



VOICING THE VOICELESS EARTH: SUBALTERN ECOCRITICISM IN SELECT INDIAN ENGLISH NOVELS

R. Theresa¹

*Research Scholar, PG & Research Department of English, DKM College for Women (Autonomous),
Vellore, Tamilnadu, India*

&

Dr. M. Manimozhi²

*Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of English, DKM College for Women
(Autonomous), Vellore, Tamilnadu, India*

Abstract

The convergence of ecocriticism and subaltern studies has generated a productive framework for examining the interconnected oppression of marginalized communities and degraded environments. This paper explores the concept of subaltern ecocriticism through a comparative analysis of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. These novels reveal how ecological spaces are inseparable from social structures and how environmental exploitation frequently accompanies the marginalization of vulnerable populations. Drawing upon the theoretical insights of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Rob Nixon, the study investigates the ways in which nature and subaltern subjects are simultaneously silenced within dominant political, economic, and cultural discourses. The selected texts portray rivers, forests, coastal regions, and urban landscapes as contested spaces where power relations become visible. Through an examination of displacement, environmental injustice, caste oppression, poverty, and ecological degradation, the paper argues that these authors challenge anthropocentric and elitist narratives by foregrounding voices traditionally excluded from mainstream representation. The novels demonstrate that ecological crises are not merely environmental issues but also social and ethical concerns affecting marginalized communities disproportionately. By bringing together postcolonial ecocriticism and subaltern studies, the paper highlights how contemporary Indian English fiction offers a critical perspective on environmental justice and the politics of representation. Ultimately, the study contends that these literary works transform the silenced experiences of both nature and subaltern communities into powerful narratives of resistance and survival.

Keywords

Subaltern Ecocriticism; Environmental Justice; Postcolonial Ecocriticism; Marginalization; Ecological Resistance; Indian English Fiction; Amitav Ghosh; Arundhati Roy; Rohinton Mistry, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

The twenty-first century has witnessed increasing scholarly attention to the relationship between environmental degradation and social inequality. Climate change, ecological destruction, industrial expansion, and developmental projects have disproportionately affected marginalized populations across the globe. In postcolonial societies, environmental concerns are often intertwined with issues of class, caste, poverty, ethnicity, and political exclusion. Literature serves as an important medium through which these interconnected realities can be explored and



critiqued. Within this context, subaltern ecocriticism emerges as a significant interdisciplinary framework that examines the relationship between ecological exploitation and the oppression of marginalized communities.

Ecocriticism traditionally focuses on the representation of nature in literature and the relationship between human beings and the environment. However, postcolonial scholars have argued that environmental discussions cannot be separated from questions of power and social justice. The environmental experiences of privileged groups differ significantly from those of marginalized populations who are directly affected by displacement, resource extraction, pollution, and environmental degradation. Consequently, ecocritical analysis in postcolonial contexts must address the voices of communities that remain excluded from dominant narratives. The concept of the subaltern, developed within postcolonial studies, refers to groups that are socially, politically, and economically marginalized. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", highlights the difficulties faced by marginalized communities in achieving representation within dominant structures of power. Subaltern ecocriticism extends this concern by exploring how environmental issues intersect with social exclusion. It investigates the ways in which both nature and marginalized populations are silenced, exploited, and rendered invisible within hegemonic discourses. Indian English fiction provides a fertile ground for examining these concerns because many contemporary Indian writers engage with questions of environmental change, displacement, and social injustice. Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, and Rohinton Mistry are among the most significant literary voices addressing these issues. Their works depict diverse ecological landscapes while simultaneously foregrounding the struggles of marginalized communities. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh explores the fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans and the lives of local communities whose existence depends upon the region's ecological balance. Roy's *The God of Small Things* examines the complex interactions between caste oppression, social inequality, and environmental transformation in Kerala. Mistry's *A Fine Balance* portrays urban poverty, displacement, and survival during the Emergency period, revealing how environmental conditions shape the experiences of marginalized individuals.

This paper argues that these novels challenge dominant narratives by giving voice to both ecological spaces and subaltern communities. Through their representations of environmental injustice, displacement, and resistance, the texts expose the interconnected nature of ecological and social oppression. By bringing together ecocriticism and subaltern studies, the paper demonstrates how contemporary Indian English fiction contributes to broader discussions of environmental justice and ethical responsibility.

