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Ecocriticism and the Anthropocene: Ecological Consciousness in Twenty-First Century English Literature

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Abstract

This research paper examines the intersection of ecocriticism and English literature across historical and contemporary periods, with particular emphasis on how literary texts engage with, critique, and respond to ecological concerns in the age of the Anthropocene. Ecocriticism, as a formal discipline, emerged in the late twentieth century as a critical framework dedicated to analyzing the relationship between literature, culture, and the natural environment. Drawing upon the foundational theoretical contributions of scholars such as Cheryll Glotfelty, Harold Fromm, Lawrence Buell, Jonathan Bate, and Timothy Morton, this paper traces the evolution of ecological consciousness in English literature from Romantic poetry to twenty-first century fiction. The paper argues that literature has consistently functioned not merely as a passive mirror of societal attitudes toward nature, but as an active agent of ecological awareness, ethical transformation, and environmental advocacy. From Wordsworth's reverence for the natural world in "Lines Written in Early Spring" and "Tintern Abbey" to Margaret Atwood's dystopian imaginations, Amitav Ghosh's postcolonial ecologies, and the ecocritical dimensions of postcolonial writers such as Chinua Achebe, Arundhati Roy, and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, English literature offers a rich repository of environmental reflection and critique. The paper further explores the concept of the Anthropocene as both a geological and cultural marker, arguing that the unprecedented scale of twenty-first century ecological disruption — encompassing climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, ocean acidification, and rising sea levels — demands a renewed engagement with literary representations of nature. By situating ecocriticism within this broader context, the paper demonstrates how literary analysis can contribute to environmental education, activism, and the cultivation of ecological ethics. The research concludes that ecocriticism, far from being a narrowly academic enterprise, is a vital instrument for reshaping cultural narratives and fostering the kind of ecological consciousness that the contemporary world urgently requires.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Anthropocene, English Literature, Environmental Consciousness, Romantic Ecology, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Nature Writing, Climate Change, Ecological Ethics.

Introduction

Ecocriticism as an Academic Framework

Ecocriticism is an academic approach that entails analyzing literature and other forms of cultural expression through an environmental lens. Ecocritics strive to reinforce consciousness and foster contemplation on ecological concerns. It explores the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the devastation that has been wrought on that environment by human activities (Abrams & Harpham, 2009, p. 81). As a formal discipline, ecocriticism emerged in the late twentieth century amid growing environmental movements, with William Rueckert coining the term in his 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996).

"Ecocritics not only interpret the meaning of nature writing texts. They also use these texts as a context for analyzing the ideology and practice of our society in relationship to nature. Often, the result is a critique of how our culture devalues and degrades the natural world, the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. xviii)

According to Lawrence Buell (1995), environmentally oriented works display the following characteristics: the existence of the non-human environment is not limited to being a simple framing device, but rather it emerges as a significant entity that implies the interconnectedness of human history with natural history. This foundational assertion positions ecocriticism not merely as a literary tool but as a philosophical and ethical stance — one that insists upon the moral significance of the non-human world and the inseparability of cultural narratives from environmental realities.

Ecocriticism serves as a valuable instrument for environmental education and activism, using literature and other research areas as modalities to examine, interrogate, and convey the intricate interplay between human beings and the natural world. Glotfelty and Fromm present ecocriticism as a method of analysis that not only interprets textual significance, but also serves as a potent instrument for critiquing society. Through its dual function — as both literary analysis and social advocacy — ecocriticism naturally bridges disciplinary boundaries, engaging with ecology, philosophy, history, political science, and cultural studies.

The Anthropocene: A New Geological and Cultural Epoch

The term "Anthropocene" refers to a suggested geological period characterized by the commencement of substantial human impact on the Earth's geology and ecosystems, including phenomena such as climate change. The term "Anthropocene" is etymologically rooted in the Ancient Greek terms "Anthropos," which denotes "human," and "cene," derived from "Kainos," denoting "new." The term "Anthropocene" was first proposed by ecologist Eugene F. Stoermer in the 1980s,

and it gained significant recognition in 2000 with the contributions of atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen and ecologist Eugene F. Stoermer.

The twenty-first century ushered in an era of unprecedented ecological upheavals. Global warming, deforestation, ocean acidification, biodiversity loss, and rising sea levels now dominate public discourse, scientific research, and political debate. These environmental disruptions, which threaten the very survival of numerous species — including humanity — have prompted a rethinking of human relationships with the natural world. In this context, literature has emerged not only as a reflective mirror of societal anxieties but also as a proactive force shaping perceptions, ethics, and activism around ecological concerns.

