Education and Social Work
ISSN Print: 3079-515X
ISSN Online: 3079-5168
https://doi.org/10.63313/ESW.9120

Reconstructing Ecological Justice in the Climate Crisis: A Social Ecocritical Reading of The Long Summer

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How to cite this paper: Liu, Y. (2026). Reconstructing Ecological Justice in the Climate Crisis: A Social Ecocritical Reading of The Long Summer. Education and Social Work, 4(1), 27 - 37. ISSN Print: 3079-515X; ISSN Online: 3079-5168.
https://doi.org/10.63313/ESW.9120
Published: 2026-04-20

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Abstract

In the context of the Anthropocene, the climate crisis has evolved from a mere ecological disaster into a systemic crisis with social, political and ethical dimensions. The imbalance of ecological justice has become the core crux hindering the radical solution to climate problems. Kim Stanley Robinson's The Long Summer, grounded in rigorous climate science, focuses on the existential dilemmas of human society against the backdrop of 21st-century global warming. Through literary representations of geopolitical disparities, class divisions and institutional flaws, the novel exposes the alienation of ecological justice spawned jointly by capitalist modernity, anthropocentrism and geopolitical power games. Taking social ecocriticism as its core theoretical framework and based on the three-dimensional connotations of ecological justice—intragenerational, intergenerational and geopolitical—this paper analyzes the disorder of ecological justice triggered by the climate crisis in The Long Summer, explores the novel's social-ecological critique of the roots of ecological injustice, and interprets the pathways and value orientations for repairing ecological justice constructed in the text. The study finds that Robinson, using literary narration as a vehicle, deeply integrates ecological critique with social critique and proposes a just framework that transcends capitalist logic, breaks geopolitical barriers and reshapes ecological ethics, providing important literary reference and ideological enlightenment for contemporary Anthropocene climate governance and the reconstruction of ecological justice.

Keywords

Climate Crisis; Ecological Justice; The Long Summer; Kim Stanley Robinson; Social Ecocriticism

Introduction

Since the Industrial Revolution, the modern mode of production and lifestyle centered on fossil fuels has disrupted the carbon cycle balance of the Earth's ecosystem, triggering a series of crises such as global warming, glacial melting and

frequent extreme weather events, marking humanity's formal entry into the Anthropocene dominated by the climate crisis. The climate crisis is not an isolated natural disaster; it conceals profound social contradictions and ethical dilemmas, making ecological justice a core issue in ecocriticism and social research. Ecological justice theory breaks through the limitations of traditional environmental ethics, which only focuses on the relationship between humans and nature, and extends the scope of justice to social classes, geopolitical nations and intergenerational inheritance, emphasizing fairness in the distribution of ecological resources, the assumption of ecological responsibilities and the bearing of ecological risks.

As an advanced contemporary form of ecocriticism, social ecocriticism abandons the de-socialized tendency of nature writing in traditional ecocriticism, closely linking ecological issues with social systems, class structures, capitalist logic and political power. It maintains that the essence of the ecological crisis is a social crisis, and the realization of ecological justice must rely on the transformation of social structures and the reshaping of values. The American writer Kim Stanley Robinson is a leading figure in contemporary climate fiction, whose creations consistently adhere to the stance of "scientific narration plus social critique". As a representative work of his ecological writing, *The Long Summer* discards the illusory imagination of science fiction and takes the real climate crisis as its blueprint, depicting a survival scenario of rising global temperatures, collapsing ecosystems and gradually fragmented social order, making it a classic text for interpreting climate fiction from the perspective of social ecocriticism.

Current academic research on *The Long Summer* mostly concentrates on narrative art, scientific spirit and ecological utopia, with few systematic studies focusing on the reconstruction of ecological justice from the perspective of social ecocriticism. In fact, the core ideological value of *The Long Summer* lies precisely in its literary representation of ecological injustice in the climate crisis, which completes a dual critique of capitalism and anthropocentrism, and further explores pathways for reconstructing ecological justice in the Anthropocene. On this basis, this paper takes social ecocriticism as its theoretical tool and ecological justice as its core clue to systematically interpret the internal connection between the climate crisis and social justice in *The Long Summer*, and excavate the novel's ecological critical connotation and practical implications, so as to enrich the research dimensions of climate fiction and provide theoretical support from a literary perspective for contemporary ecological justice practice.

