

Broken Forests and Fractured Lives: Environmental Displacement in Indian English Fiction

Niranjan Lakra¹, Research Scholar, Department of English

Email: niranjan.lakra1438@gmail.com

Dr. Disha Bhatt², Assistant Professor, Department of English

Email: disha.bhatt@kiss.ac.in

KISS Deemed to be University, Bhubaneswar

Abstract

Environmental displacement has emerged as one of the most critical socio-ecological challenges in contemporary India, driven by deforestation, mining, dam construction, industrial expansion, conservation policies, and climate-induced disasters. Indian English fiction has become a powerful archive that documents, critiques, and reimagines these crises by foregrounding the human and ecological consequences of developmental violence. This article examines how writers such as Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Mahasweta Devi, Indra Sinha, Kiran Desai, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, and others depict “broken forests” as metaphors for fractured communities, cultural erasure, and historical injustice. Drawing on ecocriticism, postcolonial ecology, ecofeminism, trauma studies, and environmental justice theory, the study argues that literature transforms landscapes into sites of memory, resistance, and ecological witness. Through narrative strategies including multivocal storytelling, mythic structures, documentary realism, non-linear temporality, and embodied narration, Indian fiction exposes the slow violence of developmentalism, the gendered dimensions of displacement, and the enduring vulnerability of Adivasi, Dalit, and rural communities. By situating Indian literary representations within broader global and historical contexts from colonial forestry practices to neoliberal extraction and climate change the article demonstrates that fiction not only reflects environmental realities but also challenges dominant narratives of progress. Ultimately, Indian English fiction emerges as a crucial medium of environmental justice, compelling readers to

confront the moral and ecological costs of development and imagine more equitable futures.

Keywords: Environmental Displacement, Indian English Fiction, Ecocriticism, Postcolonial Ecology, Environmental Justice, Ecofeminism

Introduction

Environmental displacement has become one of the most pressing socio-political and ecological concerns in twenty-first-century India. Large-scale mining, dam construction, industrial expansion, deforestation, and climate-induced disasters have uprooted millions, disproportionately affecting Adivasi, Dalit, and rural communities. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, India records one of the world’s highest numbers of people displaced annually due to environmental and weather-related events. This crisis reflects not merely a physical uprooting but a profound disruption of cultural identity, memory, livelihood, and community belonging. Literature especially contemporary Indian English fiction has emerged as a powerful medium that documents, critiques, and humanizes this phenomenon. Through narrative depth, symbolic landscapes, and emotionally textured characters, fiction reveals how “broken forests” translate into “fractured lives,” making visible the hidden costs of development and ecological destruction.

The title “Broken Forests and Fractured Lives” captures the central metaphor through which Indian English fiction represents environmental displacement: nature is not a backdrop but an active participant in the social world, and its degradation mirrors the disintegration of social relations. From Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019) to Mahasweta Devi’s tribal narratives,

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *The Cost of Living* (1999), Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007), and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), literary works explore how ecological damage unfolds alongside political marginalization, class asymmetry, and historical injustice. These narratives demonstrate how developmentalism often defended as national progress becomes complicit in dispossession. Roy critiques this explicitly when she writes that India's development model has produced "the world's largest population of internally displaced people" (Roy, *The Cost of Living* 47).

Indian English fiction also engages with broader global discourses the Anthropocene, climate justice, postcolonial ecology, ecofeminism, and Indigenous environmentalism. Writers situate local events such as the Morichjhapi massacre, Narmada dam displacement, and Bhopal gas tragedy within transnational systems of extraction, capitalist expansion, and climate-change vulnerability. As Rob Nixon theorizes in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, environmental harm is often "incremental, accretive, and largely invisible" (Nixon 2). Indian fictional narratives make this elusive violence legible by focusing on intimate human stories situated within damaged ecologies.

Amitav Ghosh's work is central to this project because his fiction foregrounds the entanglement of global climate forces and local histories of displacement. In *The Hungry Tide*, the fragile Sundarbans become a microcosm for geopolitical precarity, shaped simultaneously by tides, cyclones, refugee politics, and state violence. The memory of Morichjhapi where refugees resisting eviction were brutally suppressed exemplifies how environmental management intersects with political power. Ghosh writes that the people of Morichjhapi were "swept away like debris before the tide" (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 254), using ecological imagery to depict human dispossession. Similarly, *Gun Island* dramatizes climate migration across continents, illustrating how displacement is no longer geographically contained.

Mahasweta Devi's stories, meanwhile, emphasize that for Adivasi communities, the forest is not simply land but a lifeworld cultural, spiritual, economic, and historical. In *The Book of the Hunter*, she notes that the forest is "the very condition of existence for the tribal" (Devi 22). When development or industry destroys these spaces, the

resulting displacement erases not only homes but entire cosmologies. Districts like Koraput, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh have long been sites of mining-induced devastation a reality reflected in Devi's fiction, which depicts how Indigenous identities fracture when ancestral forests are lost.

Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* offer a different but related portrait: the aftermath of the Bhopal gas leak, which rendered an entire community toxic. The protagonist Animal's deformed body becomes a living archive of environmental harm. As he says, "This place is cursed by the poison they made here" (Sinha 41). Environmental disasters, in this view, produce communities of permanent displacement ecological refugees unable to return to a liveable home.

Arundhati Roy's fiction and nonfiction interweave ecological and human trauma. In *The God of Small Things*, the Meenachal River once a space of childhood play and sensual freedom is polluted and choked, symbolizing the corrosion of social harmony. Roy writes that the river "shrinks like a wounded creature" (Roy, *The God of Small Things* 123), linking environmental degradation with emotional and political suffocation. Her essays in *The Cost of Living* further document the devastating consequences of big-dam development on tribal communities along the Narmada River.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* expands this discourse into the Himalayan landscape, where colonial forestry practices, immigration policies, and climate vulnerability intersect. She describes the mountains as scarred by erosion, deforestation, and landslides a "place of lost purity" (Desai 32). Displacement in her novel is geographical, economic, and existential.

These works demonstrate that Indian English fiction does not merely represent environmental crises; it interprets them, critiques them, and situates them within a matrix of power. Literature becomes a mode of environmental witnessing, contributing to what scholars such as Ursula Heise call "eco-cosmopolitanism" a recognition that ecological crises transcend national borders (Heise 21). Indian fiction thus places local environmental displacement within global discourses of climate justice, ecological citizenship, and postcolonial critique.

This research article argues that Indian English fiction constructs a powerful discourse of environmental displacement by:

- (1) using landscapes as archival spaces of memory and resistance;
- (2) critiquing development-induced displacement and extractive violence;
- (3) illuminating the emotional, cultural, and gendered dimensions of ecological loss; and
- (4) employing narrative techniques that foreground ecological witness and slow violence.

The following sections develop these arguments through a detailed literary, theoretical, and contextual analysis.

Objectives

To analyse how Indian English fiction represents environmental displacement

1. To examine the intersections of ecology, development, and social injustice
2. To explore how landscapes function as spaces of memory, identity, and cultural continuity, and how their destruction results in emotional and historical rupture.
3. To study the gendered dimensions of ecological violence
4. To demonstrate how Indian English fiction challenges dominant state and corporate discourses of development

Section I - Theoretical Framework

Understanding environmental displacement in Indian English fiction requires an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that brings together ecocriticism, postcolonial ecology, ecofeminism, Indigenous studies, and trauma theory. These frameworks illuminate how literary representations of ecological damage reveal deeper structures of social inequality, historical violence, and cultural erasure. They also help analyse how fiction interprets the Anthropocene a geological era marked by human-induced ecological change from the perspective of the Global South.

1. Ecocriticism and the Anthropocene

Ecocriticism, broadly defined by Cheryll Glotfelty as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xix), provides the first analytical foundation for reading environmental displacement in the Indian context. Ecocritical readings acknowledge that landscapes in fiction are not inert settings but dynamic entities that

shape and are shaped by human histories. This framework is especially crucial for Indian fiction, which often treats forests, rivers, mountains, and coastal ecologies as living presences.

