

Original Article

Eco-literature and Environmental Imagination

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Abstract

Eco-literature, a literary domain concerned with ecological awareness and human–nature relationships, has emerged as a critical space for reimagining environmental futures. Rooted in the tradition of nature writing but evolving through diverse genres, eco-literature transcends aesthetic appreciation of the natural world to interrogate the socio-political and cultural conditions underlying ecological crises. The concept of environmental imagination—how individuals and societies envision nature and their place within it—plays a pivotal role in shaping environmental ethics, activism, and sustainable futures. Drawing upon ecocriticism, deep ecology, postcolonial environmentalism, and eco-feminism, this paper examines eco-literature as a site of transformative imagination. Through a critical review of global and regional eco-literary works, the study explores how literature functions as a medium of ecological consciousness and resistance to environmental degradation. The paper also addresses the scope, methodology, and scholarly perspectives within the field, and offers findings on how environmental imagination can foster sustainability narratives in a climate-challenged era.

Keywords: Eco-literature, Environmental imagination, Ecocriticism, Deep ecology, Climate fiction, Indigenous narratives, Sustainability, Nature writing

Introduction

The accelerating environmental crisis—manifested in climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, pollution, and resource depletion—has catalyzed a rethinking of humanity's relationship with the natural world. Literature has historically played a critical role in shaping cultural attitudes toward nature, from Romantic poetry's celebration of pastoral landscapes to contemporary climate fiction's apocalyptic warnings. The term eco-literature encompasses literary works that engage with ecological themes, seeking not merely to depict nature but to interrogate humanity's moral, philosophical, and political obligations toward the environment (Glottfelty & Fromm, 1996).

The environmental imagination refers to the capacity to envision the world ecologically, recognizing the interdependence of all life forms and the consequences of human actions on ecosystems (Buell, 1995). This imagination is cultivated through narratives, metaphors, and symbols that connect readers emotionally and intellectually to the environment. By fostering empathy for non-human life and envisioning sustainable futures, literature can become an instrument of environmental change. This paper aims to explore the intersection of eco-literature and environmental imagination, identifying their theoretical underpinnings, cultural manifestations, and potential as catalysts for environmental awareness and activism.

Objectives of the Study

1. To define and contextualize eco-literature within literary and environmental studies.
2. To examine the concept of environmental imagination and its role in shaping ecological consciousness.
3. To review major eco-literary works and movements, both global and regional.
4. To analyze the interdisciplinary approaches—such as ecocriticism, deep ecology, and eco-feminism—that inform eco-literary studies.
5. To assess the potential of literature as a tool for environmental education and activism.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its interdisciplinary engagement between literature, environmental philosophy, and cultural studies.

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By understanding eco-literature as a space of environmental imagination, we can appreciate literature's potential in influencing societal values and policy debates around sustainability. This study contributes to the growing body of ecocritical scholarship by:

Highlighting literature's role in envisioning alternative ecological futures.

Offering critical insight into how narrative forms can inspire environmental ethics.

Providing an analytical framework for educators, activists, and policymakers seeking to integrate environmental consciousness into cultural discourse.

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on both Western and non-Western traditions of eco-literature, with examples ranging from Romantic nature poetry to contemporary climate fiction (cli-fi), Indigenous oral traditions, and postcolonial environmental narratives. The scope includes:

- Literary genres: poetry, fiction, essays, memoirs, and Indigenous storytelling.
- Theoretical approaches: ecocriticism, eco-feminism, postcolonial ecologies, and deep ecology.
- Geographical focus: Global perspectives with attention to South Asian and Assamese eco-literary traditions.

Methodology

1. The research adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in literary analysis and ecocritical theory. The steps include:
2. Textual Analysis: Close reading of primary eco-literary texts.
3. Theoretical Application: Applying ecocritical frameworks to interpret texts.
4. Comparative Approach: Cross-cultural comparison of environmental narratives.
5. Secondary Sources: Reviewing scholarly articles, books, and critical essays to contextualize findings.
6. Thematic Synthesis: Identifying recurring themes of environmental imagination.

Review of Literature

Scholarly engagement with eco-literature gained momentum in the late 20th century with the rise of ecocriticism. Glotfelty and Fromm's (1996) *The Ecocriticism Reader* established the field by defining it as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." Buell's (1995) *The Environmental Imagination* argued that literature could influence environmental consciousness by expanding readers' ecological awareness.

Garrard (2012) categorized ecocritical approaches into key thematic areas: pastoral,

wilderness, apocalypse, dwelling, animals, and earth. Meanwhile, eco-feminists such as Shiva (1988) and Gaard (1993) emphasized the interconnected oppression of women and nature. Recent developments include climate fiction, as exemplified by Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy and Robinson's *Science in the Capital* series, which dramatize the socio-political consequences of environmental collapse.