Theoretical Framework: Subaltern Ecocriticism:

Subaltern ecocriticism represents an interdisciplinary framework that combines insights from ecocriticism, postcolonial theory, environmental justice studies, and subaltern studies. It seeks to understand how environmental degradation and social marginalization reinforce one another within structures of power. Rather than treating nature and society as separate domains, subaltern ecocriticism examines the complex interactions between ecological systems and human communities. At the foundation of this framework lies ecocriticism's concern with environmental representation. Cheryll Glotfelty emphasizes that literary texts play a crucial role in shaping human attitudes toward the natural world. Ecocriticism challenges anthropocentric assumptions that position nature merely as a resource for human use. Instead, it encourages recognition of the intrinsic value of ecological systems and nonhuman life.

Postcolonial ecocriticism extends this perspective by examining how colonial histories have influenced environmental relations. Colonial powers frequently exploited natural resources



while simultaneously marginalizing indigenous populations. As a result, environmental issues in postcolonial societies are inseparable from questions of power, identity, and historical injustice. Postcolonial ecocritics argue that environmental degradation often reflects broader patterns of economic and political domination. The concept of the subaltern provides another essential dimension of analysis. According to Spivak, subaltern groups occupy positions of structural exclusion that limit their ability to participate in dominant systems of representation. Their experiences frequently remain absent from official narratives. Subaltern ecocriticism applies this insight to environmental contexts by examining how ecological policies, developmental projects, and resource extraction often silence the voices of marginalized communities.

Rob Nixon's notion of slow violence further strengthens this framework. Environmental destruction rarely occurs as a single dramatic event. Instead, it unfolds gradually through pollution, deforestation, displacement, and climate change. These processes disproportionately affect communities with limited political and economic power. Consequently, environmental harm becomes a form of structural violence that reinforces existing inequalities. Subaltern ecocriticism also draws upon environmental justice theory, which emphasizes equitable access to environmental resources and protection from ecological harm. Environmental justice challenges policies that place disproportionate burdens upon vulnerable populations while benefiting privileged groups. In literary studies, this perspective enables scholars to examine how narratives represent environmental inequality and resistance. Within the Indian context, environmental conflicts often involve struggles over land, forests, rivers, and livelihoods. Development projects, industrial expansion, and conservation initiatives frequently affect indigenous communities, fishermen, laborers, and economically disadvantaged groups. These populations occupy positions that can be understood as both ecological and social margins. The selected novels exemplify these concerns. In *The Hungry Tide*, local communities struggle to survive within an unpredictable ecosystem while facing political marginalization. In *The God of Small Things*, ecological decline parallels caste-based exclusion and social fragmentation. In *A Fine Balance*, environmental conditions and urban poverty reveal the vulnerabilities experienced by marginalized populations during periods of political upheaval.

By integrating ecocriticism and subaltern studies, this framework enables a comprehensive examination of how literature represents environmental injustice and social exclusion. It highlights the ways in which ecological and human voices are interconnected, revealing that the silencing of nature often accompanies the silencing of marginalized communities. Through this perspective, contemporary Indian fiction emerges as a powerful site for exploring questions of justice, resistance, and survival in an increasingly unequal world.

Ecology and Subalternity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*:

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* occupies a significant place in contemporary Indian environmental literature because of its nuanced representation of the Sundarbans, one of the world's most fragile ecological regions. Situated at the intersection of land and water, the Sundarbans constitute a dynamic ecosystem characterized by constant environmental transformation. Through this setting, Ghosh explores the complex relationship between nature, politics, and marginalized communities. The novel demonstrates how environmental realities shape the lives of subaltern groups while simultaneously revealing the limitations of dominant approaches to conservation and development.

The Sundarbans function as more than a geographical backdrop. They emerge as a living entity whose unpredictable tides, shifting islands, and diverse wildlife influence every aspect of human existence. The ecological instability of the region mirrors the precarious lives of its inhabitants, particularly fishermen, settlers, and refugees. These communities depend upon natural



resources for survival, yet they remain vulnerable to both environmental hazards and political neglect. One of the central concerns of the novel is the conflict between environmental conservation and human survival. Governmental and institutional efforts to protect endangered species often overlook the needs of local populations. While wildlife preservation is undoubtedly important, Ghosh exposes the consequences of conservation policies that fail to consider the livelihoods of marginalized communities. The deaths and displacement experienced by local residents reveal the unequal distribution of environmental burdens.

