

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Tracing Ecological Degradation from Mythological Antiquity to Post-Colonial Reality in Indian English Literature

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ABSTRACT

Ecological degradation in literature frequently operates as more than just a background setting. It often mirrors or actively facilitates the physical trauma inflicted upon marginalised human bodies. This paper argues that contemporary Indian cultural narratives portray a direct parallel between the systemic exploitation of the natural environment and the physical trauma inflicted upon the female and subaltern body. While ecocriticism is widely applied to specific modern authors, it is rarely in conversation with mythological retellings or capitalist critiques. This creates a gap in understanding how ecological and bodily exploitation form a continuous historical narrative. By analysing Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), this study traces this parallel across different literary modes. The paper contrasts the sacred yet disrupted relationship with nature in the mythological framework with the polluted, extractive environments of modern capitalist and militarised wastelands. This research answers how post-2000 Indian literature aligns environmental collapse with the systemic abuse of vulnerable populations.

Keywords: Eco-Trauma, Ecofeminism, Post-colonial Ecology, Marginalised Bodies, Indian Anglophone Fiction

FULL RESEARCH PAPER**Introduction**

The natural environment in post-colonial literature is a heavily contested space. It is a site where historical grievances, economic ambitions, and social hierarchies physically manifest. In contemporary Indian fiction, the destruction of the natural world is rarely portrayed in isolation. Instead, authors frequently connect the poisoning of rivers and the clearing of forests to the physical suffering of the most vulnerable members of society. This connection suggests that the ideologies that permit the exploitation of the earth are the same ideologies that permit the abuse of women and the lower castes. Environmental degradation and human trauma are bound together in a shared vulnerability. While academic discourse has heavily applied eco-critical frameworks to specific political authors, there is a distinct lack of comparative research. Scholars frequently read Arundhati Roy through the lens of environmental activism. They often read Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni through a feminist revisionist lens. They read Aravind Adiga through Marxist critiques of capitalism. However, these distinct theoretical approaches are rarely placed in direct conversation with one another regarding eco-trauma. This separation obscures a crucial pattern in Indian cultural narratives. There is a clear, continuous line of ecological and bodily exploitation stretching from ancient mythological frameworks to post-colonial capitalist realities.

This paper argues that contemporary Indian cultural narratives align the exploitation of the natural environment with the systemic abuse of the female and subaltern body. To demonstrate this, the paper examines three defining novels published after the year 2000. It begins by analysing Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* to uncover the mythological roots of ecofeminist trauma. It then shifts to Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* to examine how modern capitalism accelerates this dual decay in rural India. Finally, it explores Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* to map the intersection of state violence, ecological ruin, and the marginalised body. Through this comparative approach, the research answers the question of how these narratives use environmental collapse to critique cultural hegemony.

Theoretical Framework

To properly analyse the intersection of environmental and bodily trauma, this paper draws on ecofeminism and post-colonial ecocriticism. These theoretical models

provide the necessary vocabulary to understand how power operates over both land and human life.

Ecofeminism forms the primary foundation of this analysis. Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies have written extensively on how patriarchal and capitalist systems rely on the artificial separation of humans from nature. In their foundational text *Ecofeminism* (1993), they argue that the dominant cultural narrative equates women and indigenous populations with nature. Because the patriarchal system views nature as a passive resource meant to be conquered, it views women and the lower classes in the same way. Val Plumwood further expands on this in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993). Plumwood identifies a series of dualisms created by Western and dominant patriarchal thoughts, such as culture versus nature, and male versus female. The first term in these pairs is always treated as superior and entitled to dominate the second term. Therefore, the violence enacted upon the earth is philosophically linked to the violence enacted upon marginalised bodies.

