

Reconstruction of Nature and Gender: Ecofeminist and Ecological Interventions in Contemporary English Literature

Aishwarya Singh

Research Scholar

Dept. of English

Maharaja Agrasen Himalayan Garhwal University

Pauri Garhwal, U.K.

Abstract

*This article examines how contemporary English literature reconfigures the relationship between gender and environment through ecofeminist and ecocritical frameworks. Moving beyond representational readings of nature as a passive backdrop, the study argues that literary texts actively construct ecological meaning through narrative form, voice, and metaphor. It foregrounds how gendered bodies and ecological spaces are co-produced within structures of power, where domination of women and exploitation of nature operate through parallel logics. While ecocriticism has increasingly attended to environmental crisis, and feminist criticism has interrogated gendered hierarchies, their intersection in literary analysis remains uneven, particularly at the level of close textual engagement. Addressing this gap, the article undertakes a qualitative, interpretive analysis of selected contemporary texts, including Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *The Year of the Flood*, and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Through sustained close reading, the study demonstrates how narrative fragmentation, embodied voice, and symbolic landscapes function as strategies of resistance. The analysis shows that ecofeminist writing does not merely depict ecological crisis; it reworks the terms through which environmental ethics are imagined. In doing so, it challenges anthropocentric and patriarchal assumptions embedded in dominant literary traditions. The article concludes that ecofeminist interventions offer a critical reorientation of literary studies by foregrounding relational ethics, ecological interdependence, and the politics of representation in the age of environmental crisis.*

Keywords

Ecofeminism; Ecocriticism; Gender; Environmental Ethics; Contemporary Literature

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Aishwarya Singh

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Introduction

The relationship between literature, gender, and the environment has gained renewed urgency in the context of accelerating ecological crisis. Contemporary English literature increasingly engages with environmental degradation, climate change, and resource exploitation, yet these concerns are rarely isolated from questions of power. Gender, in particular, emerges as a critical axis through which ecological issues are both experienced and represented. This article argues that ecofeminism provides a necessary framework for understanding how literary texts reimagine the entangled dynamics of gender and ecology.

Ecofeminism, as a critical perspective, links the subordination of women with the exploitation of nature. It suggests that both are rooted in systems of domination that privilege control, hierarchy, and instrumentalization. Ecocriticism, on the other hand, examines how literature represents and shapes environmental consciousness. While both fields have developed significantly, their intersection often remains underexplored in literary analysis, especially in relation to narrative form and language. This study addresses that gap by focusing on how ecofeminist concerns are embedded not only in thematic content but also in the structural and stylistic features of literary texts.

Rather than treating literature as a mirror of ecological realities, this article approaches texts as active sites where environmental and gendered meanings are produced. Through close readings of selected works, it demonstrates how literary form—fragmentation, shifting perspectives, and symbolic landscapes—functions as a medium of ecological critique. The argument foregrounds that ecofeminist writing does not simply represent environmental crisis; it reshapes the ways in which such crises are understood.

Conceptual Framework: Ecofeminism and Ecocriticism

Ecofeminism emerged as a critical response to the limitations of both mainstream feminist theory and environmental thought, especially their tendency to treat gender and ecology as separate domains. Scholars such as Vandana Shiva and Val Plumwood argue that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are structurally connected through shared systems of domination. These systems operate through hierarchical logics that prioritize control, rationality, and instrumental use, thereby reducing both women and the natural world to objects of exploitation (Plumwood 41; Shiva 23). This perspective moves ecofeminism beyond symbolic association and situates it within material and ideological structures of power.

Ecocriticism complements this approach by analyzing how literature constructs environmental consciousness. Rather than treating nature as a passive backdrop, ecocritical readings emphasize its active role within narrative and cultural imagination. Lawrence Buell highlights that literary texts shape environmental perception by redefining human–nature relationships and challenging anthropocentric frameworks (Buell 2).

Ecofeminism, however, deepens ecocritical inquiry by foregrounding gendered and intersecting systems of inequality. Karen J. Warren argues that environmental ethics must account for overlapping structures of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism that shape both ecological harm and social exclusion (Warren 12). In literary studies, this requires attention to how texts construct relationships between human and non-human worlds through gendered, classed, and cultural lenses.

