

Gender, Nature, and Equity: An Ecofeminist Approach to Justice and Sustainability in Literary Criticism

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Abstract:

The rising environmental issues and social injustices of our day necessitate an integrated approach to justice and sustainability. This research analyzes literary works through an ecofeminist perspective, illustrating how narratives about the environment and gender relate to larger discourses on equality. The study responds to the urgent appeal for inclusive development that embraces the perspectives of disadvantaged people, notably women and indigenous populations impacted by environmental degradation. Using qualitative, interpretative research, the study builds on ecofeminist paradigms established by authors such as Vandana Shiva and Karen J. Warren. Close reading and theme analysis are used to study Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. These works, drawn from many cultural and chronological settings, shed light on the gendered elements of environmental exploitation, resistance, and agency. The approach recognizes repeating themes of dualism, exploitation, and interdependence, presenting a critique of hierarchies that divide people from nature and men from women. This study's significance lies in its contribution to current concerns about environmental justice and gender equity. It demonstrates how literary tales disrupt exploitative ideologies and promote linked worldviews. By emphasizing the importance of cultural narratives in generating environmental consciousness, this study suggests a comprehensive approach to sustainability that goes beyond academic critique. The findings are intended to inspire policy, education, and action, highlighting ecofeminism as a critical approach for creating a just and sustainable future.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Environmental Ethics, Gendered Agency, Marginalized Voices.

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, the intensifying concern of environmental destruction and social injustice has led to a transdisciplinary turn that merges gender, environment and justice (Temper, Del Bene, & Martinez-Alier, 2015). Eco-feminism, an analytic lens developed by theorists including Vandana Shiva and Karen J. Warren, interrogates the intersection of environmental degradation and gender-based violence (Vangeli, 2023). If you take this approach, you see how patriarchal systems create not only ecological destruction, but also the subjugation of women.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) serve as poignant literary ruminations on such themes (Kamble, 2023). Roy's novel explores the lives of marginalized women in her home state of Kerala, India, and how the headwinds of social caste and

environmental destruction work in tandem to silence them (Govinda & Poornima, 2019). The story speaks of different kinds of inequities, which is outgrowing local and national realities and finds itself in the global landscape.

Similarly, Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is set in the ecologically unique region of the Sundarbans, and follows the struggles of the region's indigenous communities, especially women, to survive the constant threats of environmental destruction and dispossession. The novel challenges the author's critical thinking about what it is going to take to make the relationship between the human world and natural world better.

The two novels provide profound understandings of resistance and agency in the face of environmental injustice by pursuing a focus less conventional to marginalized women, indigenous communities. With eco-feminism, they both illustrate that the oppression of women and the nature are two aspects of a single system but also minimize the power, and this is what life knows.

This research considers how these narratives illuminate power structures, hierarchies and ecological destruction, part of the broader conversation within ecofeminism. Building on their storytelling, Roy and Ghosh complete the picture to signify resilience and agency in the lived experiences of marginalized communities against environmental injustice.

2. Literature Review

The intersection of ecology and feminism has been a central theme in literary criticism for several decades. Ecofeminism, as articulated by scholars such as Vandana Shiva (1989) and Karen J. Warren (2000), critiques the dualistic hierarchies that link the subjugation of women with the exploitation of nature. Shiva, in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (1989), argues that Western developmental models often marginalize women and indigenous communities, viewing them as obstacles to economic progress rather than as stewards of sustainable environmental practices. Similarly, Warren's *Ecofeminist Philosophy* (2000) highlights the conceptual framework that associates women with nature and men with culture, reinforcing patriarchal structures that legitimize domination over both.

Ecocriticism of feminism as an intersection theme in literary criticism is fields for several decades (Murphy, 1995). Ecofeminism, following influential thinkers like Vandana Shiva in 1989, and Karen J. Warren in 2000, critiques dualistic hierarchies that connect the domination of women with the domination of nature. In *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (1989), Shiva notes that Western developmentalism tends to exclude women and indigenous peoples from developmental paradigms, treating both as impediments to economic growth rather than custodians of sustainable environmental management (Shiva, 2016). Warren's *Ecofeminist Philosophy* (2000) reminds us that there is a conceptual structure that equates women with nature and men with culture, thus contributing to patriarchal relations that continued to justify both domination over women and nature (Hunnicut, 2019).