Post-colonial eco-criticism provides a vital secondary lens. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee's *Postcolonial Environments* (2010) argues that environmental disasters in postcolonial nations are the direct result of uneven capitalist development. He asserts that the environment cannot be studied separately from the extreme poverty that characterises the global south. Furthermore, Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" is critical for this research. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Nixon describes slow violence as a form of destruction that is delayed and dispersed across time and space. Unlike a sudden explosion, slow violence is the gradual poisoning of a water supply or the slow onset of a disease caused by pollution. Nixon argues that this type of violence disproportionately affects the poor, who lack the resources to escape toxic environments or secure medical care. Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality in *Bodily Natures* (2010) is also highly relevant here. Alaimo proposes that the human body is never separate from its environment. Toxins, pollutants, and ecological changes physically enter and alter human biology, making the body a site of environmental consequence. By combining Shiva's ecofeminism with Nixon's slow violence and Alaimo's trans-corporeality, this paper establishes a robust framework. This framework allows for a deep reading of how mythological kings, modern entrepreneurs, and militarised states exert dominance by simultaneously breaking the land and the people who inhabit it.

Mythological Ecology and the Female Body in *The Palace of Illusions*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* reimagines the ancient Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, through the voice of Draupadi. While traditional readings of the epic focus on duty and war, Divakaruni's feminist revision highlights a profound ecofeminist tragedy. The novel demonstrates that the systemic violence required to build patriarchal empires begins with the dual subjugation of the female body and the natural environment.

Draupadi's connection to the environment is established at her birth. She is not born biologically but emerges from a sacred fire. She is elemental, intimately tied to the natural forces of the earth. However, the patriarchal society immediately attempts to control her nature. King Drupada, her father, views her birth as a disappointment because he desired a son to exact political revenge. From the beginning, Draupadi is treated as a political commodity rather than a human being. The strict rules of the royal court bind her elemental body. This mirrors the way ancient kings sought to bind and control the unpredictable forces of nature. Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt note in *Postcolonial Green* (2010) that pre-colonial narratives often contain the seeds of ecological dominance, even within cultures that supposedly revere nature. Divakaruni highlights this contradiction. The characters pray to river and forest deities, yet they aggressively extract resources from the land to build their kingdoms.

The most violent parallel between ecological trauma and bodily trauma occurs during the burning of the Khandava Forest. The Pandavas, Draupadi's husbands, need land to build their magnificent new capital city. To clear the space, they systematically burn down the ancient Khandava Forest, slaughtering the indigenous tribes and animal life that reside there. Divakaruni describes this event with deep horror. The destruction of the forest is not presented as a heroic civilising mission but as an act of immense cruelty. The clearing of the forest directly parallels the later violation of Draupadi's body. Just as the Pandavas feel entitled to destroy the forest for their political ambitions, the rival Kauravas feel entitled to strip and humiliate Draupadi in the royal court to assert their dominance.

The commodification of the land and the commodification of the woman are identical processes in the novel. The magical Palace of Illusions, built on the ashes of the ruined forest, becomes the physical site of Draupadi's confinement. The architecture is magnificent, but it represents the complete subjugation of the natural world. Val Plumwood's theory of mastery perfectly applies here. The male warriors believe they have mastered nature by building the palace, and they believe they have

mastered Draupadi by controlling her marital status. However, the trauma inflicted upon the forest and the woman ultimately leads to the catastrophic Kurukshetra war, which destroys the entire civilisation. Divakaruni suggests that ancient mythological heroism is built on an unsustainable foundation of eco-trauma and gendered violence.

The Capitalist Wasteland and Subaltern Decay in *The White Tiger*

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* shifts the focus from ancient mythology to modern hyper-capitalism. The novel provides a brutal examination of how the globalised Indian economy treats the rural environment and the subaltern body as disposable resources. Adiga clearly illustrates Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, showing how environmental degradation slowly kills the poor. The novel is geographically divided between the "Light" of the modern cities and the "Darkness" of rural India. The Darkness is characterised not only by extreme poverty but by severe ecological ruin. The primary geographical feature of Balram's home village is the river Ganga, which Adiga strips of its traditional sacred status. Balram describes the river as a black, toxic sludge. He states, "No, Mr. Jiabao, I urge you not to dip in the Ganga, unless you want your mouth full of faeces, straw, soggy matchsticks, and the bodies of seven-day-old babies" (Adiga 15). The river's pollution is a direct result of unregulated capitalist development and corrupt governance. The black river serves as a physical reflection of the corrupted, decaying state of the rural poor. The environment in the Darkness is completely exhausted, entirely drained of its life-giving properties.

