

**"Environmental Storytelling in Contemporary Indian Literature: A Study of Climate Change and Ecological Crisis in the Works of Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy"**

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**Abstract:**

Recent literature on ecological issues increasingly focuses on climate change, environmental justice, and the displacement of marginalized communities due to ecological degradation. Writers are blending fiction and activism to highlight the urgency of environmental crises, urging a rethinking of humanity's relationship with nature. This study examines climate change and ecological crises in Indian literature through Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* and *Gun Island*, and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Ghosh critiques the literary failure to address climate change, while Roy highlights environmental degradation and displacement. Using ecocriticism, postcolonial ecocriticism, and narrative analysis, the study explores how these authors depict environmental crises and their impact on marginalized communities. A comparative analysis of their storytelling methods reveals how literature influences ecological awareness. Findings suggest that fiction and non-fiction play vital roles in shaping climate discourse, urging a stronger literary response to environmental challenges.

**Key Terms:** Eco-literature, Climate Change, Ecocriticism, Environmental Degradation, Displacement, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy.

**Introduction**

Eco-literature, or environmental literature, is a literary movement that explores the relationship between humans and nature, addressing ecological concerns such as climate change, deforestation, and environmental justice. Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment," highlighting how literature can foster environmental consciousness. In Indian writing, eco-literature has gained prominence due to the country's ecological challenges, including pollution, urbanization, and climate-induced displacement. Authors use storytelling to depict environmental crises and challenge socio-political structures that contribute to ecological degradation.

Literature plays a crucial role in shaping environmental awareness by offering narratives that engage readers emotionally and intellectually. Lawrence Buell (1995) argues that literature can function as a catalyst for ecological consciousness, making abstract environmental issues more relatable. Fiction and non-fiction alike serve as powerful tools for addressing climate change and advocating for sustainability. In Indian literature, writers like Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy use narrative techniques to depict environmental destruction, human displacement, and political neglect. Their works reflect how literature can bridge scientific discourse and public understanding, urging action against ecological crises.

Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy are particularly significant in this study due to their literary and activist engagements with environmental issues. Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* (2016) critiques the literary world's failure to address climate change, while *Gun Island* (2019) fictionalizes the impact of climate-induced migration. Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) examines environmental destruction through the lens of urbanization, displacement, and political conflicts. Their works not only narrate ecological crises but also interrogate the socio-political structures that perpetuate them. The comparative study of their texts offers insights into how literature represents environmental struggles in both fiction and non-fiction.

This research aims to answer two key questions: (1) How do Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy represent environmental crises in their works? (2) How does their storytelling shape public understanding of climate change and displacement? Using ecocriticism and postcolonial ecocriticism, this study examines their narrative techniques, thematic concerns, and the intersection of environmental and socio-political issues in their writings. By exploring these questions, the research highlights literature's role in fostering ecological consciousness and influencing environmental discourse.

### **Theoretical Framework**

**Ecocriticism:** Ecocriticism is a literary theory that examines the relationship between literature and the environment, analyzing how texts depict ecological issues and shape environmental consciousness. Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment," emphasizing how literary works reflect, critique, and influence human interactions with nature. Lawrence Buell (1995) highlights the power of literature to inspire environmental awareness, arguing that narratives can challenge anthropocentric perspectives and promote ecological sustainability. Greg Garrard (2004) further classifies ecocriticism into categories such as pastoral, wilderness, and apocalypse, each addressing different aspects of nature representation. In Indian literature, ecocriticism helps analyze the depiction of climate change, industrialization, and environmental degradation. Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* (2016) critiques the literary world's failure to address climate change, while *Gun Island* (2019) explores climate-induced migration and ecological disasters. Similarly, Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) portrays environmental degradation and displacement due to urbanization. By applying ecocritical theory, this study examines how these authors depict climate crises and advocate for ecological awareness.

**Postcolonial Ecocriticism:** Postcolonial ecocriticism explores the intersection of environmental and colonial histories, analyzing how climate change disproportionately affects marginalized communities. Scholars like Rob Nixon (2011) discuss "slow violence," where environmental destruction occurs gradually, disproportionately harming the poor. In the Indian

context, postcolonial ecocriticism reveals how colonial and neo-colonial exploitation of natural resources continues to impact indigenous and rural populations. Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) highlights climate refugees—communities displaced due to environmental disasters—while Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* critiques how rapid urbanization and state policies displace marginalized groups. Postcolonial ecocriticism helps contextualize these narratives within global discussions on environmental justice, showing how literature challenges dominant narratives that overlook the environmental struggles of the underprivileged.

