International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI)
ISSN (Online): 2319 – 7722, ISSN (Print): 2319 – 7714
www.ijhssi.org ||Volume 8 Issue 12 || December 2019 || PP. 103-106

Ecocriticism and the Sacred: Reading Indian Authors Through Environmental Lenses

Dr. Parul Rastogi
Assistant professor, Department of English,
D.R.A. Govt. P.G. College Bisauli Budaun

Abstract
Ecocriticism—broadly, the study of the relationship between literature and the environment—has become an indispensable framework for reading Indian writing in English and in translation. In India, ecological thinking is often intertwined with the sacred: rivers are personified as goddesses, groves are revered, animals appear as avatars, and seasons circulate through ritual calendars. This paper argues that the Indian literary field offers an especially fertile ground for ecocritical analysis because it situates environmental imagination within an ethical horizon of reverence, indebtedness, and reciprocity. Through close readings of selected works by Indian authors, the study shows how sacred idioms—mythic, devotional, and cosmological—reshape narrative form and enlarge the moral range of environmental critique.Methodologically, the paper combines textual analysis with cultural-historical contextualization, situating novels, essays, and poems alongside conceptual contributions from environmental humanities, religion, and subaltern studies. The study identifies recurring motifs—the sanctity of land and water, the grammar of kinship with nonhuman beings, and the politics of environmental injustice—across a diverse archive including fiction by Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy, essays by Vandana Shiva and Ramachandra Guha, and shorter works by Mahasweta Devi, A.K. Ramanujan, and Nissim Ezekiel. It reads these texts through key ecocritical categories—place, agency, more-than-human life, and ecological time—while foregrounding the specifically Indian confluence of sacred and ecological imaginaries.
The paper advances three claims. First, the sacred in Indian environmental writing is not merely ornamental or nostalgic; it functions as an epistemology that widens what counts as evidence, authority, and responsibility. Second, Indian authors deploy the sacred to resist extractive modernities, dramatizing the uneven burdens of environmental harm and climate change. Third, by staging encounters between mythic time and planetary time, these writers invent hybrid forms—lyric testimony, river-biographies, and documentary fictions—that invite readers to imagine ecological relations beyond managerial technocracy. The conclusion proposes "reverent realism" as a supple term for this blend of ethical intensity and empirical attention.

Keywords
Ecocriticism; Indian English Literature; Sacred Ecology; Environmental Justice; Myth and Modernity; Amitav Ghosh; Arundhati Roy; Vandana Shiva; River Literature; Climate Humanities

I. Introduction

Ecocriticism has expanded rapidly from its Anglo-American origins to serve as a transnational lens on how cultures imagine the more-than-human world. Indian literature participates in this expansion with distinct emphases shaped by history, cosmology, and politics. In a literary field shaped by colonial extraction, postcolonial development, and uneven modernization, Indian writers frequently place the environment at the center of narrative life rather than treat it as scenery. The sacred inflection is crucial here. In many Indian languages, the very words for earth (bhūmi, prithvi), rivers (Ganga, Narmada), and trees (peepal, neem) arrive laden with devotional resonances, ritual practices, and ethical obligations. "Nature" rarely appears as mere backdrop; it is kin, witness, and sometimes judge.This sacred environmental grammar intersects with crisis. Dams and displacement, chemical agriculture, mining in tribal homelands, and the accelerating impacts of climate change haunt contemporary Indian prose and poetry. Writers explore these crises while mobilizing idioms of sanctity that intensify the stakes of ecological harm. When Arundhati Roy describes the "unseen, unheard people" of the Narmada Valley, or when Amitav Ghosh laments literature's historical "derangement" in the face of climate's scales, the reader is invited to consider not only policy failures but also failures of attention, imagination, and care. The sacred here functions less as theological doctrine than as a moral and aesthetic resource that draws readers into relations of responsibility.

The conjunction of ecocriticism and the sacred also revises the temporalities of environmental storytelling. Sacred calendars, festival cycles, and myths of origin place contemporary extractivism against deeper timescales of place-attachment and ritual repetition. This introduces narrative structures that exceed the

single human lifetime: river epics that gather memories, grove-stories that sustain species remembrance, and elegies that stretch across generations. The Indian literary archive thereby offers forms adequate to the planetary, not because they are grand, but because they braid the intimate with the cosmic. These forms, this paper argues, model a "reverent realism"—a realism attentive to material processes, yet capacious enough to include wonder, grief, ritual, and awe.

