



## EXPLORING ECO-LITERATURE IN ENGLISH AS A VITAL TOOL FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

**Dr Madhuri Goswami**

*Associate Professor, English, Government Girls College, Chomu (Jaipur).*

### **Abstract**

*The entire world has been grappling with the daunting challenge of eco-disasters and the pleas to save and protect our environment are audible from all over the map. Definitely, science and technology can play a crucial role in decoupling development and environmental degradation. However, merely science and technology are not enough to combat the global ecological crisis and bring forth the awareness that is the need of the hour to save mother earth. We need to perceive the necessity to orient our approach to saving nature and conserving the environment through the power of literary words. Eco-literature is the rising and expanding wave of the present time and it embraces the whole gamut of literary works, including fiction, poetry and criticism, which lay stress on ecological issues. Most of the current writing in this genre looks at human activities that have been destroying nature gradually and irrevocably. Quite interestingly, the word ‘eco’ is derived from the Greek “Oikos,” meaning household or estate. The etymology of ecology defines “Ökologie” as “the study of a dwelling place,” where the study is not circumscribed to science; likewise, defining eco-literature as a wide range of belles-letters, fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, that deals with human engagement with the landscape, flora and fauna of the natural world.*

*The paper seeks to scan the genre of eco-literature by reading environmental literary works from English literature encompassing all genres like fiction, non-fiction and poetry. The study finds that environmental literary works have sought to restore and maintain harmony and equilibrium between humans and nature. However, contemporary literary works, further, need to focus on the effects of ecological havoc on nature, humans and other species. There is an exigency to delve deeper into issues such as how large-scale tribal populations lose their habitats to give way to gigantic industries; how human activities have been blatantly insensitive towards other living species in the environment, etc. To conclude, Eco-literature portrays how environmental degradation leads to human agony, suffering and displacement and now, is expected to gain strength and turn into a strong wave across the literary ocean to achieve the aim of environmental conservation.*

**Keywords:** *Eco-literature, Ecocriticism, Environmental Conservation, Eco-fiction, Nature.*

### **Introduction**

Our planet has been facing eco-disasters and the pleas to save and protect our environment are quite distinctly audible from all spheres of life, whether political, economic, social, scientific, technological, academic, artistic, or literary. As our civilization faces this challenge, science and technology can, definitely, play a crucial role in decoupling development and environmental degradation. However, merely science and technology are not enough to combat the global ecological crisis and bring forth the awareness that is the need of the hour to save mother earth. We need to perceive the necessity to orient our approach to saving nature and conserving the environment through the power of literary words. As literature does not float above life, so it has its role to play. For a long time, nature was not given due consideration by literary critics, so ecologically oriented literature pleads for a better understanding of nature in its wider significance.



Eco-literature has emerged as a new genre and embraces the whole array of literary works, including fiction, poetry and criticism, which lay stress on ecological issues. Most of the current writing in this genre looks at human activities that have been destroying nature gradually and irrevocably. Quite interestingly, the word ‘eco’ is derived from the Greek “Oikos,” meaning household or estate or earth. The etymology of ecology defines “Ökologie” as ‘the study of a dwelling place,’ where the study is not circumscribed to science; likewise, defining eco-literature as a wide range of belles-letters, fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, that deals with human engagement with the landscape, flora and fauna of the natural world.

### **Exploring Eco-literature**

Literature, as the reflection of modern-day society, plays a significant role in representing our environment. Eco-literature encompasses all literary genres such as fiction, non-fiction, poetry, travelogue, diary, etc. that deal with significant environmental issues, and human engagement with the landscape, flora and fauna of the natural world. It further ramifies into Eco-fiction, Ecology, Eco-poetics or Eco poetry. Eco-fiction, tinged with conscience, is ecologically oriented fiction, which may be nature-oriented (non-human oriented) or environment-oriented (human impacts on nature). According to *The Cambridge History of American Novel’s* chapter titled ‘Contemporary Ecofiction’, “Ecofiction is an elastic term, capacious enough to accommodate a variety of fictional works that address the relationship between natural settings and the human communities that dwell within them. The term emerged soon after ecology took hold as a popular scientific paradigm and a broad cultural attitude in the 1960s and 1970s.” Thus, Eco-fiction became popular in the 1970s, along with other environmental movements, and opened up a new literary study that connected humanities and nature. Eco-fiction novels and prose zoom out beyond the personal narrative and connect us to the commons around us—our natural habitat. As an integral part of eco-literature, this fictional writing ranges from mysteries to thrillers, yet they all share strong environmental themes.

Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher, developed the notion of “Deep Ecology” which emphasizes the basic interrelation of all life forms and natural features and presents a symbiotic and holistic worldview rather than an anthropocentric one. Eco-poetics is not merely nature poetry rather it is a multidisciplinary approach that consists of thinking and writing on poetics, science, and theory as well as emphasizing innovative approaches common to conceptual poetry. Eco-poetics rose out of the late 20th-century awareness of ecology and concerns over environmental disasters. The influential journal *Eco-poetics*, edited by Jonathan Skinner, publishes writing that explores “creative-critical edges between making and writing” and features poets such as Jack Collom, Juliana Spahr, and Forrest Gander.

### **Eco-literature and Ecocriticism**

Earlier theories in literary and cultural studies focusing on the issue of class, race, gender, and region are criteria and fields of critical analysis. The late twentieth century has been alarmed by a new threat: an ecological disaster. The most crucial environmental crises that humankind confronts are nuclear war, depletion of valuable natural resources, population explosion, the proliferation of exploitative technologies, the conquest of space preliminary to using it as a garbage dump, pollution, and extinction of species (though not a human problem) among others. In such a context, the literary and cultural theory has begun to address the issue as a part of academic discourse. Numerous green movements have sprung up all over the world, and some have even gained representation in the governments. Literary writings have also been vocalizing these pressing issues of the world environment without being circumscribed by national boundaries and play a significant role in representing our environment.



Ecocriticism was officially heralded by the publication of two seminal works, *The Ecocriticism Reader* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, and *The Environmental Imagination*, by Lawrence Buell. Both of these works were published in the mid-1990s. Since then, Ecocriticism has developed as a 'worldwide emergent movement'. The scholars are still engaged in developing its nature and scope. Ecocriticism analyses the relationship between literature and ecology and their synthesis. It is an interdisciplinary study of ecology and literature unique as a synthesis of science and humanism.

From a broader perspective, Ecocriticism guides us to examine the world around us and critique the mannerisms of society in the treatment of nature. The theory helps in analyzing any text with an eye on nature's portrayal by the author and the ecocritical trope within the text. Ecocritics encourage others to think seriously about the aesthetic and ethical dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis and about how language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implications. It also establishes a close relation to Ecofeminism. Ecofeminism addresses the connections between the domination and/or exploitation of women, nature, and other marginalized groups of people and the literature draws a parallel between environmental degradation and the subordination of women—with the goal of identifying and fostering liberatory alternatives.

Since every country has its own literature and these countries have shaped the understanding and approach to the nature or natural world of their people through their works of literature. Hence literary works have exercised a tremendous impact on the mindset of people and the strategies of policymakers. Contemporary literary composers of all genres have raised the seriousness of environmental degradation and issues. Eco-literature and ecologists have tried to aware people to be sympathetic and respectful of mother nature. This theory has sparked writers to activate and alarm readers against the time when the aftermaths of human actions would be damaging the planet's basic life support system. This awareness brings in us a desire to contribute to environmental restoration, not merely as a hobby or demonstration but as a representative of literature. Eco-critics encourage others to think earnestly about the aesthetic and ethical dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis and about how language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implications. ( To sum up, as a distinctive approach to the practice literary criticism, ecocriticism gives increased attention to literary representatives of nature and is sensitive to interdependencies that ground the author, character or work in the natural system. This approach shifts critical focus from social relations toward natural relationships and views the individual as a member of the ecosystem. It values highly the 'literary sense of place' not as a setting but as an essential expression of bonding with or alienation from a specific natural context.)

The study explores various English literary works to seek an interrelated association between environment, sustainability and Literature. There are various novels from various writers belonging to different countries who have chosen ecological themes like David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, Jon McGregor's *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* and Ian McEwan's *Solar* and *Beloved Beasts: Fighting for Life in an Age of Extinction*, Michelle Nijhuis. *Even among Indian writers*, Amitav Ghosh's *Hungry Tide*, Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, Ruskin Bond's *No Room for Leopard* and many more. One can find a long list of non-fictional works in this range of environmental literature. Donald Worster's *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (1977) became a textbook for the study of ecological thought down the ages. The historian Arnold Toynbee recorded the effect of human civilisation upon the land and nature in his monumental work, *Mankind and Mother Earth* (1976). The work of environmental historians has been pathbreaking too. Rich-ard Grove et al's massive *Nature and the Orient* (1998), and David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha's *Nature, Culture,*



*Imperialism* (1995) have been significant works in the environmental history of India and Southeast Asia. Ramachandra Guha is an acclaimed environmental historian from India today.

