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## **Ecocriticism and Indian English Literature: Negotiating Nature, Culture, and Sustainability**

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### **Abstract**

Ecocriticism, an interdisciplinary field that bridges literary studies and environmental discourse, has emerged as a vital lens for interpreting texts in the context of ecological awareness and sustainability. In Indian English literature, this critical perspective intersects with indigenous traditions, colonial histories, and contemporary environmental crises to produce narratives that are at once aesthetic, ethical, and political. Drawing from seminal ecocritical theorists such as Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell, this paper examines the representation of nature in select works of Indian English authors including Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, and Ruskin Bond. It explores how literary texts not only reflect but also shape environmental consciousness, integrating folklore, indigenous ecological wisdom, and postcolonial sensibilities. Through close textual analysis, the study reveals how Indian English literature negotiates the tension between development and ecological preservation, urbanisation and rural heritage, and global climate change and localised environmental narratives. The paper concludes by advocating for the role of literature as a medium of environmental activism and sustainability education in a rapidly industrialising India.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism; Indian English literature; sustainability; environmental consciousness; indigenous wisdom; postcolonial ecology.

### **1. Introduction**

The rise of ecocriticism in literary studies signals an academic acknowledgement that literature does not exist in a vacuum but is deeply intertwined with the natural environment. As Cheryll Glotfelty defines it, "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty and Fromm xix). This relationship becomes particularly compelling in the context of Indian English literature, where nature has long been a source of cultural symbolism, spiritual reflection, and political contestation.

From Vedic hymns to contemporary climate-fiction, Indian literary traditions have embedded ecological consciousness within their narratives. Yet the pressures of globalisation, urban sprawl, and climate change have redefined these engagements, making environmental

discourse more urgent than ever. Indian English writers not only document ecological realities but also reimagine human–nature relationships in ways that can inform sustainable futures. The present paper, therefore, reads select prose and poetry through ecocritical, postcolonial, and ecofeminist frames to show how Indian English literature negotiates the fraught entanglements of nature, culture, and development.

## **2. Theoretical Foundations: Ecocritical, Postcolonial, and Ecofeminist Frames**

Ecocriticism developed in the 1990s as a response to the perceived marginalisation of environmental questions in literary studies. Lawrence Buell’s early intervention placed the nonhuman environment at the centre of literary analysis and proposed that environmental texts are those in which “the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history” (Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* 7). Greg Garrard’s synoptic account maps key tropes—wilderness, apocalypse, dwelling, animals, and pollution—offering a vocabulary for analysing texts across genres (Garrard 1–12). Together, these works helped shift the disciplinary gaze from purely anthropocentric concerns to more-than-human worlds.

In postcolonial contexts, however, ecology cannot be divorced from histories of exploitation, resource extraction, and epistemic violence. Colonial modernity reconfigured forests into inventories, rivers into conduits for trade, and landscapes into cartographic objects. Postcolonial ecocriticism thus widens the analytical frame to include political economy, subaltern knowledge, and the cultural afterlives of empire. Ramachandra Guha’s environmental histories of India foreground peasant and forest-dweller resistance to colonial forest policies, while Vandana Shiva’s ecofeminism highlights how women’s labour and ecological knowledge sustain biodiversity and local economies (Guha; Shiva, *Staying Alive*).

Ecofeminism in India complicates Western paradigms by linking gender justice to commons management, seed sovereignty, and subsistence economies. Bina Agarwal has critiqued romanticised versions of ecofeminism, insisting that women’s relations to nature are mediated by property regimes, class, and caste (Agarwal). This intersectional attention to material structures, discourse, and everyday practices is indispensable when reading Indian English texts that stage riverine livelihoods, mangrove ecologies, or agrarian crises.

Finally, Amitav Ghosh’s non-fictional meditation, *The Great Derangement*, argues that modern realist fiction has struggled to represent climate catastrophe’s scale and improbability, and calls for renewed narrative forms capable of registering planetary crisis (Ghosh, *Great Derangement*). His provocation both diagnoses a representational impasse and invites literary experiment—an invitation many contemporary Indian writers have taken up.

## **3. Colonialism, Environment, and Literary Memory**

Colonial extraction transformed the subcontinent’s ecological regimes through commercial forestry, plantation agriculture, canal irrigation, and railway expansion. These processes reframed forests, water, and soil as commodities to be managed, counted, and

maximised. Literary memory, in turn, records the violence—slow and spectacular—of this environmental reordering. Even in post-independence narratives, colonial logics linger in developmentalist dreams: large dams as “temples of modern India,” industrial corridors as progress, and wetlands as encroachable “wastelands.”

Indian English literature often dramatises the friction between techno-managerial visions and local ecological ethics. The river becomes a palimpsest of civilisational reverence and contemporary contamination; the forest is a site of both refuge and eviction; the coast is simultaneously bounty and vulnerability. In these narratives, environment is not scenery but agent—shaping destinies, structuring livelihoods, and resisting enclosure. Postcolonial ecocriticism, then, reads the landscape not as backdrop but as co-protagonist.