**Narrative Theory :** Narrative theory examines how storytelling techniques shape readers' perceptions of ecological crises. Amitav Ghosh (2016) argues that climate change is an "unthinkable" event in literature because traditional storytelling structures often fail to capture its complexity. His works experiment with mythological and speculative fiction elements to represent environmental disasters in engaging ways. Arundhati Roy, on the other hand, uses fragmented and nonlinear storytelling in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* to highlight environmental and political struggles. Narrative theory helps analyze how these authors use diverse literary techniques—such as magical realism, interwoven timelines, and multiple perspectives—to make environmental issues more accessible and compelling to readers.

#### **The Great Derangement (2016)**

In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh critiques literature's failure to engage with climate change, arguing that modern fiction often ignores ecological catastrophes. He questions,

“When future generations look back at the literary and artistic productions of our time, will they not think it strange that most forms of art and literature were unable to grapple with the central existential crisis of our time?”

Ghosh attributes this omission to the dominance of realist narratives, which struggle to depict the unpredictability of climate disasters. He urges the adoption of new storytelling forms to integrate environmental crises into mainstream literature. By linking colonial histories and capitalism to climate change, Ghosh exposes the global inequalities embedded in ecological destruction, challenging writers to engage more deeply with environmental discourse.

#### **Gun Island (2019)**

In *Gun Island*, Ghosh blends mythology and climate fiction to explore migration and ecological crises. The protagonist, Deen Datta, traces the legend of the Bonduki Sadagar, a mythical merchant whose journey symbolizes

“a story of exile, a story of flight, of seeking refuge from forces too powerful to withstand”

—a direct reference to modern climate refugees. Ghosh connects Bengali folklore to real-world displacement caused by rising sea levels, illustrating how myths reflect ongoing environmental concerns. Using magical realism and historical narratives, he argues that past stories contain warnings about climate disasters. By intertwining fiction with reality, *Gun Island* highlights the urgent need to recognize climate-induced migration as a defining crisis of the 21st century.

#### **The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (2017)**

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* explores the consequences of urbanization and environmental degradation, particularly their impact on marginalized communities. The novel portrays how development projects displace the poor, turning their homes into symbols of

ecological destruction. The transformation of Delhi's landscapes reflects the cost of modernization, where nature is sacrificed for urban expansion. Roy describes the changing cityscape:

“The city, increasingly, seemed to have been built on the sorrow of displaced people and the remains of annihilated ecosystems.”

This highlights how unchecked industrialization erodes both human and environmental life.

The novel also critiques large-scale infrastructure projects, such as dams and highways, which displace indigenous and rural populations. The character of Tilo observes how these projects, meant to symbolize progress, instead create suffering: “Development had become the new god, and like all gods, it demanded human sacrifice.” Roy's narrative links environmental destruction to political corruption and economic greed, illustrating how the government and corporations justify ecological harm under the guise of progress. Through interwoven personal and political stories, Roy challenges the dominant discourse of development, urging readers to recognize its devastating impact on both nature and vulnerable communities.

#### **Roy's Non-Fiction Essays: Ecological Justice and Resistance**

Beyond fiction, Arundhati Roy's essays provide a sharp critique of land acquisition, deforestation, and environmental injustice. In *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*, she exposes how corporate interests drive ecological destruction, stating,

“Destroying the environment is seen as a necessary cost of economic growth. But who pays the cost? The poor, the displaced, the voiceless.”

Her writings examine the forced eviction of indigenous communities due to mining and dam projects, such as in the Narmada Valley, where large dams submerged villages.

Roy also critiques the militarization of environmental resistance, highlighting how those who fight for ecological justice are criminalized. In *Walking with the Comrades*, she documents the struggles of indigenous activists resisting deforestation, stating, “The forests are not empty spaces to be conquered; they are homes, histories, and identities.” Her work calls for alternative models of development that prioritize ecological balance and human rights, positioning literature as a powerful tool for environmental advocacy.