Bringing these frameworks together, this study treats ecofeminism and ecocriticism as interconnected analytical modes. It examines how literary texts engage ecological and gendered concerns through narrative form, fragmentation, and symbolic structures, thereby reconfiguring how human–nature relations are ethically and imaginatively understood.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with ecology and literature has grown substantially over the past three decades, particularly with the emergence of ecocriticism as a distinct field. Early ecocritical work, as articulated by Cheryll Glotfelty, defined the discipline as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, thereby shifting critical attention toward nature as a central rather than peripheral concern (Glotfelty xviii). Building on this foundation, Lawrence Buell emphasized the role of literature in shaping environmental imagination, arguing that texts do not merely reflect ecological realities but actively participate in constructing them (Buell 2). These interventions established ecocriticism as a vital framework for understanding how narratives engage with environmental crisis.

At the same time, feminist scholarship has interrogated structures of gendered power embedded within literary and cultural production. Ecofeminist theorists, including Vandana Shiva and Val Plumwood, have extended this critique by demonstrating how the domination of women and the exploitation of nature are sustained through interconnected ideological systems (Shiva 23; Plumwood 41). Their work foregrounds the material dimensions of this relationship, challenging purely symbolic readings and insisting on the political and economic conditions that underlie ecological degradation.

More recent scholarship has attempted to bring ecocriticism and ecofeminism into closer dialogue. Greg Garrard, for instance, expands ecocritical inquiry by incorporating themes such as pollution, wilderness, and apocalypse, while acknowledging the need to account for social hierarchies within environmental discourse (Garrard 5). Similarly, Serpil Oppermann argues for a more inclusive ecocriticism that integrates gender, postcoloniality, and material ecologies, thereby complicating earlier approaches that treated environmental issues in isolation (Oppermann 459).

Recent ecofeminist and ecocritical scholarship extends earlier frameworks by foregrounding scale, materiality, and uneven ecological experience. Ursula K. Heise calls for a transnational “sense of planet,” situating ecological crises within global contexts (Heise

504). Similarly, Serenella Iovino emphasizes the agency of matter, reading environments as active participants in meaning-making (Iovino 3). Within the Indian context, Chetan Singh highlights the role of regional histories and socio-cultural hierarchies in shaping ecological discourse (Singh 325). Together, these perspectives stress the need to read ecological representation as both globally interconnected and locally grounded.

Despite these advances, a significant gap remains in the sustained integration of ecofeminist insights within close literary analysis. Much of the existing work tends to privilege thematic exploration—identifying representations of nature or gender—without examining how these concerns are embedded in narrative form, language, and structure. As a result, the role of literary technique in producing ecological and gendered meaning often remains underdeveloped.

This study addresses this gap by combining ecofeminist theory with detailed textual analysis. It moves beyond surface-level thematic readings to investigate how narrative strategies—such as fragmentation, shifting perspectives, and symbolic landscapes—mediate the relationship between gender and ecology. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing efforts to refine ecocritical methodology and to foreground the importance of form in environmental literary studies.

Theoretical Framework

Any contemporary ecofeminist inquiry must move beyond early binary critiques and engage with more recent materialist and intersectional turns in environmental humanities. While foundational thinkers such as Val Plumwood and Vandana Shiva expose the structural link between gendered oppression and ecological exploitation, newer scholarship complicates this relationship by foregrounding embodiment, materiality, and global inequality.

For instance, Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality emphasizes that human bodies are not separate from ecological systems but continuously entangled with them (Alaimo 2). This shift unsettles earlier human-centered frameworks and forces a reconsideration of agency itself. Similarly, Serpil Oppermann argues for a material ecocriticism that reads literature as embedded within dynamic ecological processes rather than as a mere representation of nature (Oppermann 460).

Recent work by Amitav Ghosh further challenges the limits of literary form in addressing ecological crisis. In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh contends that conventional realist narratives often fail to capture the scale and unpredictability of climate change, thereby necessitating new modes of storytelling (Ghosh 23). This insight is crucial for ecofeminist analysis, as it links environmental crisis to representational constraints within literature itself.

