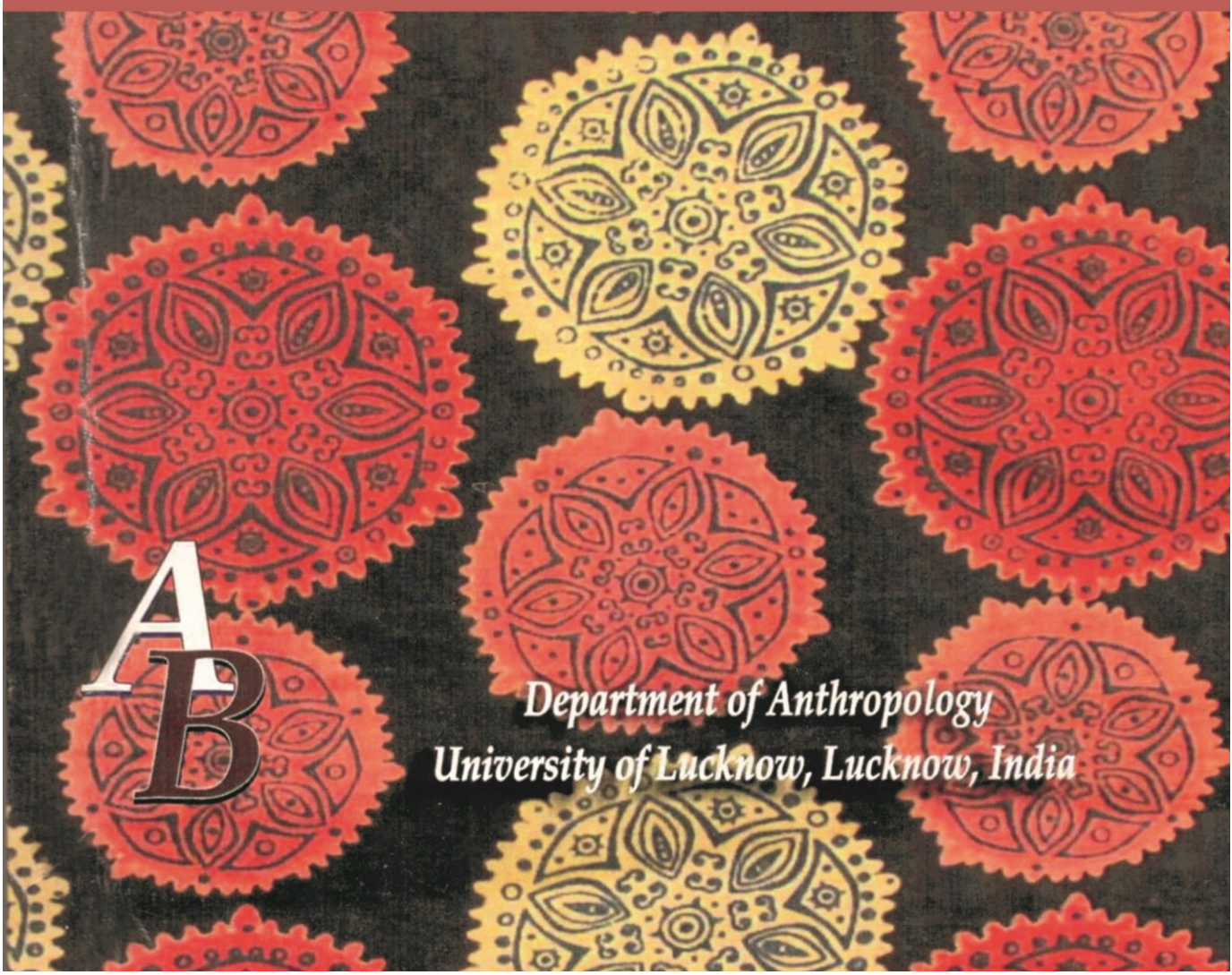


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India's Green Journey in Modern Indian English Literature: An Analytical Study