The concept of the Anthropocene popularized by Paul Crutzen underscores the unprecedented scale of human impact on the planet. Yet scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty argue that the Anthropocene must be understood alongside histories of colonialism, capitalism, and inequality. He writes that climate change forces us to think “the human species and human history together” (Chakrabarty 221). Indian English fiction precisely illuminates this intersection, showing how marginalized communities bear the brunt of planetary crises they did not create. Rob Nixon’s influential concept of “slow violence” is particularly relevant. Nixon defines slow violence as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a delayed destruction dispersed across time and space” (Nixon 2). Environmental displacement whether caused by mining runoff, dam submergence, forest loss, or toxic leaks fits squarely within this category. Fiction becomes a powerful medium for depicting slow violence because it can narrate incremental suffering through characters, memories, and intergenerational trauma.

In this view, novels such as *Animal’s People* and *The Hungry Tide* are not just stories but ecological testimonies that render visible the long-term consequences of environmental ruination.

2. Postcolonial Ecology

Postcolonial ecology examines how colonial histories of extraction shape present-day environmental crises. Scholars like Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue that colonialism created “ecological imperialism,” transforming landscapes into resources for exploitation (Huggan and Tiffin 14). In India, British forestry, plantation agriculture, and industrial mining have left enduring scars.

Indian English fiction foregrounds these legacies. Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* depicts how colonial forestry practices disrupted Himalayan ecologies, leading to contemporary landslides and erosion. Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace* (though not the primary focus of this article) explores how Burmese teak forests were destroyed by colonial capitalism. Similarly, the Narmada Valley documented in Roy’s nonfiction is a postcolonial space where development projects reproduce colonial patterns of dispossession. Postcolonial

ecology also critiques the universalizing tendencies of global environmental discourse. While Western narratives often frame climate change as a shared human responsibility, postcolonial theorists insist that responsibility and vulnerability are unequally distributed. Indian fiction reflects this by presenting displaced tribal and rural communities as victims of a global system that privileges profit over ecological sustainability.

3. Indigenous and Adivasi Environmental Epistemologies

Mahasweta Devi's fiction serves as a crucial gateway into Indigenous ecological worldviews. Indigenous epistemologies understand nature not as an external object but as an integrated web of spiritual, cultural, and economic relations. As Ramachandra Guha notes, Adivasi environmental ethics emphasize "subsistence" and "ecological prudence" rather than extraction (Guha 25).

Indigenous studies highlight concepts like:

- land as identity
- forest as kinship
- ecology as moral economy

These principles help interpret how Indian fiction portrays the trauma of displacement. For Adivasis, losing land means losing not only livelihood but cosmology, language, and cultural memory. In *The Book of the Hunter*, Devi depicts how forest loss annihilates entire ways of being, making displacement an ontological crisis rather than a logistical one. Such frameworks help us read Indian English fiction not as environmental literature alone but as literature of environmental justice, foregrounding Indigenous resistance and alternative ecological imaginations.

4. Ecofeminism and Gendered Ecological Vulnerability

Ecofeminism offers a crucial lens for understanding how gender intersects with environmental displacement. Vandana Shiva argues that "women and nature are intimately interconnected through their shared histories of exploitation under patriarchal-capitalist systems" (Shiva 38). Indian fiction often depicts environmental crises as disproportionately affecting women, who are primary caregivers, resource gatherers, and cultural memory-keepers.

For example:

- In *The God of Small Things*, the polluted river mirrors the constrained lives of women like Ammu.
- Mahasweta Devi's women characters often face compounded ecological and patriarchal violence.
- In *The Hungry Tide*, Kusum's memories frame displacement as both maternal trauma and communal catastrophe.

Ecofeminist theory helps analyse these narratives as critiques of development that sacrifices both ecosystems and the women who maintain community structures.

5. Trauma Studies and Environmental Rupture

Environmental displacement often produces psychological and intergenerational trauma. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is not merely an event but a wound that resists full assimilation into consciousness (Caruth 4). Indian English fiction uses fragmented narratives, memory ruptures, and bodily metaphors to capture the experience of ecological trauma. In *Animal's People*, Animal's body becomes a metaphor for the poisoned environment. The Bhopal gas tragedy is not only a historical event but a living wound, constantly revisited. Similarly, the Morichjhapi massacre in *The Hungry Tide* persists as "a ghostly memory hovering over the tide country" (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 289). Trauma studies thus illuminate how literature bears witness to the emotional scars of displacement long after the physical act of eviction is complete.

6. Environmental Justice as an Overarching Framework

Environmental justice (EJ) synthesizes the concerns of ecocriticism, postcolonial theory, and Indigenous studies. EJ argues that ecological burdens pollution, land loss, toxic waste, climate vulnerability falls disproportionately on marginalized communities.

In India, this includes:

- Adivasis displaced by mines
- Dalit communities living near toxic sites
- coastal inhabitants affected by cyclones
- women burdened by resource scarcity

- informal labourers in polluted industrial zones

Indian English fiction exposes these injustices. As Nixon notes, literature can “amplify the voices of those rendered mute by inequality” (Nixon 15). Fiction becomes a site of ethical engagement and political resistance.

Environmental Histories and Literary Context

Environmental displacement in Indian English fiction cannot be understood without examining the long, complex history of ecological transformation on the subcontinent. The representation of broken forests and fractured lives in literature is grounded in material histories of colonial extraction, post-independence developmentalism, and the accelerating climate crisis. This section traces these histories and demonstrates how Indian fiction responds to them by constructing a counter-archive challenging state narratives of progress and foregrounding the lived realities of ecological ruin.

1. Colonial Ecologies and the Rupture of Indigenous Lifeworld

The arrival of the British colonial state marked a profound ecological rupture in India. Colonial forestry, introduced in the mid-nineteenth century, replaced community-based forest management systems with centralized, extractive policies. Ramachandra Guha notes that colonial forestry’s primary objective was “to maximize timber extraction and revenue generation” (Guha 41). The forests of Central India, the Nilgiris, the Western Ghats, and Burma were reimagined not as thriving ecological communities but as commodities.

These transformations led to:

- deforestation and soil depletion
- displacement of Adivasi communities
- disruption of shifting cultivation systems
- criminalization of traditional forest practices
- restricted access to sacred groves and grazing routes

Indian fiction often revisits these colonial histories. Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* depicts how colonial forestry drastically altered Himalayan landscapes, marking the beginning of ecological fragility in the region. She writes that the mountains, once lush, had been “scarred by the relentless hunger of empire” (Desai 30). The novel makes

explicit the link between colonial ecological exploitation and contemporary environmental vulnerabilities such as landslides.

Similarly, Amitav Ghosh’s historical novels *The Glass Palace* and *The Hungry Tide* trace how colonial manipulation of forests, tidal lands, and river economies shaped the modern environmental landscape. These texts situate displacement within longer histories of exploitation that began well before India’s independence.

2. Post-Independence Developmentalism and the Rise of Displacement

After independence, India embarked on a development model that prioritized industrialization, large dams, mining, and urban expansion. This model, often inspired by Nehruvian socialist modernity, was celebrated as the engine of national progress. Nehru famously called dams “the temples of modern India.” However, the human and ecological costs of this development were immense.

2.1. Large Dams and Submerged Communities

The construction of mega-dams Bhakra Nangal, Sardar Sarovar, Hirakud, Tehri resulted in massive displacement. The Narmada Valley Project alone uprooted more than a million people, mostly Adivasis. Arundhati Roy’s essays in *The Cost-of-Living* document this catastrophe. She writes: “The river has become a graveyard of villages” (Roy 68). For Roy, displacement is not collateral damage but a violent, systemic erasure of marginalized lives. Indian fiction mirrors this history. While novels like *The Hungry Tide* do not depict dams directly, the Morichjhapi massacre central to Ghosh’s narrative is itself a result of state-sponsored ecological engineering and demographic control. Refugees, who had already been displaced once during Partition, are uprooted again under the logic of environmental conservation.