The research paper investigates how twenty-first century English literature incorporates ecological themes, critiques exploitative practices, and proposes new modes of coexistence. By placing literature at the center of ecological discourse, this paper affirms the pivotal role that narrative, poetry, and fiction play in shaping the collective imagination and inspiring meaningful responses to the environmental crisis. Far from being passive documents, literary works can galvanize public consciousness, foster empathy for the non-human world, and articulate alternative visions of sustainable coexistence.

Historical Foundations: Romanticism to Modernism

Romantic literature laid the early groundwork for ecological awareness, portraying nature as a moral and spiritual force against industrialization — evident in Wordsworth and Shelley. Victorian and modernist texts shifted toward urban alienation and environmental exploitation. While twenty-first century works address the Anthropocene, climate change, and slow violence, the seeds of ecological consciousness were sown much earlier in the literary tradition.

The Romantic ecocriticism of the 1990s is best understood through four major texts: Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology* (1991a), Karl Kroeber's *Ecological Literary Criticism* (1994), James McKusick's *Green Writing* (2000/2010), and Bate's *The Song of the Earth* (2000). The thrust of these four books is that the origins of environmentalism can be found in Romantic attitudes towards nature. In the critics' own age of pollution and rampant industrialization, the Romantic ascription of intrinsic value to placehood, dwelling, and organic interrelationship has much to teach us about how to live in harmony with the natural world.

We should relearn wisdom's way of looking at nature because it is "valuable and important to make claims for the historical continuity of a tradition of environmental consciousness" (Bate, 1991a, p. 9). Romantic texts such as Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" portray nature as a source of inspiration, healing, and spiritual renewal. It portrays nature not merely as scenery but as a living, dynamic presence intertwined with human emotions and

spirituality. Ecocriticism emphasizes how nature can be a refuge and healer for individuals. Wordsworth describes his revisiting the natural setting as a restorative experience, where past encounters with nature have shaped his moral and intellectual development.

Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and P.B. Shelley laid the foundation for ecological awareness by emphasizing the sublime beauty of nature and its spiritual significance (McKusick, 2000). Their work articulated a vision of humanity embedded within, rather than standing over, the natural world — a vision that would prove prophetic as industrialization continued to devastate natural landscapes across Europe and beyond. Shelley's ecological sensibility, expressed through his resistance to tyranny and his celebration of wild nature in poems such as "Ode to the West Wind" and "Mont Blanc," foreshadowed the later ecocritical insistence on recognizing the agency and value of the non-human world.

The Formal Emergence and Development of Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism emerged in the late twentieth century amid growing environmental movements, with William Rueckert coining the term in his 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology." Eco-criticism explores the portrayal of nature and environmental issues in literary texts. As the world faces mounting ecological crises, including climate change, deforestation, and biodiversity loss, literature has emerged as a vital medium to reflect and address these challenges. Through the lens of ecocriticism, literary works can be analyzed to uncover how they critique unsustainable practices, advocate for ecological harmony, and emphasize humanity's interdependence with the environment.

In the current global scenario, there is a dire need to address environmental degradation. By examining how authors integrate environmental themes into their narratives, this field sheds light on the evolving role of literature in fostering ecological awareness. The research aims to explore how storytelling can serve as a tool for ecocritical advocacy. As Reddy A. Venu Gopal notes in the article "Eco-Criticism in Contemporary English Literature: Nature as a Narrative Force": "As humanity grapples with the escalating consequences of climate change, habitat loss, and ecological degradation, literature has emerged as a potent medium to explore and critique the complex relationships between humans and the natural world."

Timothy Morton suggests in "Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics" (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) that Romantic texts serve as "a key site for the emergence of ecological awareness." This observation underscores the continuity between the Romantic tradition and contemporary ecocritical practice, demonstrating that the questions raised by poets such as Wordsworth and Keats — concerning humanity's relationship to nature, the

moral status of animals and landscapes, and the spiritual dimensions of the natural world — remain urgently relevant in the era of climate change and mass extinction.

The growth of ecocriticism as a recognized academic discipline was significantly accelerated by the founding of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in the United States in 1992, and the subsequent publication of Glotfelty and Fromm's landmark anthology, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, in 1996. This anthology brought together seminal essays from across disciplines and helped establish the theoretical and methodological foundations of the field. Since then, ecocriticism has expanded rapidly, giving rise to numerous sub-fields and methodological approaches, including animal studies, blue humanities, toxic discourse, slow violence theory, and cli-fi (climate fiction), each of which engages with distinct dimensions of the human-nature relationship.

