Nature Matters: An Ecocritical Study of Select Indian Novels in the Light of Hinduism

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Abstract

This study explores the intersection of ecocritical theory and ancient Indian religious ethos, specifically analyzing how ecological wisdom embedded in classical Hindu texts informs post-1900 Indian English literature. By tracing the evolution of ecocriticism from its foundational waves in Western academia to its postcolonial and eco-justice iterations, this paper examines how modern novelists reframe the relationship between humanity and the biophysical world. Through a close reading of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, this paper demonstrates how contemporary narrative arts echo the organic, non-anthropocentric worldview of the Vedas, Puranas, and Upanishads. Ultimately, the study underscores the urgency of synthesizing traditional ecological knowledge with modern conservation frameworks to counter the degradation driven by unchecked urbanization and industrial progress.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Indian English Literature, Hinduism, Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), Postcolonial Environmentalism, Anthropocene.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

The relationship between literature and the physical environment offers a vital lens through which the current ecological crisis can be understood and critiqued. The term "Ecocriticism" was originally coined by William H. Rueckert in 1978 within his seminal essay, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". The critical movement gained formal traction in the United States during the 1980s, pioneered by Cheryll Glotfelty and her co-editor Harold Fromm, while simultaneously emerging in the United Kingdom during the 1990s under the moniker "Green Studies".

Glotfelty famously defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment". She asserts that "ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies". This framework fundamentally diverges from traditional literary paradigms by re-evaluating the concept of the setting. While conventional literary theories examine the matrix between authors, texts, and a predominantly social world, ecocriticism expands this scope to encompass the entire ecosphere—a dynamic network wherein plants, animals, human beings, and physical terrains are profoundly interconnected.

Consequently, ecocritics interrogate how nature is represented in texts, whether physical settings actively drive plots, and if the values expressed align with ecological wisdom. Furthermore, contemporary ecocriticism advocates that "place" must join the analytical ranks of race, class, and gender as a core critical category to understand how environmental anxieties permeate popular culture.

Ecocriticism has traditionally developed across distinct chronological waves. The first wave, originating in the 1980s, focused heavily on wilderness and nature writing as an inherently valuable pursuit. It maintained a clear distinction between humanity and nature, emphasizing the intrinsic value of the non-human environment and the moral necessity to speak

on its behalf. Lawrence Buell characterizes this phase as the ideological restoration of a wild, non-human world.

Conversely, the second wave of the 1990s widened the scope of environmentalism by challenging the dichotomy between the natural and the artificial. It deconstructed the boundaries between urban and wild landscapes, redefining "environment" to include both built and natural spaces. By examining how marginalized, impoverished demographics bear the brunt of climate change and corporate environmental degradation, this second wave catalyzed the eco-justice movement.

Subsequently, postcolonial ecocriticism emerged to address the distinct plights of displaced, starved, dehydrated, and disenfranchised populations globally (Mabie 279). Over time, these paradigms integrated frameworks from the pastoral tradition, wilderness studies, and ecofeminism, creating a multi-faceted discipline capable of addressing global ecological challenges.

Ecological Consciousness in Ancient Indian Traditions

Long before the advent of modern environmental movements, human populations maintained an intimate, reciprocal relationship with natural systems. Life on Earth is fundamentally unimaginable without its supporting environment, a truth universally recognized by ancient Indian sages (*rishis*), sacred texts, and contemporary empirical science.

The classical Hindu worldview perceives human beings not as masters of the planet, but as trustees of its resources. Natural assets exist for the sustainable development and sustenance of all living creatures, and the treasures of nature must be guarded with the spiritual conviction that all existence shares an underlying unity.

The foundational texts of Hinduism articulate a deeply integrated cosmic order. The *Rig Veda* posits that the universe is composed of five great elements (*Pancha Mahabhutas*): Earth (*Prithvi*), Water (*Jal*), Air (*Vayu*), Fire (*Agni*), and Space or Ether (*Akasha*). These

elements constitute the baseline of all living matter, imposing a spiritual duty upon humanity to conserve them.