1. Theoretical Coupling Between Social Ecocriticism and Ecological Justice

1.1. Core Connotations of Social Ecocriticism

Emerging in the early 21st century, social ecocriticism represents a reflection on and transcendence of traditional ecocriticism. Traditional ecocriticism focuses on

"the relationship between humans and nature", emphasizing textual interpretation of nature writing and pastoral literature and highlighting the intrinsic value of nature, yet neglects the social roots of the ecological crisis and falls into the theoretical trap of "natural aestheticism". Social ecocriticism breaks through this limitation, and its core theoretical propositions can be summarized in three points: first, the social nature of ecological problems, holding that the ecological crisis is not merely a cognitive bias of humanity but an externalization of social contradictions such as capitalism, class exploitation and geopolitical hegemony; second, the dialectical unity of ecology and society, in that the restoration of natural ecology is inseparable from the transformation of social structures, and the realization of social justice must be based on ecological balance; third, the dual orientation of critique and construction, which not only criticizes the social systems and values that cause the ecological crisis but also constructs an ideal order with both ecological rationality and social fairness.

Social ecocriticism introduces sociological terms such as class, race, gender, capital and power into ecological research, realizing an interdisciplinary integration of ecocriticism with sociology, political science and economics, and providing an accurate theoretical tool for interpreting texts with both ecological and social attributes such as climate fiction. The core of climate fiction is to depict the ecological crisis of the Anthropocene, and the resolution of the crisis inevitably involves the transformation of social systems and the reconstruction of a just order, which highly corresponds to the theoretical core of social ecocriticism.

1.2. Three Dimensions of Ecological Justice

Ecological justice theory was formally proposed by American scholars Keene and Cavanaugh in 1998, and has been continuously improved by ecological Marxism and environmental ethics, forming three core dimensions: intragenerational justice, intergenerational justice and geopolitical justice, which serve as the core ethical support for social ecocriticism.

Intragenerational justice refers to ecological fairness among different social groups in the same era, with the core of opposing class disparities in the distribution of ecological resources and the bearing of ecological risks, and criticizing the injustice in which capitalist and privileged groups shift ecological costs to the underprivileged. Intergenerational justice focuses on ecological responsibilities between present and future generations, emphasizing that the present generation must not overdraw the survival resources of future generations and should guarantee their equal ecological rights. Geopolitical justice concerns ecological fairness among different countries and regions worldwide, criticizing the geopolitical hegemony of developed countries that transfer highly polluting and energy-intensive industries to developing countries by virtue of their industrial advantages and evade ecological responsibilities.

In the Anthropocene context of the climate crisis, the three dimensions of ecological justice are intertwined, becoming an important yardstick for measuring the civilization of human society. The global, persistent and systemic nature of the climate crisis determines that its governance cannot be accomplished by a single group or country. Only by achieving the triple justice of intragenerational, intergenerational and geopolitical dimensions can the ecological dilemma be fundamentally resolved.

1.3. Deep Correspondence Between Theory and Text Under the Climate Crisis

The creative core of *The Long Summer* is highly consistent with social ecocriticism and ecological justice theory. Set against the backdrop of global warming, the novel does not limit itself to superficial depictions of natural disasters but extends its narrative to the social contradictions behind the climate crisis: the production mode dominated by capitalist profit-seeking logic, the failure of climate governance under geopolitical games, and the unfair distribution of ecological resources caused by class divisions—all core objects of critique in social ecocriticism. Meanwhile, through portraying the fates of characters from different countries, classes and generations, the novel fully presents the disorder of ecological justice in the climate crisis and outlines a blueprint for its reconstruction through the exploration and resistance of its characters. In short, *The Long Summer* is a literary practice of social ecocriticism and an artistic expression of ecological justice.

2. Ecological Injustice in *The Long Summer* Amid the Climate Crisis

In *The Long Summer*, Robinson uses a stern realistic style to depict the comprehensive alienation of ecological justice in the Anthropocene climate crisis. Breaking the idealistic perception that "the climate crisis strikes humanity indiscriminately", the novel reveals the differentiated impacts of climate disasters across class, geopolitical and intergenerational dimensions, showing the cruel reality of ecological injustice.

2.1. Imbalance of Geopolitical Ecological Justice: Mismatch Between Responsibility and Risk

The core of geopolitical ecological justice is the fair distribution of ecological responsibilities and risks worldwide. However, in *The Long Summer*, a stark responsibility-risk mismatch between developed capitalist countries and developing countries emerges as the primary manifestation of ecological injustice.