The historical episode of Morichjhapi occupies a crucial place within this context. The forced eviction of refugee settlers from Morichjhapi illustrates how state power can silence vulnerable populations in the name of environmental management and political control. The refugees sought land, security, and economic stability, yet their voices were systematically excluded from official narratives. Through the recollections of Nirmal and other characters, the novel recovers a history that remains marginalized within dominant political discourse. From a subaltern ecocritical perspective; Morichjhapi demonstrates the intersection of environmental and social injustice. The refugees are doubly marginalized: first as politically vulnerable populations and second as inhabitants of an ecological frontier. Their displacement highlights how environmental governance frequently privileges elite interests while disregarding the experiences of those living at the margins.

The character of Fokir serves as an embodiment of subaltern ecological knowledge. As an illiterate fisherman, he occupies a socially marginalized position. Nevertheless, his intimate understanding of the Sundarbans surpasses the scientific expertise of many educated observers. Fokir's knowledge emerges from lived experience and sustained interaction with the environment. He understands the rhythms of the tides, the behavior of marine life, and the dangers of the landscape in ways inaccessible to outsiders. Ghosh challenges conventional hierarchies of knowledge by valuing indigenous ecological understanding alongside scientific inquiry. Through the relationship between Fokir and Piya, a marine biologist, the novel demonstrates the necessity of integrating local and scientific perspectives. This interaction undermines assumptions that expertise belongs exclusively to educated elite.

The novel also questions anthropocentric attitudes toward nature. Human beings are not portrayed as masters of the environment but as participants within a larger ecological system. Cyclones, tidal surges, and animal encounters remind readers of the limits of human control. The deaths and hardships experienced by characters underscore the power of natural forces and the vulnerability of human life. Moreover, the Sundarbans become a space where ecological and social boundaries remain fluid. Human settlements, wildlife habitats, and political territories constantly overlap and shift. This instability reflects broader themes of displacement and uncertainty that characterize subaltern existence. The region's geography symbolizes the fragile position occupied by marginalized communities within larger systems of power. Through its representation of environmental conflict, indigenous knowledge, and political exclusion, *The Hungry Tide* exemplifies the principles of subaltern ecocriticism. The novel gives voice to communities whose experiences are often ignored while emphasizing the ethical necessity of recognizing their relationship with the environment.

Environmental Injustice and Social Marginalization in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*:

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* offers a powerful exploration of the interconnectedness of environmental transformation, caste oppression, and social inequality. Set in the lush landscape of Kerala, the novel presents nature not merely as a scenic backdrop but as an active participant in the lives of its characters. Rivers, forests, rain, and vegetation shape both the physical environment



and the emotional atmosphere of the narrative. At the same time, Roy reveals how environmental changes mirror broader structures of social exclusion.

The Meenachal River occupies a central symbolic position within the novel. Initially portrayed as vibrant and life-sustaining, the river gradually becomes polluted and degraded. This ecological decline parallels the deterioration of social relationships and the persistence of caste-based discrimination. The changing condition of the river serves as a metaphor for the corruption of social values and the destructive consequences of unequal power relations. From an ecocritical perspective, the river represents the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman life. It influences the daily experiences of the characters while reflecting broader environmental transformations occurring within the region. Roy's depiction of pollution highlights the impact of modernization and industrialization upon natural ecosystems. The degradation of the river signifies not only ecological loss but also the erosion of cultural and ethical connections to the environment.

The novel's treatment of caste is particularly significant within a subaltern ecocritical framework. Velutha, an untouchable carpenter, occupies a position of profound social marginalization. Despite his intelligence, creativity, and skill, he remains excluded from dominant social structures because of his caste identity. His relationship with Ammu challenges entrenched social hierarchies and ultimately results in violent punishment. Velutha's connection to the natural world reinforces his status as a subaltern figure. He moves comfortably through the landscape and possesses practical knowledge rooted in lived experience. Yet the social system denies recognition to his humanity and agency. His fate illustrates Spivak's argument that subaltern voices are frequently silenced by dominant institutions. Velutha's death becomes a powerful symbol of systemic exclusion and the suppression of marginalized identities. Roy demonstrates that environmental and social injustices often operate through similar mechanisms. Both nature and subaltern individuals are subjected to exploitation, control, and neglect. The same structures that permit ecological degradation also sustain caste oppression and social inequality. Consequently, the novel suggests that genuine environmental justice requires the transformation of broader social relations.

