

ECO-CRITICISM AND CLIMATE CHANGE: ANALYSING REPRESENTATIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

*In this paper, the author focuses on the ecological in South Asian literature in modern literature concerning environmental degradation and the climate change issue through the eco-critical prism. This paper focuses on four major works, specifically *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, *Moth Smoke* by Mohsin Hamid and *Latitudes of Longing* by Shubhangi Swarup, to evaluate how each of the writings portrays, as well as critiques ecological crises, especially as it concerns the marginalised communities. Through eco-critical ideas like slow violence and environmental justice, the paper will emphasise the fact that literature not only represents environmental effects of climate change, but it also emphasises the socio-political aspects of these problems. The discussion shows that the surroundings in these novels are not just mere spectators but key participants in the life of humans and have profound effects on cultural identity, social inequality, and political tussles. The research will help to prove the role of modern South Asian literature in the discussion of climate change, make readers rethink their relations with nature and the socio-political system that remains in place and promote environmental degradation.*

Introduction

The threatening impact of climate change and environmental degradation has become the topic of the global agenda in recent years, and one of the most susceptible regions to environmental disturbances is the South Asian region. South Asia is the home to a billion people, with countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan, and as their population density increases in the tightly populated regions with poverty, urbanisation, and industrialisation, further contributing to the threat to the environment. As the sea levels are on the rise, floods, droughts, and unpredictable weather patterns are the region is experiencing great accords of environmental problems that influence the natural environment, as well as the human society. Literature in this regard is an important resource when used to explain these crises, as it provides subtle information on how environmental degradation and the socio-political systems are interlinked. A relatively new form of literary theory, eco-criticism has offered the context through which literature has dealt with environmental issues and how environmental issues are manifested through texts.

Eco-criticism is a reaction to the increasing environmental concerns and attempts to find the connection between literature and the natural environment. This is an interdisciplinary study of ways in which texts reflect, explore, and criticise ecological realities, environmental destruction, and the transforming relations between human beings and nature. At the centre of eco-criticism is the assumption that literature can expose not only the material effects of environmental change but also the ways that culture, politics, and social structures can and are affected by ecological factors. Through this manner, eco-criticism exists at the boundary between the humanities and the environmental sciences by utilising narrative in illuminating the urgent environmental problems of our day. In this context, modern South Asian literature has a major contribution to the issues of climate change, where the literature tends to focus on

the issues of displacement, loss of biodiversity, environmental justice, and the socio-economic impact of environmental degradation.

The South Asian literature is especially abundant in its interest toward the environmental issues since most of the most burning issues of the region, like poverty, social inequality, and political instability, are intertwined with the environment. The writers of South Asia, through their works, are able to give a clear picture of how environmental change may disorganise the local communities, change the traditional ways of living, and increase the existing inequalities. An example of this is *The Hungry Tide* (2004) by Amitav Ghosh, which is located in the Sundarbans, the ecologically unique area in both India and Bangladesh, where the increased level of the sea and natural catastrophes have compelled communities to face the problems of their vulnerable environment. Ghosh talks about the effect of climate change on the inhabitants of this land and how closely linked the lives of the people in this region are to the delicate ecosystems upon which they rely. On the same note, in Roy's (1997) book, *The God of Small Things*, the environmental degradation of the area is interwoven with the social and political strains that define the situation in the post-colonial Kerala in India. The setting is metaphorically used by Roy to represent the historical and social disparities that exist in Indian society, with the idea that the ecological changes have a significant influence on the lives of marginal communities.

The book *Moth Smoke* by Hamid (2000) also gives a very direct view of environmental decay, especially in the urban areas such as Lahore in Pakistan. The novel is also critical of the economic policies and industrialisation, which contribute to the destruction of the environment and ecological degradation, and is presented as an acceptable outcome of unregulated industrial development and socio-economic inequalities. The picture of the urban setting created by Hamid, with its polluted and trash-strewn environment, demonstrates that the urban poor tend to be the group that is the most susceptible to the consequences of environmental degradation. Moreover, the *Latitudes of Longing* (2018) by Shubangini Swarup offers a broader perspective of the interconnection between nature and human experience and combines the account of both the geological and environmental transformation. The novel also confronts the anthropocentric perception of nature through the discovery of the Ladakh region and the way climate change has been affecting the glaciers of the region, as the environment could influence human destinies significantly and in ways that are, in most cases, irreversible.

