

# Exploring the Poetics of Ecological Grief in Indian Poetry: Reflections on Environmental Loss and Awareness

## OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:  
ASH-2024-12047783

Volume: 12

Issue: 4

Month: April

Year: 2025

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Received: 20.02.2025

Accepted: 24.03.2025

Published Online: 01.04.2025

Citation:  
Lakshmi Nair, C. M., and  
C. B. Ambili. "Exploring the  
Poetics of Ecological Grief  
in Indian Poetry: Reflections  
on Environmental Loss  
and Awareness." *Shanlax  
International Journal of Arts,  
Science and Humanities*,  
vol. 12, no. 4, 2025,  
pp. 72–76.

DOI:  
[https://doi.org/10.34293/  
sijash.v12i4.7783](https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v12i4.7783)



This work is licensed  
under a Creative Commons  
Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0  
International License

**C. M. Lakshmi Nair**

*Department of English, Nehru Arts and Science College (A), Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India*

**C. B. Ambili**

*Assistant Professor, Department of English*

*Nehru Arts and Science College (A), Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India*

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5713-3712>

## Abstract

*This research investigates the intersection of poetic expression and ecological grief in modern Indian poetry. The study examines how Indian poets express emotional and cultural responses to environmental degradation, climate change, and loss of biodiversity through selected poems by Agha Shahid Ali, Arundhati Subramaniam, and Jayanta Mahapatra. These poets reflect on themes such as the lamenting of vanishing landscapes, the extinction of species, and fears surrounding ecological breakdown, highlighting on traditional ecological knowledge and a deep-rooted connection to nature. Through close analysis of the texts, the paper examines the employment of imagery, metaphor and narrative form to create a deep feeling of loss and urgency. The poets' works serve not only as calls to environmental awareness and collective responsibility but also as wonderful works of art. By placing ecological concerns in their verse, these voices highlight the power of poetry to inspire reflection and action in the midst of environmental crises. Ultimately, this study highlights the role of literature as a critical lens for understanding ecological grief and advocates for the integration of literary perspectives into broader environmental discourse.*

**Keywords:** Ecological Grief, Environmental Degradation, Eco Poetry, Poetic Imagery

## Introduction

In this global scenario of threatening climate change and environmental degradation, different forms of art and literature can be found, that expresses the human experience of ecological loss. Among these literary forms, poetry has emerged as a strong medium in sharing, exploring and articulating the ecological grief in India English Poetry. This paper explores the nuanced portrayal of ecological grief in Indian poetry by examining how poets articulate with the loss and degradation of natural environment. The theme of mourning, memory and resistance within poetry that reflects a deep connection with the eco system will be studied through some selected works. This paper thus aims to make an ecocritical analysis and illustrate how Indian poetry serves as mirror for society's ecological concerns and also as a medium for ecological awareness and healing.

Ecocriticism is defined as "the study of relation between literature and physical environment" by Glotfelty and Fromm. "We have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems" (Glotfelty and Fromm). This fact is also shouted out by the modern Indian poets through their works and their main motif is to creates awareness among the people. Nature writers don't just include the romantic ideas of nature rather it is the impression on the writer's psyche that nature creates. It can be positive, negative, suffering, crisis etc.

The strong relationship between nature and literature can be found in the ancient literary works of oral traditions that includes all the four Vedas that highlights the importance of Nature worship. The oldest texts in human history, is filled with hymns that praise the elements of nature like “The mighty waters, universal kings, drink tribute from the earth.” (*The Rig Veda*) and “O Mother Earth! Born of you, and living with you, We all creature.” (*The Hymns of the Atharvaveda*) are examples of these texts emphasising how much all the living creatures are bound to the mother earth. We can also see this deep connection reflected in the ancient epics, classical texts and folk traditions. Natural world is not used as a mere background, rather it serves as central characters in epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata, charged with spiritual significance and emotional depth. These texts reveal how much Indian culture is relied on nature through different contexts, for example, the exile of Rama in Ramayana and how the forest serves as a backdrop of their journey and existence. Even these texts echo the lamenting nature and ecological sensitivity through the instances of epic battles. Not only Hindu myths and epics but also other religious texts highlight the human co-existence with nature and importance to conserve ecology. Similarly, contemporary Indian poetry offers the reflection of ecological grief through the arousing conditions like drying up of rivers, the death of flora and fauna, and the devastation of landscapes and the environmental cost of human greed.