Additionally, Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence highlights how environmental harm unfolds gradually and disproportionately affects marginalized communities (Nixon 2). This framework resonates strongly with ecofeminist concerns, particularly in postcolonial

contexts where ecological degradation intersects with gender, caste, and class hierarchies. Taken together, these perspectives expand ecofeminism and ecocriticism into a more nuanced, intersectional framework. This study builds on these developments by examining how literary texts negotiate ecological and gendered meanings not only through thematic content but through formal strategies that reflect instability, fragmentation, and relationality.

Textual Analysis

Margaret Atwood: Ecological Crisis and Embodied Subjectivity

In *Surfacing* and *The Year of the Flood*, Margaret Atwood constructs ecological narratives that resist stable subjectivity. The breakdown of language in *Surfacing* reflects what Stacy Alaimo describes as trans-corporeal entanglement, where the boundaries between body and environment dissolve. The protagonist's experience is not simply psychological; it is ecological. Her identity becomes inseparable from the landscape she inhabits.

In *The Year of the Flood*, this entanglement is extended into a dystopian future shaped by corporate biopolitics. Here, ecological collapse is unevenly distributed, aligning with Rob Nixon's notion of slow violence. Environmental damage is not immediate or spectacular; it accumulates over time, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations. The novel's shifting narrative voices reinforce this unevenness, refusing a singular or authoritative perspective.

At the same time, Atwood's work reflects the concerns raised by Amitav Ghosh regarding the limitations of conventional narrative forms. The fragmented structure and speculative elements suggest an attempt to move beyond realist constraints, creating a narrative space capable of engaging with ecological uncertainty.

Arundhati Roy: Ecology, Inequality, and Narrative Form

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy presents an ecological landscape deeply intertwined with social hierarchies. The river, for instance, functions as a site of memory, violence, and transformation. Its shifting meanings reflect what Serpil Oppermann identifies as the material agency of ecological systems, where nature is not passive but actively participates in the narrative.

Roy's fragmented narrative structure further reinforces this perspective. Time moves irregularly. Events are revisited from multiple angles. This formal instability mirrors the uneven and layered nature of ecological and social experience. It also aligns with Nixon's framework of slow violence, where harm is dispersed across time and space, resisting immediate recognition.

Gender, within this framework, is neither isolated nor secondary. It is embedded within ecological relations. Female characters experience both social restriction and ecological proximity, revealing how systems of domination operate across human and non-human domains. However, the text resists presenting this as a unified or resolved condition.

Instead, it foregrounds contradiction, suggesting that ecological and gendered agency remain contingent and unstable.

Comparative Insight: Contemporary Ecocritical Turn

Across these texts, a key shift becomes visible—one that aligns with post-2012 ecocritical scholarship. Ecology is no longer treated as background. It becomes constitutive of narrative itself. Form, in particular, plays a central role. Fragmentation, multiplicity, and temporal disruption are not stylistic choices alone; they reflect the difficulty of representing ecological crisis within inherited literary frameworks.

This aligns with Amitav Ghosh's argument that climate realities demand new narrative strategies. It also reinforces Stacy Alaimo's emphasis on interconnectedness and Rob Nixon's focus on uneven ecological harm. Together, these perspectives highlight that contemporary ecofeminist writing does not merely describe environmental issues—it reconfigures how they can be known, represented, and critically engaged.

Discussion

Ecofeminist readings of contemporary literature demonstrate that ecological crisis cannot be understood apart from the operations of gendered and structural power. The selected texts do not present nature as a neutral or passive backdrop; instead, they construct it as a contested site where authority, vulnerability, and agency are unevenly distributed. This perspective resonates with the foundational arguments of Val Plumwood and Vandana Shiva, who argue that the domination of nature and the subordination of women are produced through shared hierarchies of control and exploitation (Plumwood 43; Shiva 27). However, contemporary ecofeminist criticism must extend beyond this foundational insight by examining how such power structures are embedded in language, narrative form, and modes of representation.