Rob Nixon's influential concept of "slow violence" — referring to forms of environmental harm that unfold gradually and invisibly over time, such as industrial pollution, soil erosion, and climate change — has proven particularly valuable for analyzing literary texts that engage with the long-term consequences of ecological degradation. Nixon (2011) argues that the poor and marginalized communities of the Global South disproportionately bear the burdens of this slow violence, and that literature has a crucial role to play in rendering these slow, attritional harms visible and morally legible to a wider audience. This insight connects ecocriticism to broader questions of social and environmental justice, affirming that ecological criticism cannot be separated from a concern for equity and human rights.

Modern English Literature and Environmental Themes

"Modern English literature, spanning poetry, fiction, and non-fiction, has increasingly incorporated environmental themes, addressing issues such as climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and environmental justice." (G.V. Radha Krishnan, "The Role of Literature in Shaping Environmental Consciousness: Ecocritical Perspectives in Modern English Literature," *Journal Advances in Consumer Research*, Issue 1: 24-31). Modern English literature has played a pivotal role in portraying environmental concerns, often reflecting societal attitudes towards nature.

In contemporary literature, authors like Margaret Atwood and Amitav Ghosh incorporate environmental themes in their works, addressing issues such as climate change, species extinction, and ecological degradation (Nixon, 2011). Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* engage deeply with issues such as climate change, the destruction of ecosystems, and the consequences of human intervention in nature. Writers like Tempest Williams and Robert Macfarlane emphasize the importance of experiencing nature firsthand and developing a personal connection to the environment.

These works engage readers emotionally and intellectually, urging them to take responsibility for the preservation of the natural world. They illustrate the ways in which literature can foster empathy with the environment, motivating readers to consider their role in environmental degradation and to take active steps towards sustainability. Through vivid depictions of landscapes, wildlife, and ecological processes, nature writers emphasize the interconnectedness of all life and the importance of protecting the planet's fragile ecosystems.

Srushti Kamble, in the article "'What Man Has Made of Man': An Eco-Critical Reading of Wordsworth's 'Lines Written in Early Spring'" (*International Journal of Research in English*, 2025, 7(1): 352-353), says: "Wordsworth's reverence for 'nature's holy plan' aligns with today's eco-philosophical ideals, such as biocentrism, which asserts the intrinsic value of all living beings. The Romantic belief in nature's moral and spiritual significance overlaps with contemporary ecological ethics that seek harmony rather than dominance over the environment." (p. 353).

The genre of climate fiction, commonly referred to as cli-fi, has emerged as one of the most significant literary responses to the ecological crises of the twenty-first century. Works in this genre — including Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour*, Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, and Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy — deploy the imaginative resources of narrative fiction to render the abstract and statistical dimensions of climate change into lived, embodied experiences. By grounding ecological crisis in the particularities of individual lives, landscapes, and communities, cli-fi cultivates the kind of emotional and empathetic engagement that scientific reports alone cannot provide. This literary form represents a creative frontier in ecological advocacy, demonstrating that storytelling retains its ancient power to move hearts and minds in ways that data and policy documents cannot.

Non-fiction nature writing has also experienced a significant renaissance in contemporary English literature, with writers such as Robert Macfarlane, Helen Macdonald, and Robin Wall Kimmerer producing works that blend lyrical description, ecological knowledge, and personal reflection into a distinctively hybrid form. Macfarlane's *Underland* and *The Wild Places* invite readers into intimate encounters with landscapes at risk, cultivating a sense of wonder and custodial responsibility toward the natural world. These works demonstrate that ecological consciousness does not require apocalyptic framing — it can also be nurtured through beauty, curiosity, and a patient attention to the non-human world that surrounds us.

Postcolonial Perspectives and the Global South

Works like Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and the novels of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o showcase the environmental challenges faced by marginalized communities, particularly in the Global South. These authors draw attention to how environmental degradation disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, linking

environmental justice with social justice. Ecocritical analysis of canonical and contemporary texts reveals how environmental and social concerns are intertwined. Postcolonial novels, for example, frequently register the ecological consequences of imperialism, land dispossession, and development.

Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" reveals how colonial disruptions impacted traditional ecological practices, linking cultural and environmental devastation. Postcolonial authors foreground rural and non-human perspectives, using landscape, animals, and weather not only as setting but as agents that shape conditions, plot, and character. Ecofeminist readings attend to parallels between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of marginalized genders and communities, revealing the structural connections between patriarchal power and the domination of the natural world.