2.2. Mining, Industrial Zones, and Corporate Violence

Mining has been one of the largest drivers of displacement in India. States such as Jharkhand, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh rich in minerals are also home to dense Adivasi populations. The conflict between mining corporations and tribal communities has created zones of permanent displacement. Mahasweta Devi’s work, especially her writings on tribal resistance in Bihar and Jharkhand, captures the violence of mining-induced dispossession. In stories like “Douloti the

Bountiful” and *The Book of the Hunter*, Devi exposes how forest depletion correlates with exploitation and displacement.

Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*, though set in the fictional town of Khaufpur, is a thinly veiled commentary on the Bhopal gas tragedy a real disaster caused by industrial negligence and corporate impunity. Sinha writes: “Our city is poisoned. Our bodies are poisoned. They made this death and walked away” (41). The novel documents the birth of an environmentally displaced community trapped in a toxic landscape yet unable to migrate.

3. Conservation, Development, and the Paradox of Environmentalism

Another historical force shaping environmental displacement is the emergence of state-sponsored environmentalism. Projects aimed at wildlife protection sometimes result in the displacement of communities who have lived sustainably in these landscapes for centuries.

In the creation of tiger reserves, wildlife sanctuaries, and national parks, thousands of forest-dwellers have been evicted in the name of conservation. The Sundarbans a central setting in *The Hungry Tide* has been the site of such displacements, where human inhabitants are seen as encroachers despite their historical dependence on the mangrove ecosystem.

The paradox is clear:

- Development displaces people to create dams, industries, and mining zones.
- Conservation displaces people to restore forests and protect animals.

Both models frame human communities especially Adivasis as expendable. Ghosh highlights this paradox when he notes how the tidal islands are regulated more for ecological purity than human welfare. The refugees of Morichjhapi were expelled under the pretext of protecting the environment: an example of conservation used as a tool for political control.

4. The Climate Crisis and New Forms of Environmental Displacement

While colonial and developmental histories structure much ecological displacement, the twenty-first century introduces new pressures: cyclones, floods, sea-level rise, erratic monsoons, heatwaves, and agricultural collapse.

4.1. Coastal and Island Vulnerability

The Sundarbans, featured in *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*, are among the world’s most climate-vulnerable regions. Rising seas, salinization of soil, and intensifying cyclones continually displace communities. Ghosh writes that in the tide country, “the land is always becoming water and the water is always becoming land” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 7), capturing the precarious instability of the ecosystem. *Gun Island* extends this vulnerability into global climate migration, showing how local ecological changes reverberate across continents.

4.2. Himalayan Fragility

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, the eroded Himalayas symbolize both ecological and political fragility. Desai describes how landslides reshape the mountain villages and force inhabitants into precarious livelihoods. Climate change has amplified these dangers, transforming the Himalayas into a region of chronic displacement.

4.3. Urban Environmental Crises

Novels like *Animal’s People* reveal how industrial disasters, toxic pollution, and unsafe urban development create environmental refugees within cities. Climate-induced water scarcity, heat islands, and slum dispossession continue to push marginalized populations into unstable living conditions.

5. Literature as Environmental Archive

Given these historical forces, Indian English fiction becomes a crucial archive documenting both ecological transformation and the human consequences of displacement. Literature records the voices of those erased from official narratives Adivasis, poor farmers, refugees, victims of industrial negligence, and climate migrants.

As Nixon reminds us, literature “provides the imaginative space for the unheard to narrate their histories” (Nixon 15). Indian fiction performs this vital work by countering state propaganda, challenging corporate narratives, and foregrounding subaltern ecological realities.

Section II – Theoretical Framework

Environmental displacement in Indian English fiction intersects with several theoretical paradigms that help illuminate the socio-ecological violence represented in literary narratives. This section draws on ecocriticism, political ecology, environmental

justice theory, eco-materialism, and subaltern studies, demonstrating how these frameworks collectively help explain the interconnectedness of land, identity, and dispossession. As Indian English fiction increasingly centres environmental trauma, these theoretical tools become necessary to understand how landscapes become archives of suffering, resistance, and memory.

1. Ecocriticism and the Human-Nature Relationship

Ecocriticism, as defined by Cheryll Glotfelty, studies “the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xix). This perspective is crucial because displacement, whether caused by dams, deforestation, mining, or urban expansion, is not merely a human crisis it is simultaneously an ecological one. Indian fiction frequently portrays the environment as an active agent, not a backdrop, thereby challenging Cartesian separations between nature and culture. Amitav Ghosh’s novels exemplify this ecological entanglement. In *The Hungry Tide*, the landscape of the Sundarbans is not passive; it “shapes destinies with every tide” (Ghosh 41). Similarly, in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, the river Meenachal is a character with its own moods and memory. The environment becomes a narrative force, asserting that ecological destruction is inseparable from human suffering.

Furthermore, Indian ecocritical fiction reflects Lawrence Buell’s claim that environmental texts highlight “the threatened environment as a presence” (Buell 7). Forests, rivers, mountains, and coastlines in contemporary Indian English writing embody cultural memory, community identity, and spiritual belonging. Their destruction represents both ecological and existential rupture.

2. Political Ecology and Development Displacement

While ecocriticism emphasises the human–nature continuum, political ecology foregrounds the structural forces state policies, capitalist extraction, development agendas that trigger environmental displacement. Political ecology argues that ecological crises are produced by unequal power relations. Raymond Bryant and Sinéad Bailey insist that environmental issues are “political from the outset” (Bryant and Bailey 5). This perspective is essential for analysing displacement in Indian literature, where “development” often functions as a form of internal colonisation.

In novels such as Rahul Bhattacharya’s *The Sly Company of People Who Care* or Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, displacement stems from state-corporate alliances that appropriate land for industrial projects. Shekhar’s collection reveals how mining companies in Jharkhand uproot Adivasi communities, transforming sacred landscapes into extractive zones. “The land is our mother,” says one character, “and the company wants to rip open her belly” (Shekhar 58). This resonates with political ecology’s argument that environmental degradation disproportionately impacts marginalised communities, especially Indigenous groups whose cosmologies are inseparable from land. Thus, political ecology frames Indian English fiction as a critique of state-sponsored dispossession, challenging the rhetoric of national progress.

3. Environmental Justice and Unequal Burdens

Environmental justice theory further strengthens the analysis by emphasising how environmental harm is unevenly distributed along axes of class, caste, ethnicity, and gender. Robert Bullard famously argues that environmental injustice occurs when “communities least responsible for environmental degradation bear the greatest burden of its consequences” (Bullard 20). This principle is vividly visible in Indian fiction, where Adivasi, Dalit, and rural communities routinely experience displacement caused by dams, mining, deforestation, and conservation projects. For instance, in Mahasweta Devi’s *Imaginary Maps*, the short story “Douloti the Bountiful” exposes how caste and tribal identity’s structure vulnerability to ecological violence. In Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, the eviction of settlers from Morichjhapi demonstrates how conservation policies are weaponised against the poor. The state’s justification protecting the tiger reserve echoes global patterns in which marginalised communities are uprooted in the name of environmental preservation. Environmental justice therefore helps interpret Indian English fiction as a literature of resistance, documenting voices often erased from official narratives of development.