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ABSTRACT

Environmental consciousness has emerged as one of the most significant thematic concerns in modern Indian English literature, reflecting India's changing relationship with nature in the wake of industrialisation, urbanisation, and globalization. Contemporary Indian writers have increasingly explored ecological degradation, environmental justice, biodiversity conservation, and indigenous knowledge systems through literary narratives that transcend aesthetic expression and function as ethical interventions. This paper examines the evolution of ecological consciousness in modern Indian English literature by analysing selected works of major writers such as Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Indra Sinha, Sarah Joseph and Ruskin Bond. Employing ecocriticism as its primary theoretical framework, the study explores how literary texts challenge anthropocentric attitudes, critique exploitative models of development, and foreground the interconnectedness of human beings and the natural world. The paper further argues that Indian English literature has become an important cultural space for articulating ecological ethics rooted in indigenous traditions and environmental activism. By integrating literary imagination with ecological concerns, these writers contribute to global environmental discourse while simultaneously addressing India's socio-cultural realities. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that modern Indian English literature not only documents environmental crises but also inspires sustainable thinking, ecological responsibility, and collective action toward preserving the natural environment for future generations.

Keywords: Ecocriticism; Indian English Literature; Environmental Justice; Ecological Consciousness

Introduction

Nature has occupied a central place in Indian philosophy, religion, folklore, and literature since ancient times. The Vedas, Upanishads, Buddhist texts, Jain scriptures, and epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* portray human beings as inseparable from the natural world. Rivers, forests, mountains, and animals are represented not merely as

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physical entities but as sacred companions in human existence. Consequently, Indian literary traditions have historically reflected an ecological worldview that emphasizes coexistence, balance, and reverence for nature (Glottfelty & Fromm, 1996; Shiva, 1988). Modern Indian English literature inherits this rich tradition while simultaneously responding to the unprecedented ecological crises generated by industrialisation, rapid urbanisation, deforestation, pollution, and climate change.

The emergence of environmental consciousness in modern Indian English literature is closely associated with India's socio-economic transformation after Independence. The pursuit of economic development, technological advancement, and globalization has undoubtedly improved material conditions, yet it has also accelerated environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and the displacement of indigenous communities. These realities have encouraged writers to reconsider the relationship between human beings and nature through literary expression (Guha, 2000). Rather than treating nature merely as a picturesque background, contemporary Indian authors increasingly portray it as an active participant whose survival is inseparable from human welfare.

The rise of ecocriticism during the late twentieth century has provided an influential theoretical framework for examining literary representations of the environment. According to Cheryll Glottfelty (1996), ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." Similarly, Lawrence Buell (1995) argues that literature plays a crucial role in shaping ecological imagination by encouraging readers to perceive environmental issues beyond scientific and political discourses. Greg Garrard (2012) further observes that ecocriticism investigates the complex interaction between literature, ecology, ethics, and culture while challenging anthropocentric assumptions. These theoretical perspectives have significantly influenced the study of Indian English literature, where environmental concerns intersect with questions of postcolonial identity, social justice, and cultural memory (Nayar, 2013).

Indian English literature presents a distinctive ecological perspective because environmental degradation in India is closely intertwined with issues of poverty, caste, displacement, gender inequality, and indigenous rights. Unlike many Western environmental narratives that primarily focus on wilderness preservation, Indian literary texts frequently examine the socio-economic consequences of ecological destruction upon marginalized communities. Consequently, ecological consciousness in Indian English literature extends beyond conservation to include environmental justice and sustainable development (Guha, 2000; Shiva, 1988).

As Chandra Das (2007) observes, Indian English poetry from the North-Eastern region is particularly rich in celebrating ecological diversity and environmental awareness. The poets of this region depict forests, rivers, mountains, and indigenous cultures as living entities whose survival determines the well-being of local communities. The Himalayan landscape, which encompasses Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, and Sikkim, has inspired numerous literary works that highlight both ecological beauty and environmental vulnerability. Such writings reveal that nature functions not only as a geographical setting but also as a repository of cultural identity and collective memory (Das, 2007).