To summarise, the South Asian literature of the present day has been a rich and varied literature that can make a great contribution to the eco-criticism field. By analysing some of these texts, we can examine how the regional writers use the literature to sensitise people on issues related to environmental degradation and climate change. The pieces of writing make people think of the social and ecological crises of South Asia and the world in general, as well as encourage people to rethink the future, where humans and non-humans can live in a more friendly and sustainable manner. With climate change constantly redefining the world, literature will always be a powerful tool with which to understand the human price of environmental devastation and effect change.

Methodology

This paper formed a qualitative research design, whereby a literary examination was used based on the eco-criticism comprehension. It was intended to discuss how modern South Asian literature reflects the situation of environmental degradation and climate change with regard to how that literature interacts with the socio-political apparatus and the oppressed communities. The study included a critical review of major writings of major authors of the South Asian world, applying a multi-dimensional method in the interpretation of environmental and social problems raised in those literary works.

Selection of Texts

The texts used in the analysis used were selected on the basis of their suitability to the themes of environmental degradation, climate change and socio-political implications in South Asia. Four texts were selected to closely read and analyse: *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh (2004), *The God of Small Things* by Roy (1997), *Moth Smoke* by Hamid (2000), and *Latitudes of Longing* by Swarup (2018). These readings have been chosen due to their subtle depiction of environmental problems in the socio-political and cultural settings of South Asia. The novels are full of representations of the world of nature, environmental destruction, and human reaction to ecological disasters, which is why they are the perfect objects of the eco-critical analysis.

Literary Analysis

Literary analysis was the main data collection technique. The texts were studied in detail to determine and identify the ecological themes in the narratives. The analysis based on the eco-critical theory was done to share the depiction of nature, environmental degradation and the influence of man on the environment in each of the novels. The relationship of the characters to their environments was specifically focused on in the way that they indicated larger socio-political and ecological processes. The main themes, which included the issue of displacement, the extinction of biodiversity, socio-economic inequalities and environmental justice, were determined and discussed regarding the narrative structure and characterisation of each text.

Eco-Critical Framework

To analyse the way the selected literary works address the environmental issues, an eco-critical framework was used in analysing those works. It focuses on the social, cultural and political consequences of environmental degradation and the interrelationship of human beings and nature. The texts were interpreted using key eco-critical concepts that included the slow violence (Nixon, 2011) and environmental justice (Schlosberg, 2007). According to the theory of environmental justice, it is "slow violence": the progressive and frequently undetectable damage to the environment disproportionately suffered by the poor and the marginalised, whereas environmental justice is the gradual and ongoing accumulation of ecological costs and benefits. Such ideas formed the theoretical background of the way in which the novels criticise environmental policies and socio-economic systems that lead to the degradation of the environment.

Textual Comparison

Having analysed each of the texts separately, a comparative analysis was performed to look at how the four novels represented the environmental degradation in a similar or different way. The comparison aimed at examining how both authors employed the techniques of narration, symbolism, and character development of characters to deliver their message regarding climate change and its socio-political effects. The paper also took into account the contribution of nature environment as a character in both novels and how the portrayal of nature by the authors undermined or supported the socio-political systems in South Asia. This comparative method made it possible to have a wider perspective on how contemporary South Asian literature is dealing with the problem of environmental degradation in various ways.

Thematic Coding and Interpretation.

Thematic coding and interpretation were the last stage of the analysis. Themes connected with the degradation of the environment, climate change, and socio-political concerns were identified and divided into certain themes in each text. These themes were not restricted to displacement on rising sea levels (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*), the intersection of the environment and social injustice (Roy, *The God of Small Things*), consequences of

industrialisation on the environment (Hamid, *Moth Smoke*), and how nature influenced human destinies (Swarup, *Latitudes of Longing*). Each theme was discussed in detail to capture how the authors handled ecological issues and their general implication to the South Asian societies.