Indian pre-independence poets have written poems that shows the environmental consciousness and also expresses Indian feelings. Rabindranath Tagore, the most celebrated pre-independence writer often depicted nature as a source of spiritual and moral wisdom. The ecological consciousness that is connected with Indian philosophy and spirituality is reflected through his poems. For example, in his poem *The Stream of Life*, Tagore writes: “The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day / runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.” This shows that all the life forms are key parts of this eco system and also, his depiction of nature as living and breathing entity shows his deep respect for the environment. His ecological view points are not just restricted to his poems, we can also

find these elements in his short stories that clearly makes him an eco-writer. Another significant writer of this period is Sarojini Naidu, whose works often celebrates the beauty of nature and also laments its degradation. Writers like Toru Dutt whose works like *Sita*, *The Lotus*, *Our Casuarina Tree* etc showcases human-nature relationship in various ways. Our *Casuarina Tree* talks about human actions against nature and it’s a lamenting nature that can be seen in this poem. “What is that dirge-like murmur that I hear / Like the sea breaking on a shingle-beach? / It is the tree’s lament, an eerie speech”.

The post-independence period had lots of significant changes that had a profound impact on the environment. The consequences of industrialization and urbanization created a growing ecological concern among poets and this got reflected in their works. The poets like A.K. Ramanujan have contributed a lot into eco poetry. His works address the tension between tradition and modernity with relation to environment. In his poem *A River*, Ramanujan highlights the different faces of nature with some harsh realities of floods: “In the summer it was dry, the river, / A thin blue line, / Like a hairline crack on a skull.” Here, he uses the metaphor of both beautiful and destructiveness of nature to showcase the duality of human interactions with nature. This poem also criticises the romanticization of nature and puts forward the realistic approach. In modern poetry, based on the reflections on environmental degradation and ecological grief, the relationship with nature has become more complex.

Glottfelty and Fromm states that “The environmental crisis is fundamentally a crisis of the imagination. The way we imagine our place in the world affects the way we treat it”, highlights the role of literature and our perceptions and interactions with environment. She points that it is very important to reimagining and reestablishing our relationship with nature to address the environmental challenges.

Jayanta Mahapatra is a prolific writer in contemporary Indian poetry and his works are deeply rooted in Odisha culture and landscape. His works are intensely connected to natural world. His poems reveal complex relationship between nature and humanity, exploring themes like cultural loss, ecological and environmental degradation through

rich imagery and deep connection to land. The major aspects in his poetry always intertwines nature with cultural and spiritual identity. His works like *Dawn at Puri* captures the landscape in Puri, a Coastal town in Odisha known for Hindu pilgrimage sites. The lines... Their austere eyes / stare like those caught in a net / hanging by the dawn's shining strands of faith. / The fail early light catches / ruined, leprous shells leaning against one another, / a mass of crouched faces without names,... (Poem Hunter) shows how human conditions are portrayed through nature and its beings. Here he uses the image of fish caught in net and its eyes showing the hope and its life desires. This fish and its image used to portray a widow who visited Puri, and the "shell" image shows her lonely life and struggles through subtle images of environmental exploitation.