Recent environmental humanities scholarship enables this shift in focus. Stacy Alaimo introduces the concept of trans-corporeality, which redefines the human body as inseparable from ecological systems, thereby destabilizing fixed boundaries between subject and environment (Alaimo 2). Within the literary texts under discussion, this interconnectedness is not merely thematic but formally embedded. Narrative fragmentation, shifting perspectives, and disruptions in temporal order reflect a world where coherence itself is under strain. Such instability should not be read as narrative weakness; rather, it signals a deliberate resistance to containing ecological crisis within conventional representational structures.

This formal experimentation also aligns with the theory of slow violence proposed by Rob Nixon, who emphasizes that environmental harm unfolds gradually and disproportionately affects marginalized populations (Nixon 2). In texts like *The God of Small Things*, narrative fragmentation mirrors this delayed and dispersed structure of harm,

where meaning emerges belatedly and resists immediate comprehension. The text thus does not merely describe slow violence; it formally enacts its temporal logic.

Similarly, Amitav Ghosh critiques the limitations of conventional realist fiction in representing climate change and ecological instability (Ghosh 23). The literary texts examined respond to this challenge by reworking narrative techniques such as voice, temporality, and focalization. These strategies do not resolve ecological crisis; instead, they expose the inadequacy of inherited aesthetic frameworks and shift attention from representation to mediation—how ecological meaning becomes intelligible in the first place.

Ecofeminist theory further deepens this analysis. Karen J. Warren emphasizes that environmental ethics must account for intersecting systems of domination, including patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism (Warren 12). The texts under study reflect these intersections without stabilizing them into a single narrative. Gendered agency appears but remains constrained; ecological awareness emerges but does not lead to resolution. This tension is central to ecofeminist critique, as it resists reducing resistance to a coherent or complete form.

Ultimately, ecofeminist literary analysis reveals that narrative form itself becomes a site of ethical and political inquiry. Fragmentation, ambiguity, and multiplicity function as critical strategies that unsettle anthropocentric and patriarchal assumptions. Rather than offering solutions, these texts reshape perception, foregrounding relationality, interdependence, and vulnerability as essential conditions of ecological understanding. In doing so, they compel readers to confront the limits of established frameworks and reconsider how ecological meaning is produced and perceived.

Conclusion

This study has argued that ecofeminist and ecocritical readings of contemporary literature must move beyond thematic interpretation to engage closely with how meaning is produced through narrative form. The texts examined do not simply represent ecological crisis; they actively reconfigure the conditions through which such crisis becomes perceptible. Formal features such as fragmentation, temporal disruption, and shifting narrative voices are not decorative techniques but structural responses to the pressures exerted by ecological degradation and social inequality on language itself.

By placing ecofeminist theory in dialogue with recent environmental humanities scholarship, the analysis has shown that the relationship between gender and ecology is neither symbolic nor stable. It is materially grounded and structurally mediated through intersecting systems of domination that include patriarchy, capitalism, and environmental exploitation. Literary texts make these entanglements visible, yet they do not resolve them into a unified or coherent narrative. Instead, they sustain complexity and contradiction as integral to representation.

At the same time, the study has highlighted the limits of literary representation in the context of ecological crisis. Slow and uneven environmental violence resists direct narration and challenges conventional aesthetic frameworks. As a result, the texts examined turn toward formal experimentation, disrupting linear progression and creating spaces of absence, delay, and incompleteness. Such narrative gaps should not be read as deficiencies; rather, they reflect the difficulty of articulating experiences that exceed dominant modes of understanding.

The ecofeminist perspective developed here therefore positions literature as a site of critical negotiation rather than resolution. It does not offer definitive solutions to ecological crisis but instead reshapes the ways in which such crises are perceived, interpreted, and imagined. By challenging anthropocentric and patriarchal assumptions, these texts open alternative possibilities of relational thinking grounded in interdependence, vulnerability, and ethical responsibility.

Ultimately, the study emphasizes that ecological meaning resides not only in what texts communicate but also in how they structure that communication, making form itself a crucial site of ecofeminist critique in the present environmental moment.

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