Ecocritical discourse in Indian English literature also intersects with postcolonial criticism. Colonial policies transformed forests, rivers, and agricultural landscapes into economic resources for imperial expansion, thereby disrupting traditional ecological relationships. Postcolonial Indian writers revisit this history while simultaneously critiquing contemporary models of development that continue to exploit natural resources in the name

of modernization (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010). Their works expose the environmental consequences of unchecked industrialisation and question dominant narratives of economic progress.

One of the defining characteristics of modern Indian English green literature is its portrayal of nature as an active narrative presence rather than a passive backdrop. In *The Hungry Tide*, the Sundarbans emerge as a living ecosystem where human lives remain inseparable from tides, mangroves, rivers, and wildlife (Ghosh, 2004). Similarly, *The God of Small Things* depicts environmental degradation alongside social fragmentation, while *Animal's People* transform the legacy of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy into a powerful critique of corporate irresponsibility and environmental injustice (Roy, 1997; Sinha, 2007). These narratives demonstrate that ecological destruction inevitably produces profound human suffering.

Indian English literature further foregrounds indigenous ecological knowledge as an alternative to exploitative development paradigms. Traditional practices of water conservation, biodiversity protection, and community-based resource management receive renewed significance in literary narratives that advocate sustainable coexistence with nature. These works resonate strongly with environmental movements such as the Chipko Movement, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and the Silent Valley Movement, which have demonstrated the importance of grassroots ecological activism in India (Guha, 2000).

The present paper analyses India's green journey through selected works of modern Indian English literature using ecocritical and postcolonial perspectives. It argues that contemporary Indian writers have transformed literature into a powerful medium for environmental awareness, ethical reflection, and ecological advocacy. Their writings not only document environmental degradation but also propose alternative visions of harmony between humanity and nature, thereby contributing significantly to both Indian literary studies and global environmental discourse (Buell, 1995; Garrard, 2012; Nayar, 2013).

Ecocriticism and the Indian Literary Imagination

Ecocriticism has emerged as one of the most influential approaches in literary studies because it examines the reciprocal relationship between literature and the natural environment. Unlike traditional literary criticism, ecocriticism analyses how literary texts construct ecological values, represent environmental crises, and encourage ethical relationships between humans and nature (Glottfelty & Fromm, 1996). Greg Garrard (2012) argues that environmental literature not only reflects ecological degradation but also shapes environmental consciousness by questioning dominant ideologies of development and consumerism. In the Indian context, ecocriticism acquires additional significance because ecological issues are closely linked with colonial history, economic inequality, indigenous rights, and sustainable development (Nayar, 2013).

Indian English literature provides a unique ecological perspective where environmental degradation is rarely portrayed as an isolated phenomenon. Instead, it is connected with social injustice, displacement, poverty, and cultural disintegration. Consequently, ecological narratives become narratives of human survival. This integration of environmental and social concerns distinguishes Indian English eco-literature from many Western ecological texts that primarily focus on wilderness preservation (Guha, 2000). Indian writers repeatedly demonstrate that environmental destruction inevitably leads to cultural fragmentation and the marginalisation of vulnerable communities.

Postcolonial ecocriticism further strengthens this perspective by examining how colonial exploitation transformed forests, rivers, and agricultural landscapes into economic commodities. Huggan and Tiffin (2010) observe that postcolonial literature exposes the continuing exploitation of natural resources inherited from colonial systems of governance.

Indian writers therefore critique not only colonial environmental policies but also contemporary development models that privilege economic growth over ecological sustainability. Such literary interventions encourage readers to reconsider conventional definitions of progress through an ecological lens.

Nature as a Living Character

One of the defining characteristics of modern Indian English literature is its representation of nature as an active participant rather than a passive setting. Rivers, forests, mountains, animals, and oceans possess agency and significantly influence the lives of human characters. This narrative strategy challenges anthropocentric assumptions by suggesting that humans are only one component of a much larger ecological system (Buell, 1995).