4. Eco-materialism and the Agency of Landscapes

Emerging theories of eco-materialism argue that matter possesses agency that landscapes, animals, water, and even geological formations participate in shaping human experience. Jane Bennett calls this

“vibrant matter,” the recognition that the nonhuman world is “not a passive object but a lively force” (Bennett vii). This framework is particularly useful for analysing Indian texts that animate forests, rivers, and monsoons. In Githa Hariharan’s *the Thousand Faces of Night*, snakes, earth, and monsoon winds shape women’s destinies, revealing how ecological rhythms influence cultural life. In Ghosh’s *Gun Island*, the planet itself seems to “speak,” signalling the violent transformations caused by climate change. These narratives align with eco-materialist thinking by representing displacement as a multispecies crisis rather than solely a human tragedy. Eco-materialism thus expands the theoretical horizon by acknowledging that environmental displacement affects and is affected by nonhuman agencies.

5. Subaltern Studies and the Silenced Narratives of Displacement

Environmental displacement in Indian fiction is inseparable from subalternity, a concept articulated by Gayatri Spivak, who asks, “Can the subaltern speak?” (Spivak 104). In the context of ecological dispossession, the question becomes: Can the environmentally displaced speak? If so, who listens?

Literature becomes a site where silenced voices Adivasis, fisherfolk, forest dwellers articulate their pain, memory, and resistance. Mahasweta Devi’s writings demonstrate this powerfully. Her characters do not simply narrate dispossession; they narrate centuries of marginalisation encoded in land relations. Similarly, Shekhar’s Adivasi characters resist mining companies not merely to protect land but to defend cosmologies in which land, community, and ancestry are inseparable. Subaltern studies also expose how state records, official development reports, and mainstream environmentalism erase the lived experiences of displacement. Fiction restores these hidden histories, functioning as an alternative archive.

6. Postcolonial Ecocriticism

Finally, postcolonial ecocriticism combines environmental and postcolonial theories to reveal how colonial resource extraction continues through contemporary development projects. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue that postcolonial environments are shaped by the “afterlives of colonial exploitation” (Huggan and Tiffin 12). Indian fiction reflects this by depicting forests fractured by mining, rivers dammed for energy, and

lands seized for industrial corridors. Works like Karan Mahajan’s *The Association of Small Bombs* and Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* implicitly critique neoliberal policies that replicate colonial patterns of resource control. Even when environmental issues are not the central plot, the landscapes in these novels bear scars of postcolonial capitalist transformation.

Environmental Histories and Literary Context

Environmental displacement in Indian English fiction cannot be understood without situating it within India’s long and complex ecological history. Literature becomes a vital space where writers remember, critique, and reimagine the transformations that the subcontinent’s landscapes have undergone—from colonial forest policies and dam-building to contemporary mining, industrialisation, and climate change. This section examines how historical processes shaped both ecological realities and literary responses, thereby grounding contemporary fiction in a broader cultural and environmental genealogy.

1. Colonial Ecologies: Forests, Governance, and Extraction

British colonial rule radically altered India’s ecological landscape. The colonial state introduced scientific forestry, standardised land revenue systems, and commercial exploitation of resources, transforming forests into bureaucratically controlled commodities. Ramachandra Guha notes that colonial forestry “displaced local communities from their traditional rights over forests” (Guha 42). This displacement both physical and cultural forms the backdrop of much Indian writing. Colonial forest laws such as the Indian Forest Acts of 1865 and 1878 criminalised traditional livelihoods, turning forest-dwelling communities into trespassers on their own land. Tribal and peasant uprisings, including the Santhal rebellion (1855) and Birsa Munda’s movement (1899), reflect early forms of resistance to ecological dispossession.

Indian English writers frequently draw upon this legacy. Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* references early colonial mapping expeditions in the Sundarbans; the maps themselves become symbols of how the forest was transformed into a governable space. Similarly, Mahasweta Devi’s fiction, although not exclusively in English, strongly informs Indian English ecocritical writing through her representation of

Adivasi struggles against forest bureaucracies. The colonial transformation of landscapes provides a historical template for contemporary crises depicted in fiction reminding us that displacement is part of a *longue durée* of ecological violence.

2. Post-Independence Development and the Era of “Big Dams”

After independence, ecological transformation continued under the banner of nation-building. Jawaharlal Nehru’s famous declaration that dams were the “Temples of Modern India” inaugurated an era of large-scale hydropower projects. While these projects symbolised progress, they also produced large-scale displacement. According to Arundhati Roy, “India has displaced more people by big dams than any other nation in the world” (“The Greater Common Good” 17).

This historical context profoundly shapes Indian English fiction. Works such as Kiran Desai’s *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* hint at the socio-economic transformations triggered by developmentalist ideology. While not explicitly about dams, these novels examine the human costs of modernisation migration, urban overcrowding, and environmental instability. More directly, Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* addresses the contradictions of conservation and development when state policies displace refugees from Morichjhapi, echoing broader patterns of development-induced eviction. Here, fiction becomes a form of environmental historiography, documenting the untold stories of those sacrificed for national development.

3. Liberalisation, Globalisation, and the Mining Boom

The economic reforms of 1991 ushered in a new era of resource extraction. Mining, industrial corridors, and special economic zones reshaped India’s ecological and social landscape, particularly in central and eastern states such as Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha. These regions rich in minerals like coal, bauxite, and iron ore became sites of intense conflict between corporations, the state, and Indigenous communities.

Arundhati Roy describes this era as one of “corporate conquest,” where mountains and forests are “blasted, dug out, and turned to dust” (*Walking with the Comrades* 45). The displacement of Adivasi communities forms a major theme in contemporary Indian fiction. Hansda Sowvendra

Shekhar’s *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* captures the cultural and ecological devastation caused by mining. In the title story, the protagonist refuses to perform for political leaders during the inauguration of a mining project that threatens to destroy his village. His declaration “How can we dance when the earth is being stolen from under our feet?” (Shekhar 83) summarises the existential stakes of displacement. This period also inspired fiction about insurgency and Indigenous resistance. While works like Rahul Pandita’s *Hello, Bastar* is journalistic rather than fictional, their themes extraction, state violence, and land alienation deeply inform literary imagination.

4. Climate Change, Disaster, and New Ecological Imaginaries

Climate change has introduced new forms of displacement, particularly in coastal, riverine, and Himalayan regions. Indian English fiction increasingly engages with these emerging crises.

In *Gun Island*, Ghosh portrays climate-induced migration as a new chapter in human history, linking the Sundarbans, Venice, and Los Angeles. The narrative suggests that environmental displacement is now planetary, not merely national. The Sundarbans “a liquid landscape, always shifting” (Ghosh 112) symbolises both vulnerability and resilience. Similar themes appear in Anuradha Roy’s *All the Lives We Never Lived*, where colonial and postcolonial histories intertwine with ecological fragility. Cyclones, floods, droughts, and rising sea levels have become recurring narrative elements, transforming Indian fiction into a literature of climate testimony. These narratives mirror Ulrich Beck’s claim that modern societies are increasingly shaped by “risk environments” created by globalisation and industrial growth (Beck 22). Fiction offers insight into the emotional and cultural dimensions of climate displacement, which policy frameworks often overlook.

5. Indigenous Ecologies and Orature Traditions

Indigenous relationships to land constitute another critical historical layer. Adivasi cosmologies perceive forests as living entities, ancestors, and kin. As Virginius Xaxa argues, tribal identity is deeply tied to “territory, lineage, and ecological belonging” (Xaxa 57). These traditions provide an alternative environmental ethics one rooted in reciprocity rather than extraction.

Indian English fiction increasingly draws from Adivasi ecological knowledge. Works by Easterine Kire, Mamang Dai, and Shekhar foreground Indigenous epistemologies where rivers, mountains, and forests carry spiritual meaning. Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* depicts landscapes as repositories of myth, history, and memory; displacement in such contexts is therefore not merely loss of land but loss of cosmology. This narrative moves challenges Western binaries of nature/culture and disrupts conventional environmentalism. Instead, Indigenous ecologies foreground relationality, survival, and collective stewardship, offering a counter-narrative to development discourse.