#### **4. Environmental Consciousness in Select Indian English Novels**

##### **4.1 Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*: Mangroves, Mobility, and More-than-Human Worlds**

Set in the Sundarbans, *The Hungry Tide* brings the reader into a tidal ecology where land and water refuse stable boundaries. Ghosh’s protagonists—Piya, a cetologist; Kanai, a Delhi businessman-translator; and Fokir, a local fisherman—form a triangulated encounter across languages, classes, and epistemologies (Ghosh, *Hungry Tide*). The novel juxtaposes scientific method with embodied, place-based knowledge. Piya’s GPS-mapped surveys of the Irrawaddy dolphin are complemented—indeed made possible—by Fokir’s intimate reading of currents, sandbanks, and seasons. Such juxtaposition does not simply romanticise indigeneity; rather, it stages a collaborative ecology of knowledges where science becomes ethical when attentive to local wisdom.

The estuarine mangroves are dramatised as living systems that “move,” “breathe,” and “remember,” their adaptive morphologies making them both sanctuary and snare. Human habitation in this amphibious world is precarious—subject to cyclones, tiger attacks, and state violence. The novel’s recollection of the 1979 Morichjhāpi massacre—when refugees were expelled from a settlement in the Sundarbans—reveals how environmental protection can be instrumentalised to dispossess the poor. Here, Ghosh prompts readers to consider conservation not as an uncomplicated good but as a terrain of competing claims, where the language of “biosphere reserve” may collide with survival rights. In Buell’s terms, the nonhuman environment in *The Hungry Tide* is constitutive, not decorative: it shapes plot and thought, demanding ethical recalibrations.

##### **4.2 Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*: Riverine Memory and Toxic Modernity**

Though rarely catalogued as an “eco-novel,” Roy’s *The God of Small Things* encodes an ecological critique in its portrayal of the Meenachal River—a once-life-giving flow that becomes silted, stagnant, and polluted. The river’s degradation shadows the narrative of social injustice, aligning environmental toxicity with caste violence and political cynicism (Roy). Roy’s lyrical attention to plant and animal life—*kochu* leaves, rain-drenched banana fronds, the entomology of

the everyday—writes a sensorium of place that capital’s abstractions attempt to erase. Industrial effluents and bureaucratic neglect conspire to make the river a repository of waste and memory. Roy’s intertwined ecologies of body, river, and society reveal how environmental harm is unevenly distributed, tracking caste and class fault-lines—what environmental justice scholarship names the inequity of exposure and vulnerability.

#### **4.3 Ruskin Bond: Mountain Pastoral, Children’s Ecologies, and the Ethics of Care**

Across essays and fiction—*Rain in the Mountains*, *A Book of Simple Living*, and numerous short stories—Ruskin Bond writes the Himalayan foothills as a habitat of small kindnesses and slow attention (Bond). His is not a naïve pastoral: landslides, deforestation, and erratic monsoons haunt the serenity. Yet the ethics at work is quotidian—feeding birds, planting a sapling, walking a familiar path—gestures that cultivate care rather than command the environment. In the classroom, Bond’s accessible prose becomes an entry point for ecocritical pedagogy, attuning readers (especially young readers) to multispecies companionship and seasonal cycles. If Ghosh and Roy stage conflictual ecologies, Bond’s vignettes model ecological citizenship—ordinary, local, durable.

#### **5. Folklore, Indigenous Wisdom, and Ecological Ethics**

Indian ecological thought has never been solely textual; it is diffused through folk songs, rituals, craft traditions, and sacred geographies. Folklore often encodes conservation ethics: the sacred groves (*devrai*, *kavu*), the taboo against felling certain trees, the river goddess who punishes polluters. These are not merely superstitions but community-sanctioned norms that historically regulated resource use. When Indian English texts draw on such reservoirs, they enact what Buell calls “environmental memory,” where cultural forms store ecological knowledge.

Ecofeminist articulations—most famously associated with the Chipko movement—demonstrate how women’s bodies and forests are co-implicated in economies of extraction (Shiva, *Staying Alive*). Literature registers this kinship not as essentialist mother-earth metaphors but as labour: gathering fodder, fetching water, saving seeds. Bina Agarwal’s critique is salutary here: while women often bear ecological burdens, they do not constitute a singular subject; caste, class, and land tenure produce different stakes and strategies (Agarwal). Contemporary fiction and life-writing that portray pastoralists, forest-dwellers, and fisher folk can thus avoid pastoral romanticism by attending to work, rights, and institutions alongside myth and memory.

Moreover, the resurgence of interest in *indigenous* epistemologies—whether of the North-East’s shifting cultivation or the Deccan’s tank irrigation—invites literary forms that privilege relationality over control, reciprocity over extraction. Narrative techniques such as polyphony, embedded oral histories, and non-linear time mimic indigenous storytelling, inviting readers to inhabit ecological time rather than modern chronologies of growth.