The concept of "small things" plays an important role in this regard. Roy directs attention toward details, memories, and experiences frequently overlooked by dominant narratives. This emphasis aligns closely with subaltern studies, which seeks to recover voices excluded from official histories. The novel values everyday experiences and local perspectives, challenging hierarchical modes of knowledge and representation. Gender further complicates the dynamics of marginalization within the text. Ammu's struggles reveal how patriarchal structures intersect with caste and class inequalities. Her exclusion from social respectability parallels the vulnerability experienced by other marginalized figures. Through her experiences, Roy demonstrates that oppression operates through multiple and overlapping forms of power. The environmental imagery throughout the novel reinforces these themes. Monsoon rains, dense vegetation, insects, and rivers create a sensory landscape that reflects both beauty and vulnerability. Nature appears neither entirely benign nor wholly threatening. Instead, it exists as a dynamic force intertwined with human histories and social conflicts.

Roy's narrative style itself contributes to the novel's ecological vision. Nonlinear storytelling, fragmented memories, and shifting perspectives challenge conventional modes of representation. This structure reflects the complexity of environmental and social realities that cannot be reduced to simple explanations. The narrative encourages readers to recognize hidden connections between personal experiences, historical events, and ecological transformations. Ultimately, *The God of Small Things* demonstrates that environmental concerns cannot be separated from questions of caste, gender, and social justice. Roy reveals how marginalized individuals and degraded environments occupy similar positions within structures of power. By



foregrounding these connections, the novel transforms ecological awareness into a broader critique of social inequality. Through its attention to silenced voices and neglected landscapes, the text embodies the central concerns of subaltern ecocriticism.

Subaltern Survival and Ecological Marginality in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*:

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* presents a compelling portrayal of social exclusion, political oppression, and economic vulnerability in India during the Emergency period (1975–1977). Although the novel is primarily discussed in relation to politics and human suffering, it also offers significant insights into the relationship between environmental conditions and marginalized lives. Through its depiction of urban poverty, displacement, overcrowding, and degraded living spaces, the novel reveals how ecological realities shape the experiences of subaltern communities. Unlike Ghosh's *Sundarbans* or Roy's Kerala landscape, Mistry's environment is predominantly urban. The city functions as a site of both opportunity and exploitation, where social inequalities become visibly embedded within physical spaces. The poor inhabit overcrowded slums, unsafe shelters, and environmentally degraded areas, while political and economic elites enjoy relative security. This unequal distribution of environmental resources reflects broader patterns of social injustice. The experiences of Ishvar and Omprakash illustrate the intersection of caste discrimination, economic hardship, and environmental vulnerability. As members of a lower caste community, they encounter systemic exclusion throughout their lives. Their migration to the city represents an attempt to escape rural oppression; however, urban life exposes them to new forms of marginalization. Their struggle for housing, employment, and survival demonstrates how environmental conditions influence social mobility. The demolition of slums constitutes one of the most significant examples of environmental injustice within the novel. Government authorities remove informal settlements in the name of urban development and modernization. These actions displace vulnerable populations without providing adequate alternatives. The destruction of homes and communities illustrates how developmental policies frequently prioritize economic interests over human welfare. From a subaltern ecocritical perspective, such displacement reflects the unequal distribution of environmental burdens. Marginalized populations are often excluded from decision-making processes while bearing the consequences of urban restructuring. Their experiences remain largely invisible within official narratives celebrating progress and modernization.

The novel also highlights the material realities of poverty. Access to clean water, sanitation, and safe shelter remains uncertain for many characters. Environmental conditions directly affect health, dignity, and well-being. Mistry demonstrates that ecological concerns extend beyond forests and rivers to include the everyday environments inhabited by vulnerable populations. Dina Dalal's apartment functions as a temporary refuge where diverse individuals form relationships across social boundaries. Yet even this fragile space remains vulnerable to political and economic pressures. The insecurity experienced by the characters underscores the instability that characterizes subaltern existence. Their lives are shaped by forces beyond their control, including state policies, economic structures, and environmental conditions.

The Emergency intensifies these vulnerabilities through coercive governmental measures. Forced sterilization campaigns, displacement, and political repression disproportionately affect the poor. Mistry reveals how state power operates through both physical and social environments, transforming urban spaces into sites of control and exclusion. Environmental marginality in the novel is therefore inseparable from social marginality. The characters inhabit spaces that reflect their exclusion from economic and political power. Their struggles illustrate the broader reality that environmental justice cannot be achieved without addressing structural inequalities. Through its detailed portrayal of urban life, *A Fine Balance* expands the scope of subaltern ecocriticism.