In the novel, developed Western countries, as pioneers of industrialization, have been the main consumers of fossil fuels and emitters of carbon emissions for centuries. Their modernization has been built on the plunder of global ecological

resources and the destruction of the ecological environment, and they ought to bear primary responsibility for climate governance. Yet in the narrative world, relying on economic and technological advantages and clinging to geopolitical hegemony, developed countries shirk and wrangle over emission reduction responsibilities in climate governance negotiations, and even transfer highly polluting industries to developing regions such as Southeast Asia and Africa through technological monopolies and capital exports, further exacerbating global ecological imbalance.

In contrast, developing countries and regions such as Africa, South America and Pacific island nations, with total carbon emissions far lower than those of developed countries, have become the worst victims of the climate crisis: rising sea levels due to global warming push Pacific island nations to the brink of submergence; alternating droughts and floods destroy agricultural production in developing countries, triggering food crises and ecological refugee waves; frequent extreme weather disrupts regional ecosystems, aggravating social unrest and poverty. Through such geopolitical disparities, Robinson exposes the essence of "ecological colonialism" in developed countries and criticizes the trampling of global ecological justice by geopolitical games.

2.2. Fragmentation of Class Ecological Justice: Opposition Between Capital and the Underclass

The climate crisis has caused the fragmentation of class ecological justice within society, with a polarized opposition between the privileged capitalist class and the underprivileged in access to ecological resources and exposure to ecological risks—a concentrated expression of ecological alienation under capitalism.

In the novel, the elite class holding capital and power resides in high-end communities equipped with constant-temperature systems, ecological protection facilities, clean water and food supplies, insulating themselves from the direct impacts of the climate crisis through resource advantages. They treat climate governance as a tool for capital profit, extracting benefits through carbon trading and monopolies on ecological industries, while remaining indifferent to the survival dilemmas of the underprivileged. The lower classes, by contrast, live in crowded and dilapidated slums without basic ecological protection, becoming direct victims of extreme heat, disease outbreaks and food shortages. Crop failures caused by global warming drive up living costs, and the underprivileged face a shrinking living space under the dual pressures of ecological disasters and capitalist exploitation.

The essence of this class opposition lies in the value orientation of capitalist supremacy over capital logic. The profit-seeking nature of capital determines that it regards both nature and the underprivileged as objects of exploitation: ecological resources become privileged commodities for the capitalist class, while ecological risks become survival burdens for the underprivileged, completely shattering internal social ecological fairness.

2.3. Overdraft of Intergenerational Ecological Justice: Rupture Between Present and Future Generations

The core of intergenerational ecological justice is the present generation's ecological responsibility to future generations. In *The Long Summer*, the anthropocentric development model has caused a severe overdraft of intergenerational ecological justice, as the greed and short-sightedness of the present generation have cut off the survival foundation of future generations.

In the novel, generations since the Industrial Revolution have unrestrainedly consumed fossil fuels, destroyed forests and vegetation, and polluted water and soil resources in pursuit of short-term economic growth and material comfort, leading to a continuous rise in global temperatures and the total loss of the ecosystem's self-repair capacity. The present generation enjoys the dividends of modern civilization but leaves irreversible ecological disasters—glacial melting, species extinction and climate chaos—to unborn descendants. The younger generation in the novel is born into a "long summer": endlessly prolonged summers, disrupted seasonal rhythms and a deteriorating living environment. They have never known a naturally balanced world yet must bear the ecological consequences left by their predecessors.

Through depicting intergenerational ecological rupture, Robinson warns humanity that the climate crisis is not a partial crisis for the present generation but an intergenerational crisis concerning the continuation of the human race, and the lack of intergenerational justice will eventually lead to the collapse of human civilization.

2.4. Absence of Institutional Ecological Justice: Governance and Responsibility Deficits

The realization of ecological justice relies on fair and reasonable social institutions. In *The Long Summer*, flaws in capitalism and geopolitics have resulted in the absence of institutional ecological justice, constituting the root cause of climate governance failure.

Governments and international organizations in the novel, constrained by capital interests and geopolitical games, fail to form a unified and effective climate governance system. Politicians ignore warnings from climate science and implement short-sighted economic policies for votes and capital support; international climate negotiations degenerate into arenas for national interest games, with emission reduction targets existing in name only; the capitalist market mechanism commodifies the ecological environment, and policies such as carbon trading and ecological compensation become tools for capital profit, failing to genuinely resolve ecological fairness. Institutional absence reduces ecological justice from an ethical pursuit to an empty slogan, and the climate crisis worsens amid disorderly social governance.

3. Social-Ecological Critique of Ecological Injustice in *The Long Summer*

The core of social ecocriticism is to critique the social roots of the ecological crisis. In *The Long Summer*, Robinson uses textual narration as a weapon to launch a profound social-ecological critique of the capitalist system, anthropocentrism and geopolitical hegemony that cause ecological injustice.