## **6. Urbanisation, Climate Crisis, and Contemporary Indian English Poetry**

Indian English poetry has long recorded the friction between city and river, asphalt and banyan, flyover and field. A. K. Ramanujan's "A River" anatomises civic amnesia: each year the river floods, each year the city forgets the poor who drown. Without resorting to direct quotation, one can note how Ramanujan's irony chastens elite spectatorship and challenges poetic conventions that aestheticise disaster. Jayanta Mahapatra's coastal poems dwell on salt, heat, and monsoon—sensuous textures that embed human longing in seasonal cycles. Keki N. Daruwalla's verse tracks drought and flood as twin faces of mismanaged waterscapes; Ranjit Hoskote's lyric essays often meditate on birdlife and urban ruins as co-present ecologies.

Recent climate-inflected poems reckon with air toxicity, heat islands, and cyclone aftermaths—subjects once thought resistant to lyric form. Formally, poets experiment with lists, fragments, and documentary collage to register data-saturated ecologies: particulate matter indices, cyclone names, satellite images, municipal notices. Such strategies align with Amitav Ghosh's call to remake narrative forms for the Anthropocene (Ghosh, *Great Derangement*), and they enact Buell's insistence that environmental representation must implicate human histories within larger biospheric systems.

Importantly, a new generation of poets foregrounds environmental justice. The refinery-lit night, the informal settlement beside a landfill, the fisher community fenced out by a coastal road—these images ask who pays the price for "world-class" urban dreams. Intersectional poetics links pollution to caste stigmatisation (manual scavenging, sewage work), heat stress to informal labour, and water scarcity to gendered time poverty. Indian English poetry thus becomes a civic archive and a warning system.

## **7. Bridging Literature and Environmental Activism: Pedagogy and Public Humanities**

If literature can sharpen perception, it can also catalyse action. Classroom ecocriticism in India benefits from a praxis-oriented pedagogy: river walks and field visits paired with texts; campus biodiversity audits alongside nature writing; translation assignments that recover local ecological lexicons. Ruskin Bond read with bird surveys; *The Hungry Tide* taught with mangrove ecology modules; Roy's river read against municipal water-quality reports—such pairings cultivate what Buell calls "environmental literacy," a habit of connecting text to world.

Public humanities initiatives—reading circles in public libraries, storytelling in community centres, open-air poetry in parks—can democratise environmental discourse. When students annotate neighbourhood trees with QR codes that link to poems and species notes, the city becomes a living anthology. Collaborations with NGOs on waste segregation, lake restoration, or seed banks translate literary insight into civic stewardship.

At the level of policy discourse, literary voices matter. Essays, op-eds, and festival panels by writers bring narrative nuance to technocratic debates: they humanise displacement in environmental impact assessments, foreground slow violence in post-disaster reconstructions,

and restore memory to erased commons. As Indian cities draft climate action plans, the humanities can complicate metrics with meaning, and maps with memories.

### **8. Counter-Arguments and Cautions: Against Pastoral Nostalgia and Token Green**

A robust ecocritical practice must also resist two temptations. The first is pastoral nostalgia—the desire to return to a putatively pure nature. Indian landscapes have long been cultivated, inhabited, sacred, and worked; purity myths often justify exclusion and elite leisure. The second temptation is token green: sprinkling ecological motifs without interrogating infrastructures and institutions. Literature that lingers on lotus ponds but ignores sewage lines risks aestheticising inequality. The most compelling Indian English texts avoid both traps: they love places without idealising them and critique systems without disowning attachment. Methodologically, we must also be wary of over-generalising “indigenous wisdom.” While invaluable, it is not monolithic; nor is it immune to internal hierarchies. Ecocriticism that listens closely will hear polyphony rather than a single voice, contingency rather than timelessness.

### **9. Conclusion**

Indian English literature offers a rich, evolving archive for thinking ecologically. From the tidal ambivalences of *The Hungry Tide* to the riverine melancholies of *The God of Small Things*, from Ruskin Bond’s mountain intimacies to documentary-inflected climate poetry, these texts refuse to treat the environment as mere backdrop. Instead, they make the more-than-human world a co-author of plot, memory, and ethics.

Theoretical lenses from Buell, Glotfelty, and Garrard help locate these works within a global ecocritical conversation, while postcolonial and ecofeminist thinkers such as Guha, Shiva, and Agarwal recalibrate analysis toward justice, labour, and rights. The result is a body of literature that both reflects and reworks India’s environmental predicaments—industrial aspiration, agrarian distress, contested conservation—into narratives capable of educating feeling and informing action.

In the years ahead, as heatwaves intensify and coastlines retreat, the demand upon literary form will only grow. Indian English writers have already begun to answer that demand with hybrid genres, collaborative knowledges, and public-facing prose. If policy must be evidence-based, then culture must be empathy-based; and literature, at its best, gives us both: reasons and relations, arguments and attachments. To read ecocritically in India today is not merely to interpret texts differently; it is to practise citizenship differently—attentive, accountable, and alive to the more-than-human commons we share.

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