The *Hungry Tide* exemplifies this ecological imagination. Set in the Sundarbans, the novel portrays the mangrove forests as simultaneously nurturing and destructive. The tides, rivers, crocodiles, dolphins, and Royal Bengal Tigers collectively shape the destiny of every human inhabitant. Ghosh writes, "But to the world at large this archipelago is known as the Sundarbans – which means 'the beautiful forest'" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 154). The apparent beauty of the landscape conceals its ecological complexity and unpredictability, reminding readers that nature cannot be fully controlled by human intervention.

The Sundarbans become more than a geographical location; they emerge as a living ecosystem whose survival depends upon maintaining ecological balance. Human attempts to dominate nature repeatedly fail because the natural world possesses its own rhythms and laws. Thus, Ghosh dismantles anthropocentric notions of human supremacy and advocates coexistence between humanity and nature (Buell, 1995; Garrard, 2012).

Similarly, *Fire on the Mountain* presents the Himalayan landscape as a silent witness to human loneliness and emotional conflict. Nature functions not merely as scenery but as a symbolic extension of psychological experience. Desai's descriptions of forests, birds, and mountains reveal both the serenity and fragility of ecological existence. Her narrative also subtly critiques urban consumerism and environmental neglect by contrasting natural harmony with modern alienation (Desai, 1977).

Environmental Justice and Developmental Critique

Modern Indian English literature consistently interrogates the environmental consequences of industrialisation and economic development. Rather than celebrating modernization uncritically, many writers expose its devastating impact on marginalized communities and fragile ecosystems.

The *God of Small Things* demonstrates how ecological degradation parallels social disintegration. The polluted river in Ayemenem symbolises the gradual destruction of both environmental and human relationships. Roy illustrates how modernization, commercialization, and social inequality collectively erode traditional ecological values (Roy, 1997). The deterioration of the river becomes a metaphor for the collapse of moral and ecological harmony.

Likewise, *Animal's People* transform the Bhopal Gas Tragedy into a profound critique of corporate negligence and environmental injustice. Through the experiences of its disabled protagonist, the novel reveals the long-term consequences of industrial pollution upon economically disadvantaged communities. Sinha demonstrates that environmental disasters disproportionately affect those with the least political and economic power (Sinha, 2007). Consequently, environmental justice becomes inseparable from questions of human rights and social equality.

These novels reveal that environmental degradation cannot be understood independently of political structures, economic policies, and unequal power relations. Their ecological vision therefore extends beyond conservation towards broader ethical concerns regarding justice, responsibility, and accountability (Guha, 2000).

Indigenous Knowledge and Sustainable Living

An important contribution of Indian English literature lies in its recognition of indigenous ecological knowledge. Traditional Indian communities have historically maintained sustainable relationships with forests, rivers, wildlife, and agricultural landscapes through practices rooted in collective responsibility rather than commercial exploitation. Modern writers frequently recover these ecological traditions as alternatives to unsustainable models of development.

Gift in Green celebrates the intimate relationship between local communities and their natural environment. The novel presents wetlands, rivers, and forests not merely as economic resources but as sacred spaces essential for cultural identity and community survival (Joseph, 2011). Although written in Malayalam and translated into English, the novel occupies an important place in discussions of Indian ecological literature because it foregrounds indigenous environmental ethics.

Similarly, the writings of Ruskin Bond cultivate ecological sensitivity through simple yet profound depictions of Himalayan forests, birds, flowers, and village life. His stories encourage readers, particularly young audiences, to appreciate biodiversity and develop emotional connections with nature. Rather than advocating environmental conservation through political rhetoric, Bond inspires ecological awareness through affection, observation, and everyday experience (Bond, 1991).