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is a rare text, which has been read through multiple feminist and postcolonial lenses, but its ecofeminist dimensions have only been cursorily scooped in (Kroon, 2021). Researchers like Chitra Sankaran (2012) and Upamanyu Mukherjee (2015) analysed

The God of Small Things as a critique of caste, gender, and colonial history, but its ecological symbolism, particularly regarding the Ayemenem River, has only recently gained attention in ecofeminist readings. In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) the river, teacher of life and decay, becomes symbol for the oppression of marginalized women like Ammu, whose agency is constrained by societal and ecological degradation (Tizzoni, 2018).

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) has drawn considerable ecological and postcolonial criticism (Fletcher, 2011). In his analysis of the novel, Rob Nixon (2011) highlights the ways in which the novel represents the plight of the disenfranchised in environmental struggles, describing how the Morichjhāpi massacre is central to the novel. Other scholars, such as Rini Bhattacharya Mehta (2017), have explored the novel's representation of indigenous ecological knowledge and the sometimes-conflicting relationship between conservationist policies and local ways of making a living. Ghosh's nuanced treatment of environmental justice aligns with ecofeminist arguments that stress the importance of intersectionality in ecological discourse.

This literature review establishes the critical foundation for the study's analysis of gendered ecological narratives. By synthesizing feminist environmental criticism with literary interpretations of Roy and Ghosh's works, this research contributes to the broader discourse on ecofeminism and environmental justice in contemporary South Asian literature.

3. Theoretical Framework: Ecofeminism and Literature

Ecofeminism critiques the colonial capitalist patriarchal world system for the oppression of women and nature, claiming that the two are correlated (Tizzoni, 2018; Shoba & Surapet, 2012). Vandana Shiva criticizes contemporary development schemes for their blatant neglect towards Nature and their single-minded chasing of profits, which severely exploits women and indigenous people. Like them, Karen J. Warren analyzes the systemic hierarchies of man over woman and nature over culture and how these dualistic systems aid in the exploitation of women and nature as well (Warren, 2000).

The aforementioned theoretical perspectives affect the analysis of *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh, both exhibiting ecological and gender-based oppression. In the case of Roy's novel, it illustrates the various ways that caste motherhood and ecological violence works together to oppress women. On the other hand, Ghosh's work shows indigenous people suffering because of displacement and ecological violence (Syed, Qadri, & Sajid, 2023.)

In some of the selected novels, the novel contains themes of chronic environmental degradation, gendered violence, and resistance, which suggests that these novels serve as a counter-narrative to colonial feminist power and perspective. These novels, as discussed in the essay, provide reason-based justification for ecofeminist control of power and agency.

4. Ecofeminist Analysis of *The God of Small Things*

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is based on caste and gender discrimination, as well as environmental destruction in the state of Kerala. The novel also presents the Ayemenem River that exploits nature and women, who are already marginalized. The river was once a lively natural feature but has turned into an ignored and polluted body of water, which is the setting of the social deterioration and oppression that Ammu, the protagonist, is encountering. As the novel describes, "The river shrank

and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees” (Roy, 1997, p. 27). As a woman who defies the patriarchal order, Ammu is neglected, which serves as a broader ecofeminist argument that women and nature are looked down upon within a power hierarchy.

Ammu’s defiance of societal norms and her relationship with the lower-caste man Velutha lead to her being socially shunned. She is fated as each centimetre of agency and respect is quietly taken away. “*She was already damned, so it didn’t matter whether it was a little damnation or a lot*” (Roy, 1997, p. 154).

It shows the suffocation of women in patriarchal societies. Across it and the novel makes this argument on a larger ecofeminist level: both women and the natural world, outside of hierarchical structures are objects of abuse.

Roy analyzes the systemic injustices that treat both women and the environment as collateral damage within a capitalist and patriarchal society. In addition, the story highlights the importance of indigenous and local environmental awareness. The traditional ways of protecting the river’s ecosystem are in stark contrast to the industrial revolution and environmental degradation. This is the way Roy illustrates the phenomenon of development without sight of its consequences, which is focused on profit and neglects social and ecological health. In ecofeminist new literature, modernization policies are critiqued for their violence not just against nature but against nurturing humanity as well, advocating for drastic changes in social and environmental policies that put women and nature at the edges of the margins.