This environmental exhaustion directly translates into bodily trauma for the subaltern characters. Balram's father is a rickshaw puller who eventually dies of tuberculosis in a crumbling, underfunded government hospital. His death is a prime example of slow violence. He is not murdered instantly. Instead, his body is slowly worn down by the physical labour of pulling humans through heavily polluted streets, inhaling toxins, and living without access to clean water or adequate nutrition. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee argues that post-colonial environments are defined by this exact type of infrastructural failure, where the state abandons the poor to toxic living conditions (Mukherjee 67). The capitalist system extracts the father's physical labour until his body breaks, much like a mining company extracts coal until a mountain collapses.

Adiga further highlights this parallel through the process of resource extraction. The wealth of the "Light" is built by physically tearing apart the "Darkness". Landlords in the rural areas steal the land, mine the coal, and hoard the resources, leaving the

villagers to starve. When Balram moves to New Delhi, he witnesses the same dynamic on an urban scale. The construction workers who build the shining glass malls are forced to live in squalid, polluted slums hidden behind the construction sites. The extraction of cheap labour is identical to the extraction of natural resources. Both the land and the subaltern body are mined for profit and then discarded when they are no longer useful. Balram's violent rebellion, in which he murders his employer, is a desperate reaction to a system that has historically consumed the bodies of his family. He internalises the ruthlessness of the capitalist environment, proving that toxic landscapes ultimately produce toxic human behaviours.

Intersectionality and Environmental Collapse in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* offers the most comprehensive look at how state power marginalises both bodies and ecosystems. Roy weaves together the narratives of transgender communities in Delhi and the victims of military occupation in Kashmir. Through these interconnected stories, she demonstrates how environmental collapse intersects with gender discrimination, caste violence, and religious persecution.

In Old Delhi, Roy explores the urban ecosystems of the outcast. Anjum, a transgender woman, leaves the confines of her traditional community and moves into a city graveyard. The graveyard is a discarded space, filled with garbage and neglected by the city administration. However, this polluted space becomes the only viable sanctuary for people who fall outside of societal norms. Anjum is joined by Dalits, orphans, and religious minorities. Roy draws a deliberate connection between the castaway humans and the castaway animals that inhabit the space. She frequently describes the dying vultures and stray dogs that scavenge in the polluted city. The animals and the subaltern humans share a common vulnerability to the modern state's machinery. They are both pushed to the absolute margins of the urban environment, forced to survive on the toxic refuse left behind by the privileged classes.

The novel then shifts to the Kashmir valley, where the parallel between ecological trauma and bodily trauma becomes literal and horrifying—the Indian state's military occupation of Kashmir results in the severe degradation of the local environment. Forests are cleared for military camps, and the machinery of war pollutes the pristine rivers. This ecological destruction happens simultaneously with the physical torture and disappearance of the Kashmiri people. The military uses the natural environment as a weapon, hiding mass graves in the forests and dumping bodies into the rivers.

Ramachandra Guha notes in *Environmentalism: A Global History* (2000) that environmental conflicts in the developing world are almost always conflicts over human rights and survival. Roy perfectly illustrates this point. The defence of the Kashmiri landscape is indistinguishable from the defence of the Kashmiri body.