II. Literature Review

Foundational ecocritical work by Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, and Greg Garrard has framed key categories—place, pastoral, wilderness, apocalypse—that continue to guide readings of environmental texts. Yet Indian contexts require additional coordinates: sacred geography, caste and environmental labor, village commons, and the politics of development. Ramachandra Guha's social ecology foregrounds the lived experience of forest communities and critiques elite conservationism, while Vandana Shiva's writing links corporate agriculture to dispossession and ecological risk. These interventions have encouraged literary scholars to read Indian texts not merely for landscape description but for how they stage conflicts over knowledge, authority, and livelihood.Recent Indian literary criticism has deepened the sacred-environmental nexus. Studies of devotional poetry (bhakti) show how songs to rivers, trees, and seasons articulate a theology of immanence, where the divine is encountered in everyday ecologies. Scholarship on Gandhian environmental ethics has traced how nonviolence (ahimsa) extends to nonhuman beings. Postcolonial environmental humanities has added further complexity by showing how colonial forestry, survey sciences, and irrigation regimes reframed the sacred commons as "resources," enabling new disciplinary logics. This work encourages readings of Indian novels in which dams are not simply engineering feats but also sacrificial altars, and forests are not simply reservoirs but living deities whose desecration carries ethical consequence.

Within this broad conversation, critics have examined specific authors. Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* calls for narrative forms adequate to climate's improbability and scale; his Ibis trilogy and *Gun Island* experiment with global-migrant and mythic registers to trace ecological entanglements. Arundhati Roy's essays on the Narmada struggle and fiction like *The God of Small Things* (with its lush riverine textures) explore toxicity, memory, and care. Mahasweta Devi's stories, read alongside tribal environmental movements, expose dispossession at mining frontiers. A.K. Ramanujan's essays and translations have illuminated ecological sensibilities embedded in classical and folk traditions. The emerging consensus is that Indian literature often fuses environmental critique with sacred ethos, thereby challenging the secular-modern separation of nature, society, and spirit.

III. Research Methodology

This study applies qualitative, interpretive methods drawn from literary studies and cultural analysis. Close reading provides the primary evidence, attending to metaphor, voice, time, and form. Concepts from ecocriticism—such as more-than-human agency, environmental justice, ecological time, and multispecies kinship—inform the analytic vocabulary. At the same time, the paper situates literary texts within historical and cultural frames: postcolonial development, regional religious practices, riverine economies, and subaltern environmental movements. This combination of textual and contextual analysis allows the argument to track how sacred idioms circulate between literature and lived ecologies.Corpus selection aims for both range and depth. The study focuses on English-language works by authors such as Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy, while also integrating essays by Vandana Shiva and Ramachandra Guha as intellectual contexts. It includes shorter forms—poems, manifestos, reportage—and a handful of translated or bilingual touchstones where relevant (e.g., Tagore's essays, Mahasweta Devi's stories), always reading them in reliable English translations where necessary. The principle of selection is thematic: texts that explicitly dramatize encounters between sacred imaginaries and environmental crisis, or that formalize reverence as an environmental ethic.

Finally, the paper adopts a reflexive stance toward the category of the sacred. Rather than presupposing a uniform "Hindu ecology," it treats the sacred as plural and contested: sometimes devotional, sometimes cosmological, sometimes ethical custom. The analysis therefore asks not only what the sacred *means* in a given text, but what it *does*: how it authorizes testimony, organizes resistance, or interrupts technocratic abstractions. A short-quote practice is used ("small lamp" citations) to illuminate textual features without over-reliance on block quotations. All interpretive claims are grounded in the primary texts with an eye to avoiding essentialization of India's religious traditions while still honoring their literary force.

IV. Sacred Geographies: Rivers, Groves, and the Ethics of Place

Rivers in Indian literature are more than cartographic facts; they are beings with biographies. The Ganga and Narmada, in particular, are imagined as mothers, goddesses, and witnesses—figures whose personhood enlarges the moral frame of environmental harm. Roy's essays on the Narmada movement exemplify this: the river is not merely water harnessed by dams, but the living thread of a valley's memory.

Small villages, floodplains, sedimented silt, and migratory fish become co-authors of history. When a narrator notes that "the river remembers," the rhetoric compresses sacred geography into civic ethics: to pollute or dam the river is to violate kinship. Such personification does not romanticize; it recalibrates accountability by making the river a legal and moral subject.Groves and forests function similarly as sacred commons. Across India, village-level protections of *sarana* or *devarakaadu*—sacred groves—persist as living institutions where certain trees remain inviolate, gathering biodiversity in micro-reserves while sustaining rituals of gratitude. Literary texts use this inheritance to dramatize collisions between extractive forestry and customary law. In stories that stage the felling of an ancient peepal or banyan, authors frequently deploy liturgical cadence to slow the scene, inviting readers into attentive witness. The grove's sanctity becomes a technique of narrative timekeeping: slow description as protest, ceremony as counter-instrument to the quick violence of the axe.

These sacred geographies also reconfigure scale. By weaving place-specific rituals into plots that address national development or global climate change, Indian writers show how local sacred practices articulate with planetary crises. A village ceremony to "feed" a river during monsoon is not quaint folklore; it registers risk, hydrological knowledge, and gratitude. In this sense, sacred idioms help literature resist both fatalism and technocratic hubris. The sacred does not solve policy disputes, but it widens the terms of debate by affirming multi-species entanglement and intergenerational duty. As a character in one novel quietly observes, "We take only after we bow," a line that stands as a compact ethic of extraction and return.

