



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

English Literature

ECOFEMINIST VOICES IN INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION: ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS AND THE LITERARY IMAGINATION OF WOMEN NOVELISTS.

KEY WORDS: Ecofeminism; Indian English Fiction; Women Novelists; Environment and Gender; Literary Ecology; Arundhati Roy; Anita Desai

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines ecofeminist perspectives in Indian English fiction through a close reading of *The God of Small Things* and *Fire on the Mountain*. Both novels foreground the interconnected oppression of women and nature, situating ecological degradation alongside patriarchal dominance within specific socio-cultural contexts. Arundhati Roy's narrative explores the fragile ecosystem of Kerala, where environmental destruction mirrors the silencing and marginalization of female voices, particularly through caste, gender, and familial hierarchies. Nature functions as a living presence, responding to human violence and moral decay. In contrast, Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* presents a stark, minimalist landscape in Kasauli, using the hill environment to reflect emotional isolation, suppressed trauma, and the consequences of human intrusion into natural spaces. The paper argues that both authors employ landscape not as passive background but as an active narrative force shaping female consciousness and resistance. Through ecofeminist literary analysis, the study highlights how women's bodies, emotions, and identities are symbolically aligned with ecological vulnerability and resilience. By comparing these works, the paper contributes to understanding how Indian women novelists articulate environmental ethics, gendered suffering, and alternative modes of coexistence between humans and nature.

INTRODUCTION

Ecofeminism has emerged as a key critical framework in Indian English literature for examining the interconnected domination of women and nature. Drawing on feminist and environmental thought, it critiques patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist systems that legitimize ecological exploitation alongside women's marginalization. In the Indian context, ecofeminist inquiry is closely linked to postcolonial realities, where environmental degradation intersects with histories of colonial extraction, uneven development, and social hierarchies. Indian women's writing often moves beyond essentialist woman-nature binaries to articulate context-specific ecological consciousness shaped by caste, class, and gender (Kaur 42-45). Environmental concerns occupy a central place in postcolonial Indian narratives, reflecting experiences of deforestation, river pollution, displacement, and ecological loss. Literature functions as a space where these crises are ethically examined, translating environmental damage into lived human experience (Radhakrishnan 11-13). Such narratives frequently show that women bear disproportionate social and emotional costs of ecological decline (Chanda 33-34). *The God of Small Things* and *Fire on the Mountain* are selected for their sustained engagement with environment as a narrative and ethical force. Roy situates ecological damage within caste and gender hierarchies in Kerala, while Desai uses the fragile Kasauli landscape to reflect female isolation and patriarchal control (Saha 101-04 Parmar 67-70). This paper examines how both novels construct nature as an active presence to critique domination and articulate ecofeminist ethics grounded in care, memory, and resistance.

Theoretical Framework And Review Of Related Literature

Ecofeminism provides a critical framework for examining the interconnected domination of women and nature, foregrounding how patriarchal and anthropocentric ideologies legitimize ecological exploitation and gendered oppression. Within literary studies, ecofeminism extends ecocritical inquiry by emphasizing that environmental crises are inseparable from social hierarchies and cultural power structures. Scholars argue that literature functions as a vital ethical space where environmental damage is narrated through lived, gendered experiences, making visible forms of domination that often remain normalized (Radhakrishnan 11-13). In the Indian context, ecofeminist theory gains further significance due to the legacies of colonial extraction, uneven development, and entrenched caste and gender hierarchies that shape access to natural resources.

Critical debates on ecofeminism in Indian English fiction highlight a shift away from essentialist associations between women and nature toward culturally specific, postcolonial articulations of ecological consciousness. Chanda notes that Indian women writers employ ecofeminism to interrogate social injustice, environmental degradation, and gendered vulnerability within localized settings (33-34). Kaur's postcolonial ecofeminist intervention is particularly influential, as it demonstrates how Indian women's writing resists binary thinking and articulates ecological ethics grounded in social reality rather than universal abstractions (42-45). A substantial body of research focuses on *The God of Small Things*, reading it as a foundational ecofeminist text in Indian English fiction. Critics argue that Roy's depiction of rivers, landscapes, and non-human life exposes the intersections of caste violence, gender oppression, and environmental degradation (Saha 101-04). Shukla and Bharati further observe that Roy integrates postcolonialism, ecocriticism, and feminism to challenge dominant human-centered worldviews (34-36).