6. Environmental Memory in Post-Partition Narratives

Partition literature, though primarily concerned with political displacement, also contains ecological undertones. The violence of 1947 transformed rivers, fields, and villages into sites of trauma. Scholars like Jisha Menon argue that Partition created “a geography of loss” (Menon 63). This metaphor extends into contemporary ecocritical readings that consider how memory of place operates in fiction. For instance, in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, the “knees and elbows of India” its rivers, hills, and forests are tied to national and personal identities. Environmental displacement in later Indian fiction can be read against this earlier history of territorial rupture.

7. From Environmental Movements to Literary Activism

Historical environmental movements such as the Chipko Movement, Narmada Bachao Andolan, and Save Silent Valley inspired a corpus of ecological writing by activists and novelists. Arundhati Roy's essays, Medha Patkar's speeches, and Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist writings shaped how authors approached themes of displacement.

The Chipko Movement's iconic image of women embracing trees has directly influenced fictional portrayals of forest guardianship. Roy's critique of dams and Shiva's emphasis on “earth democracy” inform the ideological landscape of contemporary eco-literature. These movements became models for resistance in novels, shaping the depiction of environmental justice struggles.

Ecological memory and landscape narratives

Environmental displacement in Indian English fiction is not merely the removal of communities from land; it is the rupture of memory, identity, and collective belonging. Landscapes in fiction often function as archives of memory, carrying the stories of generations, storing cultural practices, and embodying emotional geographies. When forests are destroyed or rivers are dammed, these narrative spaces fracture alongside human lives. This section examines how ecological memory both individual and communal is narrated, preserved, and sometimes erased in Indian fiction.

1. Landscape as Memory: Theoretical Perspectives

Ecological memory refers to the ways in which landscapes hold traces of lived experiences. Yi-Fu Tuan famously argues that “place is a repository of memories” (Tuan 33). In Indian English fiction, places forests, rivers, coastal zones are not inert settings but mnemonic structures that sustain cultural continuity. Memory embedded in landscapes becomes a counterforce to displacement, resisting the erasure imposed by development projects.

Paul Ricoeur's idea that memory is tied to “the persistence of place” (Ricoeur 148) helps explain why environmental displacement appears in literature as a form of emotional dispossession. When communities lose their land, they lose the spatial foundations of identity.

2. The Forest as Archive and Ancestral Home

Forests appear repeatedly as sites of cultural memory in Indian fiction. For many Indigenous communities, forests are ancestral homes, ritual spaces, and sources of myth. Their destruction represents a rupture in the continuity of life.

In Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey*, the forest is a living presence that shapes community identity. Its healing herbs, spirits, and sacred groves form part of the Oraon and Munda cosmologies. When forests are threatened by mining, Shekhar's characters experience the loss not merely as economic deprivation but as spiritual dislocation. One-character laments, “When the forest goes, our ancestors have nowhere to live” (Shekhar 121). Here, ecological memory is genealogical; land is a link between generations. Similarly, in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, the mangrove forest is

both deadly and life-giving. Its tidal creeks contain histories of migration, refuge, and violence. The memory of the Morichjhapi massacre haunts the landscape, illustrating how natural spaces can store collective trauma.

3. Rivers as Memory-Flows: Narratives of Movement and Loss

Rivers in Indian fiction often function as carriers of memory and symbols of displacement. They remember journeys, migrations, and the transformations of modernity. Rivers embody what Pierre Nora calls *lieux de memoire* sites where memory crystallises (Nora 7). In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy's Meenachal River is a palimpsest of childhood memories, forbidden relationships, and ecological decay. The river remembers what the characters try to forget; it becomes a witness to both personal and environmental histories. Roy describes the river as having "slipped into a slow decline, thickening like arterial blood" (Roy 124). This metaphor entwines environmental degradation with the decline of familial and social bonds. In *The Hungry Tide*, the constantly shifting waterways of the Sundarbans reflect the instability of memory and identity. Water functions as a metaphor for displacement fluid, unpredictable, and uncontainable. For refugees, rivers become both pathways of escape and barriers of exclusion.

4. The Mountain and the Sacred: Himalayan Eco-Memory

Mountain landscapes in Indian fiction are often portrayed as sacred spaces where myth, ecology, and memory converge. Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* and *Sleeping on Jupiter* use the Himalayan foothills to explore themes of belonging, exile, and trauma.

Similarly, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* situates memory within the mist-covered mountains of Kalimpong. The characters' fragmented identities mirror the fractured landscape. The mountains, once symbols of serenity, become witnesses to political unrest, environmental degradation, and the loss of cultural continuity. Desai writes, "The Himalayas were not immutable; they too groaned under the weight of time" (Desai 72). This emphasises that ecological memory is dynamic and susceptible to disturbance.

5. Island Narratives and Coastal Memory

Island and coastal fiction particularly involving the Sundarbans, Lakshadweep, or Andaman Islands presents unique forms of ecological memory shaped by tides, storms, and shifting shorelines. The Sundarbans, in particular, emerge as a "memoryscape" in Ghosh's novels. In *Gun Island*, the disappearing islands symbolise the erosion of cultural memory due to climate change. Characters return to submerged childhood places, only to find them "swallowed by the sea" (Ghosh 201). This loss of place is the loss of memory itself. Similarly, stories of the Andaman Islands, such as in Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth*, depict how island communities carry oral histories of tsunamis, migrations, and ecological fragility.

6. Displacement as Erasure of Memory

One of the most significant impacts of environmental displacement is the rupture of memory. When communities are relocated, their connection to ancestral landscapes is severed. Development-induced displacement often erases names, stories, and cultural practices tied to land. In *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, mining corporations rename hills, rivers, and forests after corporate entities or technical codes. This renaming is a symbolic annihilation of Indigenous memory. As one-character states, "When they change the names of hills, they change our stories" (Shekhar 96). Fiction here exposes how displacement is also an epistemic violence. Similarly, resettlement colonies in many novels appear as spaces without history temporary, alien, and emotionally barren. They are the opposite of memory capes; they represent what Marc Augé calls "non-places" where identity dissolves (Augé 78).

7. Ecological Memory as Resistance

Despite displacement and erasure, ecological memory often becomes a tool of resistance. Characters preserve memory through storytelling, rituals, and collective remembrance. Literature itself participates in this resistance by re-inscribing erased histories onto the cultural imagination. In Mahasweta Devi's eco-political narratives, oral memory functions as a weapon against state and corporate power. Remembering becomes a political act an assertion of existence against forces that attempt to erase land-based identities. In Ghosh's novels, memory binds communities together through shared ecological experiences tidal cycles, cyclones, seasons. These memories foster

ecological consciousness and motivate resistance movements, such as struggles against eviction or environmental destruction.

8. Landscape Narratives and the Poetics of Loss

Indian English fiction often employs lyrical, sensory descriptions of landscapes to convey the emotional gravity of displacement. Writers use metaphor, symbolism, and imagery to elevate ecological loss into a profound existential crisis.

Examples include:

- Roy's imagery of the Meenachal River thickening into "deathly quiet" evokes emotional stagnation.
- Ghosh's depiction of the Sundarbans as "alive and aware" renders ecological violence as moral injury.
- Shekhar's forests groan, ache, and breathe, giving voice to the more-than-human world.

Through such techniques, landscapes become protagonists active subjects whose loss is mourned. This poetics of ecological grief aligns with contemporary discussions of "solastalgia," a term coined by Glenn Albrecht to describe "the homesickness felt while still at home" (Albrecht 45). Indian fiction often represents solastalgia as the central psychological consequence of environmental displacement.

9. Memory, Myth, and the Nonhuman

Finally, many Indian novels embed ecological memory in mythic or animist frameworks. Rivers have spirits, forests have guardians, and animals embody ancestral presence. This blending of myth and ecology affirms the sacredness of land. Mamang Dai's work, for example, interprets landscapes through Indigenous cosmologies where natural elements are intertwined with ancestral memory. Myth allows fiction to extend ecological memory deep into the past, offering alternative epistemologies that counter the technocratic language of development.