The novel demonstrates that ecological concerns are not limited to wilderness or rural landscapes. Urban environments also function as contested spaces where questions of justice, survival, and human dignity emerge. Mistry gives narrative visibility to populations frequently ignored within dominant accounts of development and modernization.

Voicing the Voiceless Earth: A Comparative Discussion:

A comparative reading of *The Hungry Tide*, *The God of Small Things*, and *A Fine Balance* reveals significant thematic convergences despite differences in setting, style, and narrative focus. Each novel explores the relationship between environmental conditions and social marginalization, demonstrating that ecological and human injustices are deeply interconnected.

One of the most striking similarities among the texts is their emphasis on silenced voices. In Ghosh's novel, refugee settlers and local fishermen struggle for recognition within political and environmental discourses. Roy foregrounds the experiences of caste-oppressed individuals whose humanity is denied by dominant social structures. Mistry portrays impoverished urban populations whose suffering remains largely invisible within narratives of national progress. Together, these works challenge systems that exclude marginalized groups from representation. The novels also reveal how environmental spaces become sites of power and conflict. The Sundarbans, the Meenachal River, and the urban landscape are not passive settings but active participants in social processes. These environments shape human experiences while reflecting broader inequalities. Their representation challenges anthropocentric perspectives that separate human concerns from ecological realities.

Another important convergence lies in the authors' critique of dominant developmental ideologies. Government policies, modernization projects, and institutional structures frequently claim to promote progress while producing displacement and exclusion. The selected novels expose the hidden costs of such initiatives, particularly for vulnerable communities. They demonstrate that development often benefits privileged groups while imposing environmental and social burdens upon marginalized populations.

The texts further emphasize alternative forms of knowledge. Characters such as Fokir possess ecological understanding derived from lived experience rather than formal education. Similarly, local memories, every day practices, and community relationships provide valuable perspectives often ignored by dominant institutions. The novels challenge hierarchical assumptions regarding expertise and authority.

From a theoretical standpoint, these narratives support the central premise of subaltern ecocriticism: the silencing of nature frequently parallels the silencing of marginalized communities. Environmental degradation and social oppression emerge as interconnected manifestations of unequal power relations. By giving voice to both ecological and human experiences, the authors resist dominant narratives that privilege elite interests. The selected works also contribute to broader discussions of environmental justice. They encourage readers to recognize that ecological crises affect different populations in unequal ways. Questions of class, caste, gender, and political power influence access to environmental resources and exposure to ecological risks. Consequently, environmental protection cannot be separated from struggles for social equality.

Conclusion:

Subaltern ecocriticism provides a valuable framework for understanding the complex relationship between environmental degradation and social marginalization in contemporary Indian English fiction. Through a comparative analysis of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, Arundhati Roy's



The God of Small Things, and Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance, this study has demonstrated that ecological concerns are inseparable from questions of justice, representation, and power.

The selected novels reveal how marginalized communities frequently experience the consequences of environmental exploitation most directly. Whether through displacement, caste oppression, poverty, or political exclusion, subaltern populations occupy vulnerable positions within ecological and social systems. At the same time, the texts expose the limitations of dominant narratives that ignore or silence these experiences. Ghosh highlights the ecological and political complexities of the Sundarbans while foregrounding local knowledge and refugee histories. Roy illustrates the interconnectedness of environmental decline and caste-based oppression, demonstrating how both nature and marginalized individuals become subjects of exploitation. Mistry reveals the environmental dimensions of urban poverty and political repression, emphasizing the material realities of survival within unequal social structures.

Together, these works challenge readers to recognize the ethical implications of environmental injustice. They suggest that meaningful ecological responsibility requires attention to the experiences of marginalized communities whose voices are frequently excluded from public discourse. By recovering these voices, the novels contribute to a more inclusive understanding of environmental justice. Ultimately, subaltern ecocriticism encourages a rethinking of the relationship between humans, nature, and power. The selected texts demonstrate that literature can serve as a powerful medium for articulating silenced experiences and imagining more equitable forms of coexistence. Through their representations of resistance, survival, and ecological interconnectedness, Ghosh, Roy, and Mistry transform the voiceless earth into a site of critical reflection and social engagement.

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