The conclusion of the analysis was a synthesis of the findings with a reflection of how the South Asian literature today makes a contribution to the rhetoric of climate change and environmental justice. The research was meant to bring out the role of literature as a mirror of the existing environmental condition and as a voice of criticism to the socio-political formations that continue to cause ecological damage. The paper has also highlighted the importance of literature in creating awareness of the human cost of environmental degradation and the need to create change.

Results

The analysis of the four chosen South Asian literary works through an eco-critical approach. The texts studied were on how they depicted the environmental degradation, climate change, and their socio-political consequences. Their relationship with the natural world was also analysed, and the way it makes the characters mirror larger socio-political processes, such as the problem of displacement, environmental justice, and communities of colour.

The outcomes are formatted into major thematic aspects, each portraying varying aspects of environmental degradation as well as its overlap with social inequalities. These are the descriptions of environmental displacement, societal and economic impacts of environmental degradation, and marginalised communities in either challenging or giving in to environmental crises. Each of the main themes is presented in the next sections, with the examples of the texts provided in the novels and the summaries of the findings are presented in the tables below.

1. Environmental Displacement

One of the central themes across all four texts is the issue of displacement due to environmental factors such as rising sea levels, deforestation, and industrialisation. This displacement often serves as a metaphor for the larger socio-political forces that marginalise certain communities in South Asia.

- **Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004)**: The novel explores the displacement of the people in the Sundarbans due to rising sea levels and frequent flooding, which is exacerbated by climate change. The region's ecosystem is under threat, and the inhabitants face an uncertain future as they struggle to maintain their livelihoods. The narrative portrays the relationship between the land and the people as symbiotic, making the environmental loss a deeply personal and cultural crisis.
- **Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997)**: While not centred on direct environmental displacement, the novel critiques the larger political and social structures that enable environmental degradation, especially in the context of Kerala's rich yet threatened ecosystems. The social and political forces that disrupt the environment also exacerbate the displacement of marginalised communities, particularly in the context of caste and colonial history.
- **Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke* (2000)**: Hamid illustrates how industrial growth and urbanisation in Lahore have led to environmental decay. The pollution and socio-economic inequality caused by unchecked industrialisation displace communities, especially the urban poor, who are forced to contend with the environmental costs of economic growth.
- **Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* (2018)**: Swarup focuses on environmental changes in Ladakh, particularly the shrinking of glaciers and the altered landscape due to climate change. The displacement of communities in the face

of these changes is tied to the cultural and spiritual significance of the land, where the environment is an integral part of identity.

Table 1
Representation of Environmental Displacement in Selected Texts

Novel	Theme of Environmental Displacement	Description of Displacement Impact
<i>The Hungry Tide</i>	Rising sea levels and flooding in the Sundarbans	Environmental degradation leads to the forced migration of communities dependent on the river ecosystems.
<i>The God of Small Things</i>	Indirect displacement through socio-political forces	Environmental destruction tied to caste, colonial history, and political unrest exacerbates social displacement.
<i>Moth Smoke</i>	Industrialisation and pollution in Lahore	Economic inequality driven by industrialisation forces poorer communities to cope with polluted and unsafe living conditions.
<i>Latitudes of Longing</i>	Glacial retreat and ecosystem changes in Ladakh	Communities face displacement as glaciers recede, affecting livelihoods and cultural practices tied to the land.

2. Environmental Justice and Social Inequality

The theme of environmental justice is central to the novels analysed. These works critique the unequal distribution of environmental harms and benefits, particularly in marginalised communities.