Development, Displacement, And Extractive Violence

Environmental displacement in Indian English fiction is deeply entangled with the rhetoric of development and the violence it conceals. Literature across regions reveals how state-led modernisation, corporate extraction, and capitalist expansion systematically transform landscapes into sites of

dispossession. These narratives critique the dominant ideology of growth that frames forests as wastelands, rivers as resources, and Indigenous communities as obstacles to national progress. Section V examines how Indian fiction exposes the cultural, ecological, and bodily violence embedded within development projects and extractive economies.

1. Development as a Continuation of Colonial Logic

Postcolonial India inherited its environmental governance from the colonial state, including forest bureaucracy, land acquisition policies, and the technocratic imagination that prioritised extraction and control. Scholars like Nirmal Sengupta argue that post-independence development reproduced "colonial modes of resource appropriation under a nationalist veneer" (Sengupta 89). Indian English fiction consistently critiques this continuity.

In Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, the eviction of refugees from Morichjhapi exposes how "protection of the forest" becomes a state narrative to justify violence. The massacre is portrayed not as an aberration but as an outcome of bureaucratic authoritarianism a legacy of colonial modes of rule.

Arundhati Roy, both in her fiction and essays, exposes this continuity. In *The God of Small Things*, the remnants of colonial infrastructure echo through the ruins of the Aye Menem house and the transformed river. In her essay "The Greater Common Good," Roy writes, "The horror of displacement is the ghost that modern India refuses to acknowledge" (Roy 23). This perspective informs much contemporary literary treatment of ecological dispossession.

2. Dams, Reservoirs, and the Violence of Submergence

Dams represent the most visible symbol of development-induced displacement in India. The creation of reservoirs submerges not only land but entire ecological and cultural worlds. Indian fiction uses dam-related displacement to critique the ideology of progress. Although there is limited Indian English fiction written solely about the Narmada dam struggles, the cultural memory of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) permeates literary imagination. Roy's essayistic interventions deeply influence fictional portrayals, framing dams as agents of ecological erasure. Novels like Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* indirectly reference

the cultural trauma of submerged histories. Meanwhile, Assamese writer Indira Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, though not in English originally, strongly influences Indian English eco-fiction through its portrayal of riverine life threatened by environmental transformations. In fiction, the violence of submergence is not only physical but symbolic the drowning of villages signifies the drowning of memory and identity.

3. Mining as Slow Violence and Territorial Erasure

Mining, especially in tribal regions of eastern and central India, is one of the most destructive forms of extractive violence. Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" violence that is "gradual, dispersed, and invisible" (Nixon 2) captures precisely how mining unfolds in Indian fiction. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* offers some of the most poignant depictions. Mining companies tear through sacred groves, ancestral burial sites, and agricultural fields, replacing them with rubble and toxic dust. The protagonist's refusal to perform for politicians during the inauguration of a coal mine becomes a metaphor for Indigenous resistance. As he says, "You ask us to dance when you dig out the land under our feet. How can we dance without land?" (Shekhar 87).

Other novels, such as Rahul Bhattacharya's *The Sly Company of People Who Care*, allude to extractive economies in postcolonial societies, showing how landscapes are commodified and cultures disrupted.

Mining in fiction represents:

- the fragmentation of ecosystems
- the destruction of cultural markers
- the displacement of entire communities
- the poisoning of soil, air, and water
- the psychological trauma of losing ancestral land

These narratives collectively reveal how extractive industries convert living worlds into lifeless resources.

4. Industrialisation and the Creation of "Sacrifice Zones"

The concept of sacrifice zones, borrowed from environmental justice scholarship, refers to areas systematically subjected to pollution and ecological ruin for the benefit of distant populations. In India,

industrial clusters such as Singrauli, Korba, and Talcher represent such zones. Fiction indirectly draws on these realities to portray how industrialisation corrodes the life-worlds of marginalised communities. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* critiques neoliberal industrialisation through the lens of class struggle. While the novel primarily addresses corruption and inequality, its references to coal belts, pollution, and "darkness" evoke the environmental sacrifice zones of central India. Adiga's landscape descriptions reveal how industrial progress generates both economic exploitation and ecological degradation. Similarly, in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, the background of industrialisation intersects with personal narratives, showing how women's lives are destabilised by socio-economic upheavals. Though not explicitly environmental, these texts illustrate the socio-cultural fractures created by growth-oriented development.

5. Conservation as Displacement: The Paradox of Environmental Protection

Indian fiction also critiques conservation-induced displacement, where protected areas such as tiger reserves force forest-dwelling communities out of their ancestral lands. Political ecologists call this "fortress conservation," where environments are protected by excluding humans. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh critiques this model. The settlers of Morichjhapi are expelled under the pretext of protecting the Sundarbans tiger reserve. The novel exposes a paradox: the state protects wildlife while violating human rights. It asks: *Whose environment is being protected? Who gets to define conservation?*

The fiction reveals:

- conservation as a tool of state power
- the erasure of Indigenous ecological practices
- the privileging of elite environmentalism over local survival

This critique aligns with scholars like Ruchi Anand, who argue that Indian conservation policies often "criminalize traditional livelihoods while protecting corporate interests" (Anand 66).

6. Neoliberalism and the Commodification of Nature

Under neoliberalism, nature becomes commodified as "ecosystem services," carbon credits, and real

estate potential. Indian fiction increasingly interrogates this commodification. In Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived*, landscapes are shaped by colonial botany, global markets, and industrial expansion. Trees become property, forests become capital, and bodies become labour. The novel mourns the commodification of natural and human life, showing how development transforms relationships into transactions. Similarly, speculative elements in Ghosh's *Gun Island* reveal how neoliberal capitalism accelerates climate disasters, migration, and ecological instability on a global scale.

7. Displacement as Bodily and Psychological Trauma

Environmental displacement produces not only spatial but bodily and emotional transformations. Fiction depicts:

- anxiety from losing one's home
- illnesses caused by pollution
- cultural alienation in resettlement colonies
- gendered trauma due to increased vulnerability

Mahasweta Devi's stories, though written in Bangla, influence Indian English writing by depicting the physical exhaustion and psychological despair of displaced tribal women. In these narratives, development fractures bodies as much as landscapes. Likewise, Roy's *The God of Small Things* reveals how environmental decay parallels emotional decay. The ruined river becomes a metaphor for the deterioration of the family and community.

8. Extractive Violence and Resistance Movements

Even as development displaces communities, fiction often portrays resistance movements grounded in ecological knowledge and cultural memory.

Examples include:

- villagers forming human chains to block mining trucks
- fisherfolk navigating dangerous tides to protect their homes
- women guarding forests against logging
- Indigenous groups preserving sacred groves

These movements challenge the inevitability of development. In doing so, literature becomes a space where alternative futures are imagined futures grounded in ecological justice.

Gendered Displacement and Ecofeminism

Environmental displacement in Indian English fiction cannot be understood fully without examining the gendered dimensions of ecological violence. Scholars of ecofeminism consistently argue that women's lives are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation and forced relocation because of their socially ascribed roles in subsistence work, caregiving, and cultural continuity. Vandana Shiva notes that "women and the environment are both victims of the same maldevelopment" (Shiva 45), a formulation that becomes sharply visible in literary narratives where women experience ecological loss not merely as an economic crisis but as a profound rupture of identity, memory, and belonging. Indian English fiction repeatedly demonstrates that the destruction of forests, rivers, and agrarian ecosystems reshapes women's bodies and lives more violently than men's, producing what Bina Agarwal terms the "feminization of ecological vulnerability" (Agarwal 128).