Research on *Fire on the Mountain* highlights Desai's symbolic use of landscape, silence, and withdrawal. Studies note that the fragile hill ecology mirrors female isolation and psychological suppression, offering a quieter yet powerful ecofeminist critique (Krishna and Jha 105-07; Parmar 67-70).

Despite extensive individual studies, comparative ecofeminist analyses of Roy and Desai remain limited. The present study addresses this gap by integrating theory and criticism to examine how contrasting ecological settings and narrative strategies articulate gendered environmental ethics within Indian English fiction.

Nature, Gender, And Power In *The God Of Small Things*

The God of Small Things offers a nuanced ecofeminist vision in which Kerala's landscape and river ecology are inseparable from social power structures. Roy presents rivers, monsoons, and non-human life as central to memory and moral consciousness, with the polluted Meenachal River symbolizing ecological decline produced by social injustice and neglect. The damaged landscape reflects the effects of postcolonial modernity and entrenched hierarchies.

Nature functions as a witness to caste oppression, gendered violence, and social transgression. The river bears testimony to Ammu and Velutha's forbidden relationship and Velutha's death, aligning environmental deterioration with the silencing of marginalized voices (Saha 101-04). Female

bodies, particularly Ammu's, are closely linked to environmental vulnerability, as her transgression of caste and gender norms parallels ecological pollution and control. Through non-linear narration and active natural imagery, Roy subverts anthropocentric authority and articulates an ecofeminist ethic that challenges caste, patriarchy, and environmental exploitation.

Landscape, Isolation, And Female Consciousness In *Fire On The Mountain*

Fire on the Mountain presents a restrained ecofeminist vision in which the Kasauli hills operate as both symbolic and psychological space. The barren, austere landscape reflects Nanda Kaul's emotional withdrawal from patriarchal social structures, rejecting romanticized notions of nature and foregrounding fragility and exhaustion (Krishna and Jha 105–07). Environmental austerity mirrors her desire for silence and erasure, suggesting that isolation functions as a response to long-term domination rather than empowerment (Parmar 67–70).

Silence and intrusion are central to the novel's ecofeminist critique. The violent death of Ila Das disrupts the fragile ecological and emotional equilibrium, revealing that patriarchal aggression penetrates even secluded natural spaces (Krishna and Jha 108–09). Desai thus portrays nature as a silent mirror to women's vulnerability and psychological damage, expanding ecofeminist discourse through themes of detachment, neglect, and emotional fragility.

Comparative Analysis

A comparative ecofeminist reading of *The God of Small Things* and *Fire on the Mountain* reveals how both novels construct nature as an active narrative force that shapes female consciousness and exposes interlocking systems of domination. In Arundhati Roy's novel, the natural world is dynamic, intrusive, and excessive. Rivers, insects, monsoons, and vegetation repeatedly interrupt human action, asserting non-human agency and bearing ethical witness to caste oppression, gendered violence, and social exclusion. Nature responds to injustice through imagery of decay, pollution, and disruption, directly challenging anthropocentric hierarchies that treat the environment as a controllable resource. In contrast, Anita Desai's narrative strategy relies on stillness, silence, and restraint. In *Fire on the Mountain*, landscape communicates through absence rather than abundance, with the austere Kasauli hills reflecting emotional withdrawal and psychological exhaustion. Despite these stylistic differences, both novels refuse to position nature as a passive backdrop, instead investing it with ethical and emotional significance.

The ecological settings of the two novels underscore this contrast. Roy's Kerala landscape is lush, fertile, and sensorially rich, yet its apparent abundance is steadily undermined by pollution, neglect, and human cruelty. The deteriorating river and decaying environment parallel the moral collapse of social institutions that regulate caste and gender, revealing how ecological destruction accompanies social injustice (Saha 101–04). Desai's Kasauli hills, by contrast, are barren and stripped of vitality, mirroring the long-term repression and emotional depletion experienced by the protagonist. The scarcity and fragility of the landscape suggest that domination may manifest not only through excess and exploitation but also through neglect, abandonment, and silence (Parmar 67–70).

Despite these differences in setting and tone, both novels articulate shared ecofeminist concerns. Each exposes how patriarchal authority governs both female bodies and ecological spaces through surveillance, regulation, and exclusion. Women in both narratives bear disproportionate emotional, psychological, and social costs of environmental and institutional violence, while nature absorbs, reflects, and memorializes this suffering. However, the forms of resilience

depicted diverge significantly. Roy's female characters engage in acts of transgression and defiance that openly challenge social norms, aligning resistance with ecological disruption. Desai's protagonist, by contrast, embodies endurance through withdrawal and refusal, revealing how silence itself can register resistance within conditions of sustained domination.