- **Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004):** Ghosh highlights how the poor, particularly the fisherfolk in the Sundarbans, suffer the consequences of environmental degradation without the means to mitigate its effects. The novel critiques the environmental policies that neglect these vulnerable populations, showing how they bear the brunt of climate change with little recourse.
- **Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997):** The novel uses the environmental degradation of Kerala's ecosystems as a backdrop for the social and political struggles of the characters. The uneven access to environmental resources is portrayed through the lens of caste and class inequalities, with marginalised groups facing the worst consequences of industrial expansion and deforestation.
- **Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke* (2000):** In *Moth Smoke*, environmental degradation is intricately linked to socio-economic inequality. Hamid shows how the wealthy elite, responsible for industrial pollution, escape the consequences of their actions, while the poor are forced to endure the environmental fallout.
- **Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* (2018):** Swarup emphasises the cultural connection to land and the impact of environmental changes on marginalised communities. The loss of glacial territories due to climate change disproportionately affects the indigenous populations who rely on these areas for their livelihood.

Table 2
Representation of Environmental Justice and Social Inequality in Selected Texts

Novel	Environmental Theme	Justice	Social Inequality Impact
<i>The Hungry Tide</i>	Unequal distribution of environmental harm	of	Marginalised communities suffer most from environmental degradation.
<i>The God of Small Things</i>	Environmental	harm	Marginalised communities are

<i>Small Things</i>	exacerbates caste and class inequalities	disenfranchised by environmental destruction.
<i>Moth Smoke</i>	Industrialisation benefits the elite while harming the poor	Environmental costs are disproportionately borne by the poor, particularly in urban spaces.
<i>Latitudes of Longing</i>	Climate change affects the indigenous populations in Ladakh	Indigenous communities face cultural and economic displacement due to environmental changes.

3. Nature as a Character

Another key result from the analysis is the depiction of nature not merely as a backdrop to the story but as an active, influential character in the narrative. This personification of nature emphasises the interconnectedness between humans and the environment, highlighting the impact of ecological changes on the human psyche and society.

- **Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004)**: Nature is portrayed as a central character in the Sundarbans, where the river, the tides, and the land itself shape human existence. The environmental changes in this ecosystem are not just background events but central to the characters' survival and identities.
- **Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997)**: In Roy's novel, nature is a symbol of both beauty and destruction. The river and the forests serve as metaphors for the turmoil within the characters' lives, where ecological degradation mirrors the societal fragmentation and personal struggles.
- **Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke* (2000)**: The polluted urban landscape is a recurring theme in *Moth Smoke*, where the environment acts as a metaphor for the moral decay in the society. The toxic atmosphere is not just a setting but a reflection of the moral and ethical compromises of the characters.
- **Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* (2018)**: Swarup's depiction of Ladakh's glaciers serves as a character that embodies both beauty and fragility. The glaciers' retreat reflects the precariousness of human existence and the inevitable loss of something vital, both culturally and ecologically.

Table 3
Nature as a Character in Selected Texts

Novel	Representation of Nature as a Character	Impact of Environmental Change on Human Existence
<i>The Hungry Tide</i>	Nature as an active force shaping human life in the Sundarbans	Environmental changes directly affect characters' survival and identity.
<i>The God of Small Things</i>	Nature symbolises both destruction and beauty.	Environmental decay parallels the breakdown of social structures and personal lives.
<i>Moth Smoke</i>	Polluted cityscape reflects societal decay.	The toxic environment is a reflection of the moral decay within the characters.
<i>Latitudes of Longing</i>	Glaciers as a metaphor for cultural and ecological loss	The retreat of glaciers symbolises the irreversible loss of cultural and natural heritage.

The findings of this study highlight the centrality of environmental degradation and climate change in contemporary South Asian literature. The texts analysed use nature not only as a setting but also as a character that actively interacts with human lives, shaping their fates. The socio-political consequences of environmental harm are explored in depth, with a particular focus on how marginalised communities are disproportionately affected. The representation

of environmental displacement, social inequality, and environmental justice across these texts underscores the urgent need for a more equitable and sustainable approach to addressing climate change and environmental degradation.

Discussion

The interpretation of modern South Asian literature as viewed through the eco-critical perspective indicates the deepest connections of environmental degradation and climatic change to socio-political relations, cultural identities, and economic inequalities in the area. The novels discussed, *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, *Moth Smoke* by Mohsin Hamid, and *Latitudes of Longing* by Shubhangi Swarup, only indicate how literature may be an effective medium of exploring and commenting on the environmental issues that are especially acute in South Asia.