Similarly, the *Yajur Veda* describes the principles governing the earth, emphasizing absolute harmony among its diverse components. The *Atharva Veda* frames the Earth as a maternal entity (*Mata Bhumi*) and all living creations as her offspring, strictly forbidding the exploitation or degradation of her resources. Within this framework, natural waters are revered as the life-giving milk of the Earth Mother, rivers are celebrated as sources of life, and water stands as a symbol of dignity. The *Vedas* collectively invoke this maternal relationship through prayers for sustenance:
"Mother with your oceans, rivers and other bodies of water, you give us land to grow grains, on which our survival depends… please pour like a cow who never fails, a thousand streams for treasure to enrich me. May you, our motherland on whom we grow wheat, rice, and barley be nourished by the cloud and loved by the rain."

This deification extends directly to the animal and plant kingdoms. The *Vishnu Purana* states that the Divine is pleased with those who refrain from harming non-speaking creatures. Textual authorities like the *Padma Purana* and *Skanda Purana* identify specific trees—such as the Peepal, Bel, and Neem—as sacred abodes of the Divine that must never be felled.

The *Durga Saptashati* explicitly warns that the survival of the human race is tethered to the preservation of mountains, forests, and flora. Medicinally, the *Charaka Samhita* identifies the systematic destruction of wild vegetation as a direct catalyst for environmental anomalies like severe drought.

Furthermore, the *Padma Purana* issues severe spiritual warnings against the unnecessary slaughter of cattle. These canonical teachings show that Hindu traditions view nature as an organic, dynamic network filled with spiritual consciousness, a worldview rooted in the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*.

The Mountain Ethos: *Kanthapura* and *A Fine Balance*

Modern Indian English novelists frequently channel this rich ecological heritage to comment on contemporary environmental issues. In her seminal novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, Kamala Markandaya warns of the volatile agency of the natural world:

"Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk warily with thought and care, so long will it give you its aid; but look away for an instant, be heedless and forgetful, and it has you by the throat." (57)

Human history demonstrates that natural forces regularly overpower human technological pride. When human greed disrupts ecological systems, nature responds with destructive power through earthquakes, cyclones, and floods, mirroring the dual roles of preservation and destruction found in Lord Shiva. Authors like Raja Rao and Rohinton Mistry illuminate this delicate balance by depicting how landscapes shape human culture.

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) highlights the lived reality of this organic relationship in rural South India. The villagers of Kanthapura revere their local mountain as the Goddess Kenchamma, attributing both their agricultural prosperity and systemic adversities to her divine will. They pray directly to the landscape during times of ecological crisis:

"Kenchamma is our goddess. Great and bounteous is she……never has she failed us in grief. If rains come not, you fall at her feet and say, 'Kenchamma you are not kind to us. Our field is full of younglings.'" (2)

Similarly, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995) emphasizes the psychological and cultural value of mountains. Characters like Farokh and his son Maneck live in deep harmony with their highland homes, celebrating the purity of the local air and water. Maneck's deep connection to this landscape manifests as acute nostalgia when he is forced to move to the city for his education:

"…at this hour it would be swirling fancifully, encircling the snow–covered peaks. Just after dawn was the best time to observe the slow dance, before the sun was strong enough to snatch away the veil. And he would stand at the window, watch the pink and orange of sunrise, and imagine the mist tickling the mountain's ear chucking it under the chin or weaving a cap for it." (201)

However, this harmonious bond is shattered by state-sponsored development plans designed to connect the hill towns to urban centers. Mistry critiques this invasive modernization, noting that scenic mountain paths were systematically replaced by heavy-duty roads to suit "the broad vision of nation builders and World Bank officials" (214).

This prioritizing of progress over conservation devastates the local ecology. Despite local protests led by Farokh and Major Grewal against short-sighted policies, infrastructure development proceeds unchecked, leaving the hills "gashed and scarred" and turning the peaceful dawn mist into an industrialized nightmare.

Ultimately, the denuded hills trigger a sharp ecological backlash. The seasons destabilize, descending in torrential rains, mudslides, and avalanches, while winter snowpacks become thin and patchy. This seasonal disorder disrupts the region's climate year after year, offering a stark narrative reminder of the ecological imbalances that occur when technology overrides natural systems.

Sacred Forests and Devastated Waters: *The Ramayana* to *The God of Small Things*

The spiritual value assigned to forests and trees in Hindu epics contrasts sharply with the contemporary realities depicted in postcolonial fiction. In the *Ramayana*, when Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana enter their fourteen-year exile, they visit the ashram of Rishi Bharadvaja. The sage advises them to revere and worship the grand, green-leaved fig tree on the banks of the Yamuna to ensure the success of their journey.