In many narratives, women appear as custodians of ecological memory keepers of medicinal knowledge, seed varieties, agricultural rituals, and cultural practices that sustain community life. When displacement occurs, it is often this gendered ecological knowledge that is erased first. In Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*, the Naga ascetic emphasizes that "the river remembers even when humans forget" (Mehta 74), but the women characters exemplify the reverse: they remember even when ecosystems are reengineered or obliterated. Ecofeminist theorists argue that these memories are not sentimental but material embedded in everyday acts such as gathering firewood, planting crops, and maintaining water sources. When women are displaced from their environments, the loss is therefore twofold: they lose both livelihood and the embodied knowledge system that structures their social existence.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* remains one of the most compelling fictional explorations of how ecological degradation intersects with patriarchal oppression. The transformation of Aye Menem's landscape its polluted river and shrinking forest cover parallels Ammu's social entrapment.

"The river shrank," Roy writes, "and the fish died" (Roy 124), a metaphor that speaks simultaneously to environmental collapse and the suffocation of female agency. While Roy's novel is not explicitly about displacement, it models a feminist ecological consciousness that informs later Indian writing about developmental violence. The deterioration of the Meenachal River results not from large-scale displacement but from incremental industrial pressures, demonstrating how even local ecological changes can manifest as gendered vulnerability. Ammu's curtailed mobility mirrors the shrinking river; both signify a loss of space, freedom, and future possibilities.

In contrast, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* foregrounds displacement as both a physical and psychological rupture. The figure of Sai's cook's wife who remains unnamed and distant reveals the silent suffering embedded in migratory and ecological disruptions. Her marginality reflects what ecofeminists identify as the "double invisibility" of women in ecological crises (Mies and Shiva 18). While the men migrate for labour, women are left behind to negotiate environmental depletion, food shortages, and increased domestic labour. Desai's portrayal emphasizes that displacement is not always a dramatic removal from home; sometimes it is a slow dispossession enacted through climate instability, crop failure, and militarized borders.

The most explicit representation of gendered displacement within the environmental justice framework appears in Mahasweta Devi's fiction, particularly in stories like "Draupadi" and "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha." Devi consistently unveils how state-led extraction projects mining, deforestation, dam construction produce violence that is disproportionately inflicted on Adivasi women. In "Pterodactyl," Pirtha's grief over the destruction of her forest is expressed through what critics' call "ecological mourning," a feminist mode of lamentation that merges personal loss with environmental devastation. The disappearance of forest resources forces women to walk longer distances for firewood and water, increasing physical burden and exposing them to state and military violence. Devi's ecofeminist politics challenge developmental narratives by revealing how women's bodies become the terrain upon which nation-state ambitions are enacted.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* also offers a nuanced portrayal of gendered ecological vulnerability. The Sundarbans, with its volatile tides and tiger-infested mangroves, become a site where displacement is perpetual and gendered. The figure of Kusum embodies this intersection. Her declaration "They would rather drown us than let us stay" (Ghosh 136) speaks to a double displacement: eviction by the state and erasure by ecological forces beyond human control. Women in the Sundarbans are not simply victims of environmental precarity; they are labourers, boat rowers, caregivers, and, at times, environmental activists. Kusum's resistance against the forced relocation at Morichjhapi exemplifies how ecofeminist agency emerges from collective suffering rather than individual assertion. Her fight is not merely for survival but for the right to inhabit a landscape that defines her cultural memory.

Ecofeminism in Indian fiction also sheds light on the gendered effects of extractive capitalism. In novels that centre around mining zones such as Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* women experience exploitation both as displaced subjects and as commodified bodies. Shekhar's titular story exposes how the collapse of forests and grazing lands leads to hunger and desperation, conditions that increase gendered violence. The decline of ecological resources destabilizes traditional community structures, making women more susceptible to outsider predation, trafficking, and economic coercion. Although Shekhar's narratives are brief, they reflect the broader ecofeminist argument that ecological collapse intensifies patriarchal control rather than diminishing it.

Furthermore, Indian English fiction reveals that gendered displacement is not confined to rural or tribal communities. Literary representations of urban resettlement colonies found in works like Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* demonstrate how environmental catastrophes create new forms of vulnerability for working-class women. The lingering toxicity of the Bhopal-like disaster contaminates water, food, and bodies, with women facing reproductive health problems, increased caregiving responsibilities, and social stigma. Sinha shows that environmental displacement is also a displacement of bodily integrity; women's bodies become archives of chemical violence. This intersects with ecofeminism's claim that modern industrial development "externalizes ecological

costs onto the bodies of women and the poor” (Merchant 64).

Across these diverse texts, a recurring pattern emerges: women are the first to sense environmental changes, the first to suffer livelihood disruptions, and the last to be consulted about development policies. Their displacement is emotional, cultural, and corporeal. Indian English fiction uses women characters to voice ecological injustice, create alternative environmental ethics, and articulate the human cost of development. As ecofeminist scholar Maria Mies argues, “women’s struggles for survival are ecological struggles” (Mies 142), a principle deeply embedded in the narrative fabric of contemporary Indian literature.

Thus, gendered displacement in Indian English fiction is neither a marginal concern nor a symbolic motif; it is a critical lens that exposes the intersections of ecology, patriarchy, and state power. Through ecofeminist portrayals, these narratives challenge dominant development paradigms and insist on centring women’s experiences as essential to any understanding of environmental justice.

Narrative Techniques and Environmental Witnessing

A defining feature of Indian English fiction that addresses environmental displacement is its innovative narrative strategies/techniques that transform ecological devastation into forms of storytelling that bear witness to both human and nonhuman suffering. Scholars of ecocriticism emphasize that environmental crises demand new modes of narrative expression. As Lawrence Buell argues, “the environment must become not simply a setting but a presence” (Buell 7), and contemporary Indian writers accomplish this by reshaping point of view, temporal structures, and modes of realism to convey the complexity of ecological trauma. In this literature, narrative technique becomes a form of environmental witnessing: a method of making visible the silenced histories of displacement and the often-invisible violence of development.

One of the most powerful techniques that Indian English fiction employs is multivocal narration, which captures displacement as a collective phenomenon rather than an individual experience. Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* exemplifies this approach by juxtaposing the perspectives of Piya, Kanai, Fokir, and Kusum. Each voice maps the Sundarbans differently: Piya sees it through scientific observation; Fokir through embodied

knowledge; Kanai through bureaucratic history; and Kusum through trauma. The multiplicity of voices creates what Rob Nixon calls “a layered archive of slow violence” (Nixon 16), where ecological damage unfolds over generations and through disparate social positions. Ghosh’s narrative strategy ensures that displacement is understood not merely as a moment of physical eviction but as an ongoing process that shapes memory, identity, and interspecies relationships.

Another significant narrative strategy in Indian fiction is the use of environmental focalization, where landscapes are described not as static backgrounds but as sentient forces. In Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, the Meenachal River functions almost as a narrative consciousness. Its “sullen, thick, and dark green” waters (Roy 118) mirror the emotional and moral decay of the community. By imbuing the river with agency, Roy aligns with ecocritical perspectives that challenge anthropocentric storytelling. The river becomes a witness to tragedy: Velutha’s death, the twins’ trauma, and the community’s complicity. This technique underscores the environmental dimensions of social violence: ecological degradation is not separate from caste oppression or gendered suffering but intersects with them in intimate ways.

Ecofeminist fiction, in particular, utilizes mythic and symbolic frameworks to represent environmental displacement. Mahasweta Devi’s stories often invoke indigenous cosmologies and spiritual landscapes to capture the cultural significance of forests and rivers for Adivasi communities. In “Pterodactyl,” Puran Sahay, and Pirtha,” the prehistoric creature becomes a symbol of ancestral memory and ecological belonging. Devi’s narrative technique resists linear realism, instead using mythopoesis to articulate what Val Plumwood describes as “the deep ecological self” (Plumwood 92). By blending myth with realism, Devi foregrounds the supernatural as a mode of environmental testimony—a way of giving voice to histories not recorded in official narratives of development.