This emphasis on indigenous knowledge resonates strongly with the environmental philosophy of Vandana Shiva, who argues that traditional ecological practices offer sustainable alternatives to industrial agriculture and global consumerism (Shiva, 1988). Indian English literature thus becomes an important archive of ecological wisdom that challenges purely technological solutions to environmental crises.

Water, Biodiversity, and Environmental Activism

Water occupies a central symbolic and ecological position in Indian literature. Rivers simultaneously represent cultural continuity, spiritual purification, livelihood, and ecological survival. However, contemporary writers increasingly portray rivers as endangered ecosystems threatened by pollution, dam construction, and commercial exploitation.

In *The Hungry Tide*, rivers determine every aspect of human existence. The unpredictable tides illustrate nature's immense power while emphasizing humanity's ecological dependence. Similarly, *Gift in Green* highlights the devastating consequences of destroying wetlands and water bodies for commercial development. These literary representations encourage readers to recognize water as a shared ecological heritage rather than a market commodity.

Indian English literature also celebrates biodiversity by depicting forests as habitats where humans and non-human species coexist. The protection of endangered wildlife becomes an ethical responsibility rather than merely an environmental concern. Such literary perspectives resonate with grassroots environmental movements including the Chipko Movement, the Silent Valley Movement, and the Narmada Bachao Andolan, all of which demonstrated that ecological conservation is inseparable from community participation and democratic resistance (Guha, 2000).

Consequently, literature itself functions as a form of environmental activism. By combining aesthetic expression with ecological awareness, Indian writers cultivate

environmental ethics among readers while questioning dominant narratives of limitless economic growth. Their works encourage reflection upon sustainable development, environmental responsibility, and the moral obligation to preserve nature for future generations.

Conclusion

Modern Indian English literature has evolved into a significant medium for articulating ecological consciousness by critically examining the changing relationship between human beings and the natural environment. While early literary representations of nature largely emphasized its aesthetic and spiritual dimensions, contemporary writers increasingly portray ecological degradation as one of the defining challenges of modern society. Through the lens of ecocriticism, Indian English literature demonstrates that environmental crises are inseparable from questions of social justice, cultural identity, economic development, and ethical responsibility (Glottfelty & Fromm, 1996; Buell, 1995). The literary imagination thus becomes a powerful means of exposing environmental exploitation while simultaneously envisioning sustainable alternatives.

The works of Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Indra Sinha, Sarah Joseph and Ruskin Bond reveal diverse dimensions of India's ecological reality. Their narratives move beyond romantic celebrations of nature to explore the consequences of deforestation, industrial pollution, biodiversity loss, displacement, environmental injustice, and climate vulnerability. By portraying rivers, forests, mountains, wetlands, and wildlife as active participants rather than passive settings, these writers challenge anthropocentric assumptions and advocate a more harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world (Garrard, 2012; Nayar, 2013).

Another important contribution of modern Indian English literature lies in its affirmation of indigenous ecological knowledge and community-based conservation practices. Traditional environmental ethics rooted in coexistence, restraint, and collective responsibility are presented as meaningful alternatives to exploitative models of development. Literary engagement with environmental movements such as the Chipko Movement, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and the Silent Valley Movement further demonstrates that literature and environmental activism are mutually reinforcing. In this way, Indian English writers transform literary narratives into instruments of ecological awareness and social transformation (Guha, 2000; Shiva, 1988).

Ultimately, India's green journey in modern Indian English literature reflects a continuing search for ecological balance in an age of rapid globalization and environmental uncertainty. The selected literary works collectively remind readers that environmental sustainability cannot be achieved solely through technological advancement or governmental policies; it also requires cultural transformation, ethical responsibility, and ecological imagination. By foregrounding the interconnectedness of humanity and nature, modern Indian English literature contributes significantly to global environmental discourse while preserving India's rich ecological heritage for future generations. Therefore, these literary texts should be read not merely as artistic creations but also as compelling ecological interventions that inspire environmental stewardship, sustainable development, and a renewed respect for the natural world (Buell, 1995; Huggan & Tiffin, 2010).

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