5. Ecofeminist Analysis of *The Hungry Tide*

The Sundarbans, a delicate ecological entity where numerous creatures mingle and vulnerable human populations exist, are the backdrop for Amitav Ghosh's, *The Hungry Tide*. The novel speaks of the plight for underprivileged sections and more precisely for the fisherfolk, fishermen and forest tribes facing evictions because conservation often justified the extinction of wildlife over human rights. “*Who are these animals being preserved for? For whom are these sanctuaries created? Is it more important to save a few dolphins than to feed thousands of people?*” (Ghosh, 2004, p. 212). Policy, that are usually made by outside governance structures, do not take into account the actual experience those most directly impacts go through, perpetuating socioeconomic and gendered inequities. Ghosh via the marine biologist Piya, a scientist-demi-god will explore the conflict of scientific authority versus indigenous knowledge. Piya’s journey shows us the gender biases in environmental conservation, where disasters and the social fractures do not occur at same scale for local women. From an ecofeminist standpoint against the exclusivist conservationism of local voices silenced, the novel tears away all fronted-buttress support. Through the crux of displacement, gender and ecological disarray — *The Hungry Tide* sought to take a wider and more kind view on environmental management.

6. Comparative Discussion: Gender, Ecology, and Resistance

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* delve into the crevices of gender related environmental injustice portraying that those at the margins suffer as result of

ecological plunder as perpetrators. The novel by Roy explores caste and gender in the most restrictive system of Kerala that suppresses women's autonomy due to a draconian social order. Meanwhile, Ghosh situates gendered debates around global conservation politics — conserving while exposing how environmental policies tend to re/produce displacement in particular as women (Bonnerjee, 2020). In each of the described both taking their toll on the natural environment and societal structures in that power differentiates who gets basic resources and how alive they are. The Resistance emerges from figures who defy systemic violence — whether in Ammu's rebellion of caste, Piya encouraging displaced fisher folk through education (Mehta, 2010). These narratives enable Literature to become one of most potent critique of exploitative hierarchies while also presenting alternative, sustainable futures. The socio-environmental and gender resistance entanglements of Roy and Ghosh enact the necessity to link social with environmental justice (Tabassum, 2024).

7. Conclusion

This study has proven the necessity of ecofeminist literary analysis in exposing the web weaves connecting environmental destruction with systemic social oppression. Examining closely two novels *The God of Small Things* and *The Hungry Tide*, it indicates how both the novels highlight the nexus of gender, class, caste with environmental exploitation in their far reaching consequences thus exposing underlying power structures that are rooted into the society perpetuating inequality.

Both narratives from Roy and Ghosh not only denounce the oppression of marginalized communities, they also draw attention to the cascading impacts of environmental degradation and how those marginalized bear the brunt of ecological crises in ever increasing rate.

Moreover, this study has illustrated that ecofeminist readings are a necessary lens for unearthing what literature has to say about challenging hegemonic ideologies and calling for different kinds of futures: sustainable (Fairfield, 2021).

By foregrounding the everyday experiences of women and (hence) marginalized subjects these texts resist hegemonic mediations and imagine sites for eco-social justice. The literature also underlines the significance of literature as a medium through which public discourse is created for awareness about important environmental and social problems in a matter of urgency.

At the end of the day, these two novels give us a cursory glance at a larger thematic conversation about ecofeminism and the need for nuanced, intersectional literary criticism. It is true that there is a need of redefining our symbiotic relationship with nature and society here stressing toward more equality, more sustainability. Through this, this study underlines the prolific identity of literature as a mirror and trigger for reflection that press towards justice, as well as eco-consciousness for the collective.

8. Future Directions

Future research could extend this study into another ecofeminist themed literature from different cultural contexts using literary texts. Works by indigenous authors or postcolonial writers of South Asia aside, this kind of analysis can also provide an expanded geographical conception of different ecofeminist narratives. Further interdisciplinary approaches based on feminist geography, environmental policy and postcolonial studies may also enrich the dialogue about gender and ecology at the interface of literature to real-world activism.

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