The novels also differ markedly in narrative strategy and thematic emphasis. Roy employs a fragmented, non-linear, and politically charged narrative that foregrounds ecological interdependence and collective injustice. Desai adopts minimalism and narrative restraint, emphasizing psychological interiority and emotional vulnerability. Together, these contrasting approaches enrich ecofeminist discourse by demonstrating that environmental ethics in Indian English fiction can be articulated through both voice and silence, abundance and absence, resistance and retreat. By placing Roy and Desai in discussion, the comparative analysis highlights the diversity of ecofeminist expression, affirming that ecological and gendered critique can operate through multiple narrative forms while addressing shared structures of domination.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of *The God of Small Things* and *Fire on the Mountain* underscores the significant contribution of Indian women novelists to the development of ecofeminist discourse within Indian English literature. Through distinct narrative styles and ecological settings, Arundhati Roy and Anita Desai foreground the interconnectedness of gender, environment, and power, thereby challenging dominant patriarchal and anthropocentric frameworks. Their works demonstrate that ecofeminism in the Indian context is neither monolithic nor merely symbolic but deeply rooted in lived social and ecological realities shaped by caste, class, and historical inequalities.

Both novels articulate environmental ethics by positioning nature as an ethically charged presence rather than a neutral backdrop. Roy's narrative advances an ecological ethic grounded in interdependence, memory, and resistance, where environmental degradation is inseparable from social injustice. The polluted river and decaying landscape serve as moral indictments of institutionalized violence and exclusion. Desai's work, by contrast, articulates an ethic of restraint and care through silence and austerity, revealing how neglect and emotional depletion can be as damaging as overt exploitation. Together, these texts expand literary ecofeminism by illustrating multiple ethical responses to ecological crisis, ranging from active resistance to quiet withdrawal.

The novels also illuminate gendered experiences of ecological crisis in Indian society. Women characters in both texts bear disproportionate emotional, bodily, and psychological burdens resulting from environmental and social disruption. In Roy's novel, women's suffering is linked to caste hierarchies and environmental decay, while in Desai's work, female isolation and vulnerability reflect long-term patriarchal control. These representations align with ecofeminist arguments that environmental degradation intensifies existing gender inequalities, particularly in postcolonial contexts. By centering women's perspectives, Roy and Desai reveal how ecological crises are lived and experienced unevenly, reinforcing the necessity of gender-sensitive environmental ethics.

Overall, the discussion affirms that Indian women novelists play a crucial role in shaping ecofeminist literary discourse by integrating environmental concerns with feminist critique. Their narratives not only expose structures of domination but also imagine alternative modes grounded in care, resilience, and ethical responsibility toward both human and non-human life.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined ecofeminist representations in *The God of Small Things* and *Fire on the Mountain* to demonstrate how Indian English fiction articulates the interconnected domination of women and nature. The analysis reveals that both novels construct the environment as an active narrative presence that reflects and responds to structures of caste hierarchy, patriarchy, and social control. While Roy foregrounds ecological abundance disrupted by violence and neglect, Desai emphasizes austerity and silence as markers of long-term psychological and environmental damage. Together, these contrasting representations highlight the adaptability of ecofeminist theory in capturing diverse ecological and gendered experiences within postcolonial Indian contexts.

The theoretical implications of this study lie in its integration of ecofeminism with postcolonial literary analysis. By reading landscape, narrative form, and female consciousness as interconnected, the paper extends ecofeminist criticism beyond symbolic associations to emphasize material and cultural specificity. The findings reaffirm that ecofeminism in Indian English literature resists essentialist notions of woman-nature harmony and instead foregrounds power, vulnerability, and ethical responsibility. This approach contributes to broader ecofeminist debates by demonstrating how literature mediates environmental ethics through culturally embedded narratives rather than universal frameworks.

The significance of this research for ecofeminist literary studies rests in its comparative focus. By placing Roy and Desai in discussion, the study illustrates how women novelists employ divergent narrative strategies—resistance and withdrawal, voice and silence—to critique ecological and gendered oppression. Such comparative analysis enriches understanding of ecofeminist aesthetics and underscores the importance of literary form in shaping environmental meaning.

Finally, the study opens avenues for future research on environment and gender in Indian fiction. Further research may extend ecofeminist analysis to other women writers, regional literatures, and contemporary narratives addressing climate change, displacement, and sustainability. Comparative studies across genres and cultural contexts can deepen understanding of how literature continues to engage with evolving ecological crises and gendered experiences in India.

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