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Eco-Critical Perspectives in Contemporary Indian Literature: Environmental Consciousness and Sustainable Thought in the Works of Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, and Ruskin Bond

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Abstract

*Eco-criticism has developed as a dynamic interdisciplinary approach that examines the interaction between literary expression and ecological realities. In the context of contemporary Indian writing, environmental anxieties increasingly shape narrative imagination due to rising concerns over climate change, biodiversity loss, ecological displacement, and environmental injustice. This paper re-evaluates selected works of Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, and Ruskin Bond through an eco-critical framework to examine how literature fosters environmental consciousness and sustainable thought. Rather than presenting nature as a passive setting, these authors depict ecosystems as dynamic forces that shape cultural identities, economic structures, and ethical responsibilities. Through textual analysis of *The Hungry Tide* and *The God of Small Things*, along with Bond's Himalayan nature writings, the study highlights themes of ecological fragility, river and forest degradation, indigenous environmental knowledge, and climate vulnerability. The paper argues that contemporary Indian literature performs an educative function by translating scientific concerns into emotional and ethical awareness. Eco-critical readings reveal how literary discourse contributes to holistic life sciences by reinforcing the interconnectedness of humans, non-human life, and ecological systems. Thus, literature becomes a vital medium for sustainable imagination and environmental responsibility in the anthropogenic era.*

Keywords: Eco-criticism, Indian Writing in English, Environmental Humanities, Sustainability, Climate Literature, Ecological Ethics, Holistic Life Sciences

Introduction

The contemporary world is increasingly marked by environmental instability and ecological crisis. Climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, river pollution, and rapid urban expansion have disrupted the balance between human societies and natural ecosystems. These challenges extend beyond scientific concern and enter the realms of ethics, culture, and social responsibility. As environmental debates grow more urgent, literature has emerged as a meaningful medium for interpreting ecological change and shaping environmental awareness.

Eco-criticism, which developed as a formal field of study in the 1990s, examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment. It seeks to understand how literary texts represent nature and how such representations influence human attitudes toward ecological systems. By challenging anthropocentric perspectives, eco-criticism promotes an eco-centric vision that recognizes the intrinsic value of non-human life. Through this approach, literature is viewed not merely as artistic expression but as a form of environmental discourse. In the Indian context, ecological issues are closely linked with colonial histories of resource exploitation, post-independence developmental policies, and traditional ecological knowledge systems. Contemporary Indian literature increasingly reflects these tensions by addressing environmental degradation alongside social and political realities. Writers portray rivers, forests, wildlife, and climate systems as active forces that shape human lives and cultural identities.

This paper examines the eco-critical perspectives in the works of Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, and Ruskin Bond. Through different narrative styles, these authors explore themes such as climate vulnerability, river ecology, environmental justice, and harmonious coexistence with nature. Their works demonstrate that ecological degradation is not only a scientific problem but also a moral and socio-political issue deeply embedded in human experience.

By analyzing selected texts through an eco-critical lens, this study argues that contemporary Indian literature contributes significantly to environmental consciousness and sustainable thought.

In doing so, it highlights the important role of literature in supporting holistic understanding of life sciences and promoting responsible engagement with the natural world.

Eco-Criticism: Conceptual Foundations

Eco-criticism challenges anthropocentrism—the assumption that human interests dominate ecological value. Scholars such as Lawrence Buell (1995) argue that environmentally oriented texts foreground the presence of non-human nature as a significant narrative force. Similarly, Greg Garrard (2004) identifies recurring eco-critical themes such as wilderness, pollution, apocalypse, and dwelling.

The rise of the “environmental humanities” further integrates literature, ecology, ethics, and cultural studies. Within this framework, literature does not merely reflect environmental crisis but actively shapes ecological imagination. It fosters empathy toward non-human life and encourages sustainable thinking.

Holistic life sciences emphasize systemic interdependence among biological, climatic, and human communities. Eco-literature complements this perspective by illustrating how ecological disruption affects psychological, social, and cultural structures.

Climate Vulnerability in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

Set in the ecologically sensitive Sundarbans delta, *The Hungry Tide* foregrounds the instability of tidal landscapes threatened by rising sea levels. Ghosh portrays the region as a liminal space where land and water constantly reshape human habitation.