This deep environmental respect is echoed in Puranic lore. For instance, a myth regarding the Goddess Parvati tells of her planting and nurturing an Ashoka sapling. When questioned by divine sages about the value of raising a tree rather than bearing human heirs, Parvati outlines an environmental hierarchy:

"One who digs a well where there is little water lives in heaven for as many years as there are drops of water in it. One large reservoir of water is worth ten wells. One son is like ten reservoirs and one tree is equal to ten sons (*dasa putra samo druma*)."

During the Puranic era, this ethos evolved into widespread community conservation practices, including wrapping sacred threads around trees and planting forests to gain spiritual merit. Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) draws directly on this literary lineage, exploring the consequences of deforestation, resource exploitation, and urbanization on local ecosystems, reminding readers of the fundamental interconnectedness of life.

Rivers hold an equally sacred position in Hindu life and human history, serving as the cradle for early agrarian settlements and civilizations. In traditional epics, rivers carry the power to purify and wash away human transgressions. For example, in the *Ramayana*, Sita prays to the River Yamuna, seeking safe passage and promising charitable offerings upon her peaceful return.

In contrast, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) presents a stark critique of the modern state of India's waterways, focusing on the Meenachal River in Ayemenem. Initially, the river is described as a vibrant ecosystem: warm, grey-green, and filled with fish, reflecting the trees and the moon.

The character Velutha, framed as a figure deeply attuned to nature, lives in harmony with this river. He crafts delicate objects from natural materials, catches fish over open fires, and sleeps under the open sky on the riverbanks when displaced from his home. The river serves as his natural sanctuary, especially when he faces false accusations and social betrayal.

However, when Rahel returns to Ayemenem years later, the river has deteriorated significantly. Roy describes a shrunken, damaged waterway that greets visitors with a "ghastly skull's smile". Even the monsoons fail to restore its depth:

"Despite the fact that it was June, and raining, the river was no more than a swollen drain now. A thin ribbon of thick water that lapped wearily at the mud banks on either side, sequinned with the occasional silver slant of a dead fish. It was choked with a succulent weed... [It was] a slow, sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea." (124)

Plastic bags drift across the choked surface, and the air hangs thick with the smell of sewage and pesticides purchased through international development loans. The fish suffer from disease, and the water has lost its traditional purity due to local neglect and systemic pollution. This depiction reflects a broader ecological crisis affecting waterways across the country.

Marine Biodiversity and Traditional Knowledge: *The Hungry Tide*

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) shifts the focus to the Sunderbans, a delicate mangrove ecosystem situated between the plains and the Bay of Bengal. Ghosh highlights how modern commercial fishing methods disrupt local biodiversity. The character Moyna voices community concerns over fine nylon nets used to harvest tiger prawn spawn, which inadvertently sweep up and destroy the eggs of all other native fish species. This narrative choice illustrates how industrial technologies can destabilize local biodiversity while pursuing short-term economic gains.

The novel also addresses the immediate impacts of climate change, which threatens endangered river dolphins and native fish populations, alongside a declining tiger population. The fragile ecosystem of Morichjapi Island serves as a warning about the long-term damage caused by human negligence.

Historically, India has maintained traditions of state-enforced wildlife and forest conservation. Over two millennia ago, Emperor Ashoka carved edicts onto rocks and pillars

prohibiting the destruction of forests and the killing of wild animals. Similarly, in 1730 AD, members of the Bishnoi community in Rajasthan sacrificed their lives by hugging Khejri trees to protect them from a royal harvesting order, eventually forcing the ruler to revoke his decree. Modern industrial societies often dismiss indigenous communities as backward or superstitious. Yet despite facing economic hardships and high illiteracy rates, these groups possess a deep, practical understanding of local ecosystems. Their traditional knowledge has long contributed to healthcare and medicine, but it is increasingly marginalized by the commercialization of natural resources. Current legal frameworks often fail to protect these communities or preserve their insights.

Conclusion

The environmental degradation seen today—driven by industrialization, urbanization, and fossil fuel consumption—has increased global temperatures and accelerated extreme weather events like floods and droughts. Addressing these systemic challenges requires synthesizing traditional ecological knowledge with modern conservation strategies. By analyzing contemporary Indian fiction through an ecocritical lens, we find that ancient traditions and modern narratives both emphasize the same fundamental truth: the long-term survival of humanity depends on protecting the natural world.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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