**In *Beloved Beasts: Fighting for Life in an Age of Extinction***, Michelle Nijhuis, an acclaimed American science journalist, fascinatingly traces how the environment conservation movement has long been intertwined with, and in some cases directly born from, political agendas based upon maintaining colonial power, white supremacy, American exceptionalism, and traditional notions of robust masculinity. ‘Exploring the conservation movement from cultural, political, social, economic, and historical perspectives, *Beloved Beasts* also interrogates conservation’s academic origins, tracing the development of the fields of ecology and conservation biology in scientific and academic contexts. The very term “ecology,” Nijhuis notes, is only about one hundred years old, indicating how nascent our burgeoning understanding of the interconnectedness of all living things still is. Nijhuis also discusses how other academic as well as historical developments—from the creation of taxonomy to the invention of DDT to the end of World War II—helped give rise to newly developing notions of ecology, conservation, and environmentalism.’

The study has also investigated poetic works by William Wordsworth to trace the elements of ecological consciousness in his nature writings. Wordsworth, the priest of nature, is reckoned as one of the most famous natural poets in England because of his unfathomable love for beautiful natural scenery, his experiences in nature and his concern for nature. He had made the Lake District his home for nearly his whole life. In his poetry, he was, either consciously or unconsciously, concerned with the good relationship between man and nature, his respect and love for nature and even the influence of nature on man. All his concerns represented in his poetry embody his ecological consciousness. Since the last decade, Wordsworth has been generally recognized as one of the most important ecological poets. From ecological views, we see that the most obvious feature in Wordsworth’s poetry lies in his keen perception of the beauty of nature and the close relationship between man and nature. When considering the validity of Wordsworth’s argument in *The Tables Turned* that individuals should look to nature in order to understand themselves, and feel more contented, free, and happy, one might consider the fact that people have long experienced benefits from spending time outside in the fresh air. It is also now scientific, clinical evidence to prove nature’s health benefits and ability to relieve stress.

“One Impulse from the vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good  
Than all the sages can.” (Lines 21-24, *The Tables Turned*)

In “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud”, the poet mainly describes his discovering a large patch of country daffodils moving in the light wind and its lasting effect on his quiet moments of reverie after he left irksome city life. It seemed that the cloud, vales, hills, daffodils and the poet himself formed an organic unity. Wordsworth has immersed himself in nature, so he related: “I wandered lonely as a cloud/ That floats on high o’er vales and hills.” Here, the poet applies the image of a cloud to himself, moving aimlessly, which implied his integration with nature. The first three stanzas of this poem express that the poet feels alienated and lonely in society and then when he returns to nature, he is infected by the beautiful scenery. In the fourth stanza, his memory comes back to the scene in his imagination. His happy mood appears to be recaptured. The poet depicts his wandering and sight of a large patch of daffodils by a lake, from which he gets tranquillity and comfort. Nature provides beauty for him to





appreciate. The flowers in nature are his friends, companions and partners, so nature helps him survive the worst period of his life. Here, we see nature and the poet himself are one unity and form a picture of the consistency of the two. Then the images of dancing flowers, the lake, the breeze and the waves, etc. reinforce the harmony between man and nature. So in Wordsworth's mind, man should go with the will of nature and live with nature harmoniously. Wordsworth illuminated a view of natural integrity and thought that man was equal to nature.