Nature in the novel is neither romanticized nor subdued; it is unpredictable and powerful. Cyclones and tidal surges symbolize climate volatility. The narrative also addresses environmental displacement, particularly through historical references to the Morichjhapi incident, illustrating how marginalized communities suffer disproportionately during ecological crises.

Importantly, Ghosh integrates scientific inquiry through the character of Piya, a cetologist studying river dolphins. This blending of empirical research and local ecological knowledge reflects an interdisciplinary model aligned with holistic life sciences. The novel critiques state-led development projects that neglect environmental sustainability, positioning ecological justice at the center of its narrative.

River Ecology and Environmental Decay in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Roy's novel situates environmental degradation within intimate social spaces. The Meenachal River functions as both literal ecosystem and symbolic axis. Once vibrant and life-giving, the river gradually deteriorates due to pollution and neglect.

This environmental decline parallels the erosion of moral and social values within the community. Roy's descriptive passages emphasize sensory transformation—from lush green abundance to contaminated stagnation—thereby dramatizing ecological decay.

Eco-critically, the novel interrogates the consequences of unchecked modernization. Consumerism and industrial expansion disrupt traditional ecological rhythms. Roy subtly exposes how environmental exploitation is intertwined with caste oppression and political injustice, reinforcing the notion that ecological sustainability cannot be separated from social equity.

Ecological Harmony in Ruskin Bond's Nature Writing

In contrast to the ecological crisis narratives of Ghosh and Roy, Ruskin Bond's works emphasize environmental intimacy and affection. His Himalayan settings foreground biodiversity, seasonal change, and coexistence between humans and non-human life.

Bond's essays and short stories cultivate ecological sensitivity through observation and memory. Rather than depicting catastrophe, he encourages mindful dwelling within nature. His narratives highlight traditional lifestyles that respect ecological balance.

From an eco-critical standpoint, Bond's writing promotes eco-centric ethics by portraying nature as a companion rather than a commodity. His gentle storytelling fosters emotional engagement, which is essential for sustainable environmental behaviour.

Comparative Analysis

A comparative reading reveals distinct yet complementary eco-critical orientations:

- Ghosh emphasizes climate crisis and environmental displacement.
- Roy critiques environmental politics and river degradation.
- Bond celebrates ecological harmony and biodiversity awareness.

Together, these writers expand environmental discourse beyond scientific statistics into cultural consciousness. They demonstrate that ecological crises are intertwined with ethics, identity, and justice.

Literature as Ecological Pedagogy

Literary narratives translate abstract ecological data into lived human experience. By fostering empathy, literature enhances environmental education. Scholars such as Ursula Heise (2008) argue that storytelling plays a crucial role in developing global ecological awareness.

Eco-literature functions as a subtle yet powerful form of activism. It inspires sustainable attitudes by cultivating ecological imagination. When readers emotionally connect with endangered rivers or fragile forests, environmental responsibility becomes personal rather than theoretical.

Interdisciplinary Significance for Holistic Life Sciences

Holistic life sciences stress interdependence among organisms, ecosystems, and climatic processes. Eco-critical literature reinforces this interconnected worldview by dramatizing how environmental degradation affects human health, migration, and cultural continuity.

By bridging environmental science and humanistic inquiry, eco-criticism fosters integrative perspectives essential for sustainable development. Literature thus becomes a partner to scientific research in addressing ecological crisis.

Conclusion

Eco-critical perspectives in contemporary Indian literature reveal an evolving environmental consciousness that transcends disciplinary boundaries. Through the climate-sensitive narrative of Amitav Ghosh, the politically charged ecological imagery of Arundhati Roy, and the harmonious environmental vision of Ruskin Bond, literature emerges as a vital site for ecological reflection.

These texts challenge anthropocentric assumptions and promote ethical engagement with the natural world. By integrating environmental awareness with cultural critique, contemporary Indian literature contributes meaningfully to holistic life sciences.

In an era marked by ecological uncertainty, literary imagination offers not only critique but also hope—encouraging sustainable thought and collective environmental responsibility.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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