Roy provides a chilling description of the interrogation centres used by the military. These centres are designed to systematically break the human body, turning citizens into compliant subjects or corpses. The violence inflicted in these dark rooms is a microcosm of the violence inflicted on the broader landscape. Just as the military cuts down the ancient trees to assert control, they break the bones of the local population. When referring to the endless violence in the valley, the narrator observes, "The dead were returning. They were seeping into the water, into the air, into the soil... They were in the blood. They were in the breath" (Roy 335). This quote powerfully encapsulates Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality. The trauma of the marginalised body literally seeps back into the environment. The soil and water of Kashmir become saturated with the blood of the oppressed, making the ecological and the human tragedy completely inseparable.

Comparative Synthesis

Bringing these three texts into direct conversation reveals a dark continuity in Indian cultural narratives. From the mythological antiquity of the *Mahabharata* to the post-colonial realities of New Delhi and Kashmir, the dominant power structures consistently rely on eco-trauma to enforce their hegemony. The continuity of exploitation is striking. In Divakaruni's mythological past, kings burn forests and humiliate women in royal courts to build their empires. In Adiga's capitalist present, wealthy entrepreneurs pollute rivers and exploit the rural poor to build their shopping malls. In Roy's militarised state, the government destroys valleys and tortures minorities to enforce national borders. While the specific methods and technologies of oppression change over time, the underlying philosophy remains identical. The ruling classes view the earth and the subaltern body as empty resources waiting to be claimed, utilised, and destroyed. This aligns perfectly with the ecofeminist critiques proposed by Vandana Shiva and Val Plumwood. The patriarchal, capitalist gaze refuses to grant agency or inherent value to anything outside of itself.

However, the novels present different perspectives on the nature of resistance. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi's connection to the environment brings her little comfort. Her tragedy is that she recognises the injustice of her commodification but is trapped within the rigid structures of her society until it is too late. In *The White*

Tiger, Balram Halwai finds no solace in nature. The polluted environment of the Darkness only teaches him how to be brutal. He escapes his subaltern status by adopting the predatory tactics of his oppressors, perpetuating the cycle of exploitation rather than breaking it.

Arundhati Roy offers the only glimpse of genuine ecological and social healing in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Anjum and her community of outcasts do not attempt to conquer the environment or usurp the elite's power. Instead, they practice a form of slow healing in the graveyard. They tend to the discarded animals, plant small gardens among the graves, and care for each other's broken bodies. Their resistance is rooted in a refusal of the logic of extraction. By creating a sanctuary in a space of death, they prove that the marginalised body and the degraded environment can still sustain life when treated with compassion rather than greed. These texts collectively indicate a significant evolution in Indian Anglophone literature. Writers are increasingly rejecting the "India Shining" narrative promoted by global economic forums. Instead, they are presenting a much darker reality of progress, one where economic growth is directly subsidised by environmental collapse and human suffering.

Conclusion

Ecological degradation in contemporary Indian fiction is not merely a setting for a story. It is a fundamental mechanism of oppression. This paper has argued that contemporary cultural narratives align the exploitation of the natural environment with the systemic abuse of the female and subaltern body. This pattern persists from ancient mythological frameworks to post-colonial capitalist realities. Through the lens of ecofeminism and post-colonial eco-criticism, the analysis of these three distinct novels reveals a shared cultural trauma. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* demonstrates that the seeds of environmental and gendered violence are deeply rooted in the foundational myths of the subcontinent. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* illustrates how modern capitalism weaponises pollution and poverty to extract labour from the rural underclass. Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* exposes the terrifying intersection of state militarism, ecological ruin, and the destruction of marginalised bodies.

Recognising this intersectional trauma is vital for understanding the complexities of post-colonial literature. It proves that social justice and environmental justice are not two separate issues, but two sides of the same struggle. The forces that poison the rivers are the same forces that silence people with low incomes. Future

research must continue to explore these intersections, particularly by examining how emerging climate fiction in South Asia addresses the disproportionate impact of global warming on Dalit and tribal communities. As the global environmental crisis deepens, literature will remain a crucial space for documenting the slow violence inflicted upon the earth and the bodies of those forced to live in its ruins.

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