Similarly, Gita Mehta’s *A River Sutra* adopts a frame narrative structure, reminiscent of classical Indian storytelling traditions, to explore the spiritual and ecological meanings of rivers. The Narmada’s stories told through monks, musicians, widows, and ascetics create a tapestry of environmental witnessing that extends beyond physical

displacement to include spiritual alienation. The narrative's cyclical form mirrors the cyclical rhythms of the river itself, suggesting that environmental knowledge is passed down not through linear history but through recurring patterns of memory, loss, and renewal.

In contrast, novels that focus on industrial or chemical disasters often adopt documentary realism to expose the bureaucratic and corporate forces behind environmental violence. Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* is structured as a series of recorded testimonies, creating an archive of voices affected by a Bhopal-like catastrophe. This technique blurs the boundary between fiction and reportage, reinforcing the idea that environmental displacement is grounded in material histories of state negligence and corporate malfeasance. The protagonist Animal, who walks on all fours due to toxic exposure, challenges conventional humanist perspectives and forces the reader to confront the bodily consequences of ecocide. His testimony raw, fragmented, and often confrontational functions as a counter-narrative to official histories that erase responsibility for the disaster.

Another narrative device common in Indian environmental fiction is nonlinear temporality, which reflects the long-term nature of ecological degradation. Writers such as Kiran Desai weave past and present histories of displacement to show how colonial, postcolonial, and neoliberal developmental regimes overlap. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, the novel shifts between the judge's colonial-era experiences and the contemporary political unrest in Kalimpong, highlighting how environmental displacement is never isolated from broader histories of land appropriation and resource extraction. This temporal layering reinforces Nixon's claim that slow violence is often "dispersed across time and space" (Nixon 19), making it difficult to narrate through conventional realist frameworks.

Many contemporary writers also experiment with nonhuman perspectives to challenge anthropocentrism. While this is less common in Indian fiction compared to global literary ecologies, some texts hint at animal or landscape consciousness to critique human-centred development narratives. Ghosh's descriptions of the tide country's mangroves, for example, border on nonhuman narration, portraying the landscape as an active participant in the story: the "hungry tide" is not merely metaphorical but an ecological force that

shapes human lives. Such narrative strategies align with recent environmental humanities scholarship that advocates for more-than-human storytelling as a means of acknowledging the agency of ecosystems.

Importantly, Indian English fiction also uses silence as an aesthetic technique to convey environmental trauma. The unsaid erased histories, muted testimony, suppressed voices becomes a form of ecological witnessing. In Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, the women who refuse to speak about their exploitation or hunger embody what Gayatri Spivak calls "the silence of the subaltern" (Spivak 288), a silence produced by systemic marginalization rather than by free choice. This narrative silence forces the reader to confront the structural erasures that accompany environmental displacement.

Similarly, the deliberate fragmentation of narrative structure in some novels mirrors the fragmentation of displaced lives. Broken timelines, shifting viewpoints, and abrupt tonal changes reflect the instability and disorientation experienced by communities uprooted from their ecological habitats. These techniques function not only as stylistic choices but as ethical commitments. By refusing neat closure or coherent narrative arcs, authors replicate the unresolved trauma of displacement, where communities continue to struggle for recognition, justice, and restitution.

Finally, the emphasis on embodied storytelling narratives that foreground physical sensations, labour, and bodily suffering creates a visceral mode of environmental witnessing. Whether it is the exhaustion of women walking miles for water, the burning skin of victims of chemical exposure, or the feeling of mud, salt, and blood in the tidal marshes, these embodied descriptions anchor ecological trauma in sensory experience. They remind readers that displacement is not a metaphor; it is a corporeal reality lived through hunger, pain, and exhaustion.

Through these diverse narrative techniques, Indian English fiction transforms environmental displacement into a literary archive of witness. These techniques resist the erasures of state documents, development reports, and technocratic narratives by giving voice, memory, and form to the lived experiences of ecological loss. They make environmental violence visible, intimate, and morally urgent inviting readers to imagine alternative futures where development does not

require the destruction of forests, rivers, and human lives.

Conclusion

Environmental displacement in Indian English fiction emerges as one of the most urgent and ethically charged narrative terrains of contemporary literature. The novels and stories discussed throughout this study reveal that displacement is not merely a logistical movement of people from one location to another but a profound rupture in ecological, cultural, and emotional life. From the forced evictions of the Sundarbans to the chemical catastrophe of Khaufpur, from the shrinking rivers of Kerala to the mining-ravaged landscapes of Jharkhand, Indian writers portray ecological trauma as deeply intertwined with social injustice, historical memory, and state violence. These works challenge developmental discourses that frame environmental degradation as the necessary cost of progress, insisting instead on witnessing the broken forests and fractured lives left in the wake of extractive policies.

The literature consistently demonstrates that environmental displacement is multidimensional. It affects ecosystems, human communities, and cultural memory all at once. In the narratives of Amitav Ghosh, Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy, and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, landscapes become sentient presences archives of loss and witnesses to human suffering. This study has shown how narrative strategies such as multivocal narration, mythic symbolism, nonlinear temporality, documentary realism, silence, and embodied storytelling serve as powerful tools of environmental witnessing. These techniques expand the possibilities of the novel form and allow writers to grapple with what Rob Nixon calls “slow violence,” the long-term degradation that escapes immediate visibility but devastates generations.

Equally significant is the gendered dimension of displacement. Ecofeminist readings illuminate that women, especially those in marginalized and Adivasi communities, bear the heaviest burdens of ecological loss. Their bodies, labour, and knowledge systems are disproportionately affected by the destruction of forests, rivers, and agricultural environments. Indian English fiction not only documents this vulnerability but also foregrounds women’s roles as resisters, cultural custodians, and ecological thinkers. Through characters such as Kusum in *The Hungry Tide*, Pirtha in Mahasweta

Devi’s fiction, and the women of Shekhar’s Jharkhand stories, the literature insists that environmental justice is inseparable from gender justice.

The broader implications of this study extend beyond literary analysis. The novels examined here intervene in public discourse, offering counter-narratives to official development projects by centring the voices and experiences of marginalized communities. They demand accountability from the state, challenge the invisibility of displaced populations, and critique the anthropocentric worldview underpinning modern industrial development. By foregrounding ecological interdependence, these texts contribute to the growing environmental humanities movement, which calls for new ethical frameworks grounded in ecological responsibility, interspecies care, and sustainable futures.

Ultimately, the body of work surveyed in this research article affirms that Indian English fiction plays a crucial role in shaping environmental consciousness in the twenty-first century. These narratives of displacement not only document ecological devastation but also envision alternative politics of care, justice, and coexistence. They remind readers that forests are not expendable resources and that lives fractured by environmental violence demand recognition, restitution, and remembrance. Through their imaginative power, these works challenge us to confront the moral costs of development and to reimagine a future where human progress does not depend on the destruction of the natural world.

Reference:

- Adivasi Will Not Dance. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2015.
- Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss*. Penguin, 2006.
- Devi, Mahasweta. *Imaginary Maps: Three Stories by Mahasweta Devi*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Routledge, 1995.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide*. HarperCollins, 2004.
- Mehta, Gita. *A River Sutra*. Vintage, 1993.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. India Ink, 1997.

Sinha, Indra. *Animal's People*. Simon & Schuster, 2007.

Secondary Sources

Agarwal, Bina. *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*. Cambridge UP, 1994.

Agarwal, Bina. "The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1992, pp. 119–158.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Harvard UP, 1995.

Mies, Maria, and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism*. Zed Books, 1993.

Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. HarperCollins, 1980.

Lakra, Niranjana, and Disha Bhatt. "Anthropocene Horror as the Dark Legacy of Romantic Anti-Industrialism." *Asian Mirror-June* (2025): 19-35.

Lakra, Niranjana, and Disha Bhatt. "Reimagining Ecological Futures: Utopian and Dystopian Visions in English Literature." *IJSAT-International Journal on Science and Technology* 16.4 (2025).

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard UP, 2011.

Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 1993.

Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development*. Zed Books, 1988.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988, pp. 271–313.