The reflection of the environmental displacement is one of the key research findings because it was a common thread throughout the texts. Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* has made the Sundarbans a threatened ecosystem to bring to attention the effects of the rising sea level and high frequency of floods. It is not only an ecological effect but a social and cultural crisis that the local communities are displaced in this novel. The environmental changes destroy the bond that the characters have with their land, reflecting the overall effects of climate change on susceptible populations in South Asia. This theme of displacement finds much to agree with the eco-critical notion of a slow violence (Nixon, 2011) in which the forces of environmental degradation have a disproportionate impact on the marginalised, which can often go unnoticed or unacknowledged by the dominant discourse.

On the same note, *The God of Small Things* by Roy highlights the relationship between environmental degradation in Kerala and historical and socio-political influences, such as caste, colonial influences, and industrialisation. Although the novel is not specifically about environmental displacement, it targets the issues of ecological destruction as a means of increasing social disparities and inequalities. This convergence of environmental and social injustice is not a new problem of the region, as the marginalised populations are most likely to suffer the consequences of environmental disasters, which further complicates their social and economic status and positions. The destruction of the environment, as outlined by Roy, is not only the problem of the ecological devastation but also the profound cultural and social effects, which are usually overlooked at best or neglected at worst by mainstream politics and the economy.

Moth Smoke by Hamid gives a vivid picture of the environmental costs of industrialisation, particularly in urban areas such as Lahore. The toxic urban environment that is presented in the novel serves as a reflection of moral and ethical degradation in society. The rich elites who are the cause of the environmental damage get away with it, and the poor are faced with the pollution and social injustices it causes. This is a sharp difference between the lives of the rich and the poor, which indicates the fundamental beliefs of environmental justice in which the distribution of environmental burdens is uneven, and the marginalised are the ones who are at the receiving end. The criticism Hamid presents of industrialisation is reflected in the environmental problems experienced in the South Asian cities that are rapidly developing in the real world, where economic growth tends to neglect the environment and the poor.

Latitudes of Longing by Swarup broadens the horizons of representing the environment by giving attention to the evolving environment of Ladakh, where the shrinking of glaciers is an indicator of environmental and cultural loss. The relationship between the land and the people of Ladakh, as shown in the novel, also underscores the disastrous consequences of climate change on the native populations, where their identity and livelihoods cannot be divorced from their surroundings. The work of Swarup provides emphasis on the need to

maintain the natural environment, as well as the cultural practices of the communities that are mostly impacted by environmental change.

On the whole, the findings do highlight the importance of South Asian literature in sensitising people about the intricate relationships that exist between environmental degradation, social inequality, and climate change. These readings prove that the environmental problems have not been detached from the political and social reality of South Asia. The depiction of nature as a dynamic character in the stories supports the perception that nature is not a setting where human beings live but rather a component of their lives. The literature reviewed in the paper has shown that there is a necessity to have a more sophisticated and holistic view of environmental crises, the view that acknowledges the socio-political and cultural aspects of environmental problems and promotes justice and fairness in dealing with them. Through these readings, the reader gets to consider the dire necessity of sustainable practices and policies that can fight ecological and social injustices in the area.

Conclusion

To sum up, the modern South Asian literature can be discussed as a very diverse and enriched approach to the issue of environmental degradation and climate change and the socio-political consequences of these issues. The *Hungry Tide*, *The God of Small Things*, *Moth Smoke*, and *Latitudes of Longing*, the novels discussed in this paper, exemplify how local authors are getting involved in the environmental crises to reflect social imbalance and the excessive burden on the oppressed groups. In the given works, nature is central; the paper shows the centrality of nature using the lens of eco-criticism as a setting, but as a character that shapes and influences the human experience. These texts are significant and insightful toward the multidimensionality and intertwined nature of environmental degradation and social justice, requesting a more equal and sustainable future. Through creating awareness of these problems, South Asian literature is able to pose the question to the reader to reconsider their contribution to the current environmental crises and effect significant changes. The literature can be viewed as an indispensable medium to examine the human price of environmental damage and the necessity of environmental justice as climate change keeps changing the world and the region.

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