them as living records that demand patience and attention, and in doing so reminds us that accountability extends beyond the present moment toward future generations. In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh disrupts linear narrative progression through tidal cycles, drawing attention to ecological rhythms and positioning nature as a force that carries moral and political significance. Cormac McCarthy's stark, end-of-the-world

narrative in *The Road* renders human characters as remnants within a fossilizing landscape, prompting ethical reflection that extends far beyond questions of immediate survival.

These literary approaches are closely connected to the ideas of thinkers such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, who argues that climate history compels a rethinking of time beyond human-centered historical narratives, and Timothy Morton, who emphasizes the existence of entities whose temporal scales far exceed human lifespans. Read alongside such theoretical frameworks, the novels examined here suggest that literature can serve as a means of engaging with deep time. Narrative form, through pacing, repetition, and perspective, makes how readers imagine responsibility, not only toward other people but toward ecological futures that unfold beyond individual lives.

This shift carries important implications. For literary criticism, it calls for modes of reading that attend to the ethical significance embedded in form itself, rather than treating structure as a neutral container for meaning. For fields such as environmental policy and education, these narratives offer ways of cultivating patience, humility, and attentiveness to long-term ecological processes, qualities necessary for responsible stewardship. While further work might explore other genres or investigate how readers cognitively engage with extended temporal narratives, the three novels discussed here demonstrate that storytelling has the capacity to expand ethical imagination by situating human experience within the broader, interconnected temporal fabric of the Earth.

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