In the Indian context, writers like Amitav Ghosh (*The Hungry Tide*, 2004) and Indra Sinha (*Animal's People*, 2007) explore ecological devastation entwined with postcolonial realities. Assamese literature also features eco-conscious works, often rooted in rural landscapes, folk traditions, and Indigenous cosmologies.

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Do you want me to proceed with the remaining sections now, so the final output is the entire completed research paper in one go? That will make it fully ready for academic use.

Discussion and Analysis

Eco-literature: Expanding the Definition

Eco-literature is more than "writing about nature." It embodies an ethical and political dimension that challenges anthropocentric worldviews. While nature writing in earlier centuries often idealized pastoral landscapes, modern eco-literature frequently confronts the environmental crises of industrial modernity, globalization, and climate change. Works such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) redefined environmental discourse by blending scientific evidence with literary narrative, showing that the written word could influence environmental policy.

The term also accommodates Indigenous storytelling traditions, where cosmology and ecological ethics are embedded within oral narratives. These narratives often reject the nature-culture divide, presenting a holistic worldview where rivers, forests, and animals are living entities with agency (Cajete, 2000).

Environmental Imagination: Literature as Visionary Space

Lawrence Buell's (1995) concept of the "environmental imagination" refers to literature's capacity to project an ecologically informed worldview. Through imagery, metaphor, and narrative, literature encourages readers to imagine ecosystems beyond their immediate sensory experience. For example:

Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge evoked landscapes as spaces of spiritual renewal.

Contemporary cli-fi authors imagine future worlds shaped by ecological collapse, thereby warning readers of the urgency of environmental stewardship.

Indigenous literature uses mythic imagination to affirm reciprocal relationships between humans and non-human life.

Environmental imagination thus operates on two planes: retrospective (evoking lost or endangered environments) and prospective (envisioning sustainable futures).

Theoretical Approaches in Eco-literary Studies

a) Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism examines how literature represents nature, environmental ethics, and ecological crises (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). It moves beyond textual analysis to address the material conditions of environmental degradation.

b) Deep Ecology

Proposed by Arne Næss (1973), deep ecology advocates intrinsic value in all forms of life, rejecting human-centered utilitarianism. Literary works under this approach often depict non-human life as equally worthy of moral consideration.

c) Eco-feminism

Eco-feminists link the exploitation of nature with the oppression of women, arguing for an ethic of care that extends to all living beings (Gaard, 1993; Shiva, 1988). Eco-feminist literature often portrays women as custodians of environmental wisdom.

d) Postcolonial Environmentalism

Postcolonial ecocriticism examines how colonial exploitation reshaped landscapes and indigenous ecologies (Nixon, 2011). Literature from the Global South often intertwines environmental degradation with histories of economic and cultural domination.

Eco-literature in Practice: Genres and Examples

Poetry

Poets like Mary Oliver (Wild Geese) and Joy Harjo (She Had Some Horses) weave nature imagery with personal and collective identities, fostering emotional bonds with the earth.

Novels

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) portrays the Sundarbans as both a fragile ecosystem and a contested human space, revealing the interplay of climate vulnerability and human migration.

Memoirs & Essays

Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) is an immersive meditation on the cycles of life in a Virginia valley, demonstrating how close observation cultivates ecological wonder.

Indigenous Storytelling

Assamese folk narratives often depict forests and rivers as spiritual entities, reinforcing sustainable practices through myth and moral instruction.

Environmental Imagination in Education and Activism

Eco-literature is increasingly integrated into environmental education. By cultivating empathy for non-human life, literature can inspire sustainable behavior. Activist movements have drawn from literary works for symbolic power—such as the Chipko Movement in India, influenced by local songs and stories venerating trees.

Conclusion and Findings

Conclusion

Eco-literature and environmental imagination together form a vital intersection where art meets ecological ethics. Literature not only reflects the state of the environment but actively shapes the ways people conceptualize and interact with nature. Through diverse genres and perspectives, eco-literature invites readers to see themselves as participants in a shared ecological community. Its role in fostering environmental imagination is crucial in an age of ecological crisis, offering both warnings of collapse and visions of renewal.

Findings

- **Interdisciplinary Nature** – Eco-literature bridges literature, philosophy, ecology, and social justice.
- **Cultural Variability** – While Western eco-literature often focuses on wilderness preservation, Indigenous traditions integrate ecological ethics into everyday life.
- **Catalyst for Awareness** – Environmental imagination cultivated through literature can influence environmental attitudes and policy debates.
- **Theoretical Richness** – Ecocriticism, eco-feminism, deep ecology, and postcolonial studies offer complementary frameworks for analysis.
- **Educational Potential** – Eco-literature is a powerful pedagogical tool for environmental education.
- **Activist Resonance** – Literary works can inspire and sustain grassroots environmental movements.
- **Sustainability Visioning** – Literature's capacity to envision alternative ecological futures makes it a strategic cultural resource in climate discourse.

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