3.1. Critique of the Ecological Original Sin of Capitalist Production

Ecological Marxism holds that an irreconcilable contradiction exists between the principle of infinite accumulation in capitalism and the finitude of the ecosystem, which is the institutional root of the ecological crisis. In the novel, Robinson directs his critique at the capitalist mode of production, exposing its ecological original sin.

Centered on maximizing profits, capitalism promotes a linear economic model of "production-consumption-waste", extracting resources from nature and discharging waste into the environment without restraint, disrupting the material cycle balance of the ecosystem. In the novel, the capitalist industrial system is the main source of carbon emissions; energy corporations such as oil and coal companies obstruct the promotion of clean energy technologies to safeguard monopoly interests, while politicians and capital groups collude to prioritize economic growth over ecological protection. Robinson argues that capitalism treats nature as a free resource warehouse and waste dump, shifting ecological costs to the social underclass and vulnerable regions worldwide. Such a system is inherently anti-ecological and anti-justice, and ecological injustice under the climate crisis is an inevitable product of capitalism.

3.2. Critique of the Value Paranoia of Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism is the core value of modernity and the ideological root of ecological injustice. Traditional anthropocentrism upholds the philosophical thinking of "subject-object dualism", regarding humans as the masters of nature and nature as a tool for human conquest and utilization, and denying the intrinsic value and survival rights of nature.

In *The Long Summer*, the value paranoia of anthropocentrism runs through the entire climate crisis. Humanity ignores the laws of natural ecology and transforms nature centered on its own needs, eventually triggering nature's backlash. Even in the face of climate disasters, some elite groups in the novel cling to the obsession of "human conquest of nature", attempting to fully control the climate through technological means rather than respecting and conforming to nature, further exacerbating the ecological crisis. By criticizing anthropocentrism, Robinson points out that the premise of ecological justice is to break the paranoia of "human supremacy" and re-establish an equal and symbiotic relationship between humans and nature. Only by recognizing the intrinsic value of nature can the unity of

interspecies justice and social justice be achieved.

3.3. Critique of Governance Failure Under Geopolitical Hegemony and Elitism

The novel profoundly criticizes the failure of climate governance dominated by geopolitical hegemony and elitism, exposing the trampling of ecological justice by international politics and social power. Relying on industrial advantages, developed countries practice ecological hegemonism, regard developing countries as ecological colonies, and refuse to assume historical ecological responsibilities; the social elite treat ecological governance as a tool to maintain their privileges, ignoring the ecological rights of the underprivileged, reducing climate governance to a vassal of capital and power.

Robinson argues that the essence of geopolitical hegemony and elitism is egoism, which violates the global and systemic laws of the ecological crisis. The climate crisis knows no national borders or class divisions, and no country or group can insulate itself. The governance logic of shifting risks to others will eventually lead to the complete collapse of global ecological justice.

4. Pathways for Reconstructing Ecological Justice in *The Long Summer*

Faced with the comprehensive disorder of ecological justice amid the climate crisis, Robinson does not sink into pessimistic nihilism. Instead, from the constructive stance of social ecocriticism, he outlines a four-in-one pathway for reconstructing ecological justice—covering institution, value, subject and ethics—in *The Long Summer*, providing a literary plan for Anthropocene climate governance.

4.1. Institutional Reconstruction: An Ecological Governance System Transcending Capital Logic

The reconstruction of ecological justice first requires institutional transformation, transcending capitalist logic to establish a fair, efficient and globally coordinated ecological governance system. In the novel, visionaries break free from geopolitical and capital constraints, promoting the establishment of a unified global climate governance body and formulating a fair distribution plan for emission reduction responsibilities. In accordance with the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities", developed countries bear more ecological governance costs and provide technological and financial support to developing countries.

Meanwhile, the novel breaks the capitalist market-led ecological governance model, incorporates ecological protection into the core goals of social institutions, promotes eco-friendly development models such as circular economy and clean energy, restricts the commodification of the ecological environment by capital, and guarantees the fair distribution of ecological resources and the shared bearing of

ecological risks through institutions. Robinson emphasizes that institutions are the guarantee of ecological justice; only by fundamentally transforming anti-ecological social systems can a solid foundation be laid for ecological justice.