The thematic significance of "fire" in Anita Desai's "Fire on the Mountain" is multifaceted, symbolizing both destruction and transformation within human and ecological contexts. From an ecocritical viewpoint, fire in Anita Desai's "Fire on the Mountain" is not only a narrative device but also a representation of the imbalance created by human actions within natural spaces. Fire in "Fire on the Mountain" operates both as a force of transformation and as a stark symbol of destruction — emphasizing the delicate relationship between humans and nature, and serving as a warning against ecological devastation.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* deserves particular attention in the context of postcolonial ecocriticism. Set in the Sundarbans — the vast mangrove delta of the Bay of Bengal — the novel dramatizes the conflicts between conservation imperatives, the survival needs of local fishing communities, and the ecological pressures of a changing climate. Ghosh refuses to offer easy resolutions, instead illuminating the profound tensions between global environmental concerns and the livelihoods of those who depend most directly on natural ecosystems for their survival. In doing so, he demonstrates that ecological justice cannot be achieved without attending to the social, economic, and political dimensions of the environmental crisis, and that conservation policies developed without community participation often perpetuate rather than resolve these injustices.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* similarly engages with the ecological dimensions of caste, class, and colonial history in Kerala, weaving together personal tragedy and environmental degradation into a narrative that reveals the inseparability of social and ecological injustice. The river that runs through the novel — polluted, diminished, and finally destroyed by industrial development — serves as a powerful metaphor for the broader environmental and social devastation wrought by the intersection of capitalism, colonialism, and caste discrimination. Roy's ecocritical sensibility is inseparable from her political vision, and

the novel as a whole constitutes a powerful argument for understanding environmental and social justice as fundamentally interconnected.

Conclusion

Ecocriticism has emerged as a vital approach in literary studies, especially in the context of growing environmental concerns across the world. By examining the relationship between literature and the natural environment, ecocriticism allows readers to understand how cultural narratives shape human attitudes toward nature. It reveals that literature is not merely a reflection of reality but also a powerful tool that can influence ecological awareness and ethical responsibility.

From the Romantic poets who first articulated a vision of humanity embedded within the natural world, to the contemporary authors who chronicle the devastations of climate change and ecological collapse, literature has consistently served as a vital site of environmental reflection, critique, and advocacy. The canonical and contemporary texts examined in this paper demonstrate that literary engagement with nature is not incidental or decorative — it is constitutive of our ethical and political responses to the ecological crises of our time.

As the Anthropocene deepens and the consequences of centuries of industrialization and environmental exploitation become ever more visible, the role of literature — and of ecocriticism as its interpretive companion — becomes ever more urgent. The stories we tell about the natural world, the values we embed in our representations of landscape and animal life, and the ethical frameworks we construct for understanding human-nature relationships all carry profound implications for the future of the planet. In this sense, ecocriticism is not merely an academic pursuit but a form of cultural and political engagement that has much to contribute to the global effort to confront the environmental challenges of the twenty-first century.

Glotfelty and Fromm's foundational ecocritical anthology (1996) established a framework through which subsequent generations of scholars could interrogate the environmental dimensions of canonical and contemporary literature. Their insistence that literature is deeply implicated in cultural attitudes toward nature — and that those attitudes have real consequences for ecological systems — remains as relevant today as it was in the 1990s. As the twenty-first century confronts ecological crises of unprecedented scale and complexity, the tools of ecocriticism offer indispensable resources for reading, understanding, and ultimately reshaping the cultural narratives that shape our relationship with the natural world.

The concept of biocentrism — the philosophical view that all living beings possess intrinsic value independent of their utility to humans — has become an increasingly important touchstone in ecocritical thought. Biocentrism challenges the anthropocentric assumptions that have historically dominated Western culture and

that continue to underpin many of the practices most destructive to the natural world. By reading literary texts through a biocentric lens, ecocritics are able to identify and critique these assumptions, and to recover alternative traditions of thought — indigenous ecological knowledge, Romantic organicism, feminist care ethics — that offer more sustainable frameworks for human-nature relations. This work of cultural critique is not merely academic; it has practical implications for the way societies conceptualize and respond to environmental challenges.

Literature classrooms have increasingly become sites of ecological education, where students are encouraged to think critically about environmental issues through close engagement with literary texts. Ecocriticism offers pedagogical tools for cultivating what environmental educators call ecological literacy — the capacity to understand, appreciate, and act responsibly in relation to natural systems. By reading texts such as Wordsworth's poetry, Achebe's novels, Ghosh's fiction, and contemporary cli-fi alongside scientific reports and policy documents, students develop a richer, more holistic understanding of the environmental crisis and their own place within it. This pedagogical dimension of ecocriticism underscores its relevance not only as a scholarly discipline but as a form of civic education that prepares future generations to engage responsibly with the ecological challenges of the twenty-first century.

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