Other significant authors, in the category of Indian English fiction, who discourse much about nature are Kamala Markandaya, Ruskin Bond, Kiran Desai, and Amitav Ghosh. Kamala Markandaya owns a high place in Indian writing in English. If we look into Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* visualizes Nature both as a destroyer and preserver of life. Markandaya has signalled in this fiction how the disasters of industrialization devastate the agreement of a worker's life. The novelist here contrasts the detrimental effects of industrialization and the solace and comfort one can find in peasant life. The female protagonist of the novel Rukmani left all her relationships with city life and with her husband and started living a rural life. She is very much attached to her land and somehow responsible for their poverty as well. The very beginning of the novel indicates her relationship with the rural environment. She often recalls her early married life in these words: "While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before, and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for?" (Markandaya 8). The tannery took up all the free space and also affected the biodiversity of the region which was expressed by Rukmini as follows: "At one time, there had been kingfishers here, flashing between the young shoots for our fish; and paddy birds; and sometimes, in the shallower reaches of the river, flamingos, striding with ungainly precision among the water reeds, with plumage of a glory not of this earth. Now birds came no more, for the tannery lay close". (Markandaya 69)

Ruskin Bond, of British descent, is a living legend who has been portraying the life and experiences merged with environmental concerns in his stories. His creative works are the celebration of the environment in which he lives, especially hills and mountains. He believes that the natural environment is a pure bubbling life force, which quickens every object and creature to act, respond and grow. Nature charges and refreshes his creative vigour. The association with the natural environment imbibes nature's attributes like innocence, simplicity and purity. Ruskin Bond's *No Room for a Leopard* shows the pitiable state of the creatures after deforestation.

Kiran Desai in her *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is critical of the hectic town life, having been dissatisfied with which the protagonist takes refuge in the Guava Orchard. *The Hungry Tide* (2004) by Amitav Ghosh is a perfect piece of eco-fiction. Not only does it highlight the ecology of a unique natural region, the lifestyle of the people and animals, etc., but also deals with important points at issue that have a bearing on ecology and the human population that is umbilically attached to it. Also, the novel discusses the politics of multinationals that result in a horrible episode in which thousands of people are killed. In addition, there is a tender love theme that progresses through the warp and woof of the novel however, it rises above the barriers of language, class and culture. Amitav Ghosh has always raised his voice against the mistreatment of nature and natural objects.

"At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. Every year, dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles" (Ghosh 7).



In fact, *The Hungry Tide* is a remarkable ecocritical message as the novel underscores the ecologically and socially harsh framework harboured by people. The delta of the Sundarbans has been displayed as the destroyer and preserver of life. The tale dependably portrays the state-supported psychological oppression to expel the Bengali Refugees settled at Marichjhapi.

To sum up, the wide range of environmental literary studies or Eco-literature is multi-dimensional and sways with various issues of the human and non-human world irrespective of national boundaries. The research traces the underlining trait of increasing and expanding concern for environmental issues. These environmental artistic writings lay emphasis on the need to change our approach to a utilitarian attitude to nature. The study finds that Eco-literature, ostensibly, propounds the theory of ‘Arts for life’s sake’ as it is written with a purported aim to find the solutions for saving the environment by showing the world the numbing and deadening effect of the exploitation of natural resources. This is the need of the hour to ensure that such literary works do not sound like propaganda and should necessarily carry with them deep literary values. Authors need to ensure that they do not artificially structure their plots or introduce characters in their narrative to justify their labelling as eco-literature. The more ecocritical compositions will emanate into the centre, the more humans will figure out how to act and establish a rapport and harmony with nature in a legitimate manner placing the resurrection of the environment and nature on the top of the present concerns of the world.

## References

1. Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2006. Print.
2. Donald Worster’s *Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, Cambridge/New York, Cambridge University Press, 1994. Print.
3. Eby, C., & Reiss, B. (2011). *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* (L. Cassuto, Ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CHOL9780521899079.
4. Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2004. Print
5. Ghosh, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide*. NOIDA: Harper Collins, 2013. Print
6. <https://ecolitbooks.com/2021/12/02/book-review-beloved-beasts-fighting-for-life-in-an-age-of-extinction-by-michelle-nijhuis/>Web.
7. Markandaya, Kamala. *The Nectar in the Sieve*; New Delhi: Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd, 1954. Print.
8. Michelle Nijhuis. (2021). *Beloved Beasts: Fighting for Life in an Age of Extinction*, New York, W.W. Norton and Company, NY. Print.
9. Poetry Foundation. 2017. *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud by William Wordsworth*. [online] Available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/45521> [Accessed 11 December 2022]. Web.
10. Wordsworth, W. and Coleridge. S.T. ‘The Tables Turned’ in *Lyrical Ballads: With a Few Other Poems*. 2017. Penguin Classics, London. Print.