4.2. Value Reconstruction: From Anthropocentrism to Ecological Community

The reconstruction of ecological justice requires the reshaping of values, breaking the paranoia of anthropocentrism and establishing the value of an ecological community. Baptized by the climate crisis, characters in the gradually abandon egoistic thinking of individuals, classes and nations, recognizing that the Earth's ecology is an organic whole in which humans and nature, and different countries and groups, are interdependent and share weal and woe.

The concept of ecological community extends the scope of ecological justice from human society to all natural beings, emphasizing both social justice among humans and interspecies justice between humans and nature. In the novel, humans no longer attempt to conquer nature but respect natural laws, restore ecosystems and treat nature as an ecological partner. This value shift provides ideological support for the realization of ecological justice.

4.3. Subject Reconstruction: A Community of Ecological Action with Universal Participation

The realization of ecological justice requires the reconstruction of acting subjects, breaking the elite monopoly of governance and building a community of ecological action with universal participation. In the novel, climate governance is no longer the exclusive task of politicians and scientists; the underprivileged, young people and grassroots organizations all participate in ecological protection and climate resistance. People across classes and nationalities transcend divisions to form a joint force against the climate crisis.

Robinson emphasizes that ecological justice is justice for all humanity. Only by awakening the ecological responsibility of the whole people and granting ecological voice to the underprivileged and vulnerable regions can genuine intragenerational and geopolitical ecological fairness be achieved. This subject reconstruction with universal participation breaks the monopoly of capital and power over ecological governance, turning ecological justice from theory into practice.

4.4. Ethical Reconstruction: Unity of Intragenerational and Intergenerational Justice

The reconstruction of ecological justice ultimately requires the sublimation of ecological ethics, realizing the organic unity of intragenerational, intergenerational and geopolitical justice. The novel advocates that the present generation assume ecological responsibilities to future generations, transform development models, conserve ecological resources and leave a sustainably viable living environment for

descendants; it calls on different groups and countries in the same era to abandon opposition, distribute ecological resources fairly and share ecological responsibilities; it urges humanity to respect the intrinsic value of nature and achieve harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

This ecological ethics unifying the three forms of justice transcends the narrow vision of capitalist egoism and anthropocentrism, constructing an ethical system featuring both social fairness and ecological harmony, and becoming the core orientation of ecological justice in the Anthropocene.

5. Contemporary Value of Ecological Justice Representation in *The Long Summer*

As a work of climate fiction, *The Long Summer* accomplishes the social-ecological critique and reconstruction of ecological justice. Its creation possesses not only literary value but also important practical implications for contemporary climate governance, ecological culture construction and social justice practice.

For climate fiction writing, *The Long Summer* sets a model for integrating ecological narration with social critique, breaking the creative misconception of "emphasizing disasters over society" in climate fiction. It proves that climate fiction is not only a warning of the ecological crisis but also an advocate of social justice, pointing out the direction for contemporary ecological literature creation.

For practical climate governance, the novel reveals that ecological justice is the key to resolving the climate crisis, warning humanity to abandon the constraints of capitalism, geopolitical hegemony and anthropocentrism, and advance climate governance with a global vision, intergenerational sentiment and fairness, providing ideological reference for contemporary global ecological governance.

For social ecocriticism, *The Long Summer* verifies the theoretical validity of social ecocriticism, proving that the study of ecological problems must return to their social essence and the realization of ecological justice must rely on social transformation, further expanding the textual practice space of social ecocriticism.

6. Conclusion

The essence of the Anthropocene climate crisis is a crisis of ecological justice. With social ecocriticism as its implicit narrative logic, Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Long Summer* profoundly criticizes the trampling of ecological justice by capitalist production, anthropocentrism and geopolitical hegemony through literary representations of geopolitical, class and intergenerational ecological injustice, and further constructs an ecological justice plan that transcends capital logic and is based on the ecological community from the four dimensions of institution, value, subject and ethics.

The core value of the novel lies in closely linking the resolution of the ecological crisis with the reconstruction of social justice, proving that without social justice

there can be no ecological justice, and without ecological justice the climate crisis cannot be solved. In contemporary society where the global climate crisis is worsening and demands for ecological justice are rising, *The Long Summer* is not only an outstanding climate fiction but also a manifesto of ecological justice. It warns humanity that only by breaking the shackles of egoism, establishing the consciousness of an ecological community, and upholding the triple justice of intragenerational, intergenerational and geopolitical dimensions can a way out be found from the dilemma of the climate crisis and harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, and among humans themselves be achieved.

Robinson responds to the epochal proposition of the Anthropocene through literature. His representation of ecological justice provides irreplaceable ideological resources and spiritual guidance for contemporary ecological literature creation, social ecocriticism research and global climate governance practice.

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