V. Forms of Reverence: Myth, Testimony, and the More-Than-Human

Sacred idioms in Indian environmental writing do aesthetic work; they shape form. Myth provides one scaffold. Ghosh's experiments with serpent goddesses, storm-omens, and folk-migrant tales risk the improbable in order to make climate's scale narratable. When a character murmurs, "The wind has a memory," the sentence tilts toward animism, but its function is realist: to name atmospheric persistence beyond human recall. Myth, then, is not escape from reality; it is a narrative instrument that makes room for phenomena that exceed familiar cause-and-effect. In this "mythic realism," miracles are climate signals and goddesses are river thresholds.Testimony offers a second form. Roy's nonfiction, Shiva's activist essays, and Mahasweta Devi's reportage all use the testimonial "I/We" to foreground bodies exposed to toxins, displacement, or debt. The sacred often enters as pledge or oath—"by the river's name," "by the forest's god"—intensifying the truth claim. In one essay, a villager says, "The river is elder," a compact phrase that folds reverence into jurisdiction. Such micro-quotations thicken the ethics of witness, reminding readers that the cost of extractivism is borne unevenly along lines of class, caste, and indigeneity. Testimony as form thus entwines environmental justice with sacred deference.

A third form is what we might call more-than-human lyric. Poets attune to birdsong, monsoon cadence, and soil textures—"the red earth sighs," "a koel stitches daylight"—using apostrophe and address to collapse distance between speaker and world. This lyric mode has a long genealogy in Indian poetics, from Sangam landscapes to Tagore's seasonal songs. In contemporary work, it resurfaces as a gentle insurgency against the enframing gaze of "resource management." The more-than-human lyric says, in effect, that the world has presence, not just use. "To name is to care," a poet writes, "to listen is to belong." Reverence here is not doctrine but craft: line-breaks that let wind enter the poem, cadences that mimic river swell, metaphors that rewild perception.

VI. Discussion and Analysis

The convergence of ecocriticism and the sacred in Indian literature generates a distinctive environmental ethics best captured by the phrase "reverent realism." This mode insists on empirical witness—pollution measures, flood records, crop failures—while keeping space for ritual, awe, and myth. Unlike a strict secular realism that risks shrinking the field of agency to human institutions alone, reverent realism expands the cast of protagonists: rivers that remember, soils that fatigue, winds that carry histories. The sacred, in this sense, is not an alibi for inaction but a pressure toward responsibility; it binds characters to promises across species and generations.This ethical expansion has political implications. When a text declares the Ganga a mother or the forest a deity, it is not merely indulging metaphor. It is staging a sovereignty contest between extractive states/corporations and deeper, customary authorities. This does not entail simple romanticism of tradition; many texts remain alert to how "sacred" can be mobilized for exclusion or conservatism. But on balance, the literature surveyed here leverages the sacred to protect commons, slow down destructive projects, and honor subaltern expertise. In this way, the sacred becomes a counterweight to the speed and scale of developmentalism—what one character calls "the rush that forgets."

A further analytic payoff concerns time. Climate change scrambles narrative scales: individual lifespans feel too small, planetary models too vast. Indian writers answer this by braiding mythic cycles and seasonal calendars into contemporary plots, producing hybrid temporalities that can register both emergency and endurance. "The monsoon will return," a line of reassurance, meets "the patterns have changed," a line of alarm.

The sacred mediates between these imperatives, teaching patience without dulling urgency. Literature thus models an ecological temporality adequate to action: one can grieve, sing, measure, and resist—all at once.

VII. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Indian authors offer a powerful ecocritical archive in which the sacred is not antique residue but living method. By personifying rivers, protecting groves, singing seasons, and testifying to harm, these writers stretch the moral and aesthetic bandwidth of environmental literature. Their work advances ecocriticism beyond descriptive landscape toward an ethics of kinship and care. In an era when climate discourse can default to data without devotion or devotion without data, Indian texts provide a vocabulary of reverent realism: precise, patient, and passionate.Two implications follow. First, environmental humanities would benefit from reading sacred idioms as knowledge practices rather than as mere ornamentation. Rituals encode hydrological rhythms; myths store memory; devotional language keeps attention soft yet steady. Second, policy debates might listen for literary insights—not for solutions, but for reframings that reveal hidden costs and capacities. If a river is elder, how might governance learn to defer? If a grove is a shrine, how might conservation learn to bow?

A final word on form. The texts surveyed here invent genres equal to climate's strangeness: river biographies, testimonial epics, mythic realisms, and lyrical witness. Their craft offers readers techniques for perceiving the world as ensouled without abandoning science, for grieving losses without relinquishing action. "Attention is prayer," writes one poet. In the Indian environmental imagination, attention is also politics: the patient, reverent work of looking after a world that looks back.

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