#### **Ghosh's Global Climate Perspective vs. Roy's Localized Environmental Struggles**

Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy approach environmental concerns from different vantage points. Ghosh presents climate change as a global crisis, highlighting its interconnectedness with history, politics, and migration. In *The Great Derangement*, he criticizes mainstream literature for failing to engage with climate change, arguing, “The climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (Ghosh 9). *Gun Island* links environmental disasters with forced migration, demonstrating how climate change disrupts entire civilizations.

Conversely, Roy's focus is localized, depicting the human cost of environmental degradation caused by large-scale development projects. The *Ministry of Utmost Happiness* portrays the displacement of marginalized communities due to urbanization and dam construction. Her essays, such as *The Greater Common Good*, criticize corporate-driven environmental destruction, stating, “Big Dams are to a nation's ‘development’ what nuclear bombs are to its military arsenal. They are

both weapons of mass destruction” (Roy 24). While Ghosh’s work emphasizes broad systemic patterns, Roy exposes grassroots struggles, showing how vulnerable communities bear the brunt of ecological harm. Together, their perspectives bridge macro and micro-level understandings of climate change.

#### **Use of Fiction and Non-Fiction in Climate Discourse**

Ghosh and Roy employ different literary forms to engage with climate discourse. Ghosh primarily uses fiction, blending mythology, history, and speculative storytelling to explore environmental themes. *Gun Island* merges folklore with climate science, demonstrating how narratives evolve alongside ecological realities. In *The Great Derangement*, he argues that contemporary literature fails to capture the urgency of climate change, stating, “If climate change is a challenge to the imagination, it is also a challenge to our literary forms” (Ghosh 30). His fiction urges readers to rethink the role of storytelling in environmental awareness.

Roy, in contrast, balances fiction and activism, using both novels and journalistic essays to critique environmental policies. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* dramatizes the displacement of indigenous communities, while her non-fiction directly confronts corporate and governmental environmental failures. In *Walking with the Comrades*, she documents indigenous resistance to deforestation, writing, “The forests are not empty spaces to be conquered; they are homes, histories, and identities” (Roy 76). Unlike Ghosh’s allegorical and speculative fiction, Roy’s writing is politically charged and interventionist, making environmental struggles immediate and tangible.

#### **Impact on Public Awareness and Policy Discussions**

Both authors contribute significantly to public environmental discourse, but their approaches differ in reach and influence. Ghosh’s work has reshaped literary discussions on climate fiction (cli-fi), urging writers to integrate ecological narratives into mainstream literature. *The Great Derangement* has influenced debates on how fiction can engage with climate change, leading scholars to reconsider literature’s role in shaping environmental consciousness. His global approach makes climate change a shared human concern, transcending regional politics.

Roy’s impact is more activist-driven, influencing grassroots movements and legal battles. Her non-fiction critiques of environmental destruction, displacement, and land acquisition have shaped public opinion and informed policy debates. Her essays, such as *The Cost of Living*, expose how large-scale industrial projects impact marginalized communities, prompting discussions on ecological justice. Roy’s writing has been used in legal arguments against dam projects and deforestation policies, showing how literature can function as both artistic expression and political resistance.

While Ghosh’s work stimulates intellectual reflection on climate change, Roy’s writing directly confronts environmental policies, making both contributions vital to climate discourse and activism.

#### **Conclusion**

This study highlights how Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy engage with climate change and environmental crises through different literary approaches. Ghosh presents climate change as a global phenomenon, critiquing literature’s failure to address it in *The Great Derangement* and exploring climate migration in *Gun Island*. Roy, on the other hand, focuses on localized environmental struggles, depicting the displacement of marginalized communities due to development projects in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and her activist essays. Their works bridge global and local perspectives, demonstrating how literature shapes ecological consciousness.

Literature plays a crucial role in environmental awareness, offering narratives that make abstract ecological crises tangible and urgent. While Ghosh encourages rethinking narrative structures in climate fiction, Roy's writing directly challenges policies, making environmental degradation a political concern. Their works demonstrate that literature can both inform and inspire action, fostering a deeper engagement with ecological issues.

Future research could explore other Indian writers like Indra Sinha (*Animal's People*) or Kiran Desai (*The Inheritance of Loss*) to expand discussions on eco-literature. Comparative studies with global writers such as Richard Powers or Barbara Kingsolver could provide insights into climate fiction's evolving role in different literary traditions.

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