For him, "To Odisha, to this land in which my roots lie and lies by past and in which lies my beginning and my end, where the wind knees over the grief of river Daya and where the waves of Bay of Bengal fail to reach out today to the twilight soul of Konark. I acknowledge my debt and my relationship". He belongs to Odisha and he is lamenting the loss of nature and its past beauty. His poem *The Captive Air of Chandipur-on-Sea* reflects on the natural beauty of coastal town of Chandipur in Odisha and signs of environmental degradation. In a nostalgic tone this poem talks about the conflict, struggles and labour that the predecessors has gone through to establish supremacy over nature. Through this poem he also talks about the failure of humans to understand and read the songs of sea, hardness of the deltas and its whiteness spread like a sheet. This poem is also an attempt of the poet to portray the contrast between the nature and human lives. He also encourages modern world people to be brave and evolve to be like their active ancestors.

Glottelty and Fromm explains that, "nature per se is not the only focus of eco-critical studies of representation. Other topics include the frontier, animals, cities, specific geographical regions, rivers, mountains, deserts, Indians, technology, garbage, and the body." (Glottelty and Fromm). In Indian poetry we can see all these topics covered evoking various emotions. Agha Shahid Ali, a Kashmiri-American poet, through his poems evokes emotions

using the themes of loss, exile and complexities through natural imagery, addressing the political and personal turmoil in his homeland of Kashmir. His works like *The Country Without a Post Office*, *Snowmen*, *A History of Paisley* and *Farewell nature* is not only used to reflect and contrast emotional and political landscape, rather it also carries essential elements like fragile nature of human existence, the enduring spirit of Kashmir and the relationship between the self, the land and other natural forces in our world. Most of his works traces back to the old culture and ancestral origins when humans lived in peace and harmony with nature.

Ali's works revolve around the actions taken by government and political powers for the land of Kashmir where he fears war and violence. Though his works he is responding to all these politically unrest scenarios. He portrays Kashmir as a place with disturbed soul and mind. The natural beauty of Kashmir was its major highlight and was called as 'paradise on earth'. Shahid is in United States and connects Kashmir in his poetry *Postcard from Kashmir*. The difficulty in maintaining balance between geographical and mental shifts is evident in his work. The postcard portrays a tranquil and exquisite view of Kashmir. The poet yearns for the captivating beauty of his own region, which is no longer present in Kashmir. The speaker highlights the contrast by stating "When I return/ the colours won't be so brilliant/ The Jhelum's water so clean, so ultramarine."

Another contemporary poet in Indian English literature who uses nature as source of inspiration, a medium to explore broader existential and philosophical questions and inner state of mind, is Arundhati Subramaniam. In her poetry we could connect the nature and poet's isolation and warmth. In Subramaniam's poetry, nature not only reflects inner feelings but also frequently functions as a channel for spiritual exploration. Poems such as *Prayer* demonstrate the poet's close relationship to nature as a place of spiritual reflection and comfort. In this context, weather and wind are not just physical occurrences, but also have spiritual meaning that can be used as a means of prayer and a reminder of God's presence. In Subramaniam's writings, the spiritual aspect of nature emphasizes the notion

that the natural and the spiritual are intricately linked and provide a means of transcendence and establishing a connection with a higher force. Using nature as a mirror for one's inner landscapes is one of Subramaniam's main methods of interacting with it. The desolation of the season is reflected in poetry like *Winter, Delhi, 1997*, as it conveys a sense of reflection and separation. The poet uses the bleak, grey surroundings as a metaphor for how he is feeling, drawing comparisons between the inside and outside worlds. For instance, the "chilly amnesia" of the leaves represents a loss of life and memory, reflecting the poet's feelings of isolation and disengagement. Subramaniam can poetically and nuancedly express complex emotions by using nature as a representation of inner moods.

In addition, Subramaniam contrasts the disorder and fragmentation of contemporary urban life with nature. For instance, she invokes the natural components of home using trees, plants, and birds as symbols of solace and belonging in her poetry *Home*, which contrasts sharply with the alienating metropolitan scene. The image of bougainvillea falling "pink as coral" provides a contrast to the impersonal aspect of city life by evoking a sense of rootedness and connectedness. This contrast draws attention to Subramaniam's criticism of modernism and her desire for a closer, more genuine relationship with nature. Subramaniam frequently uses nature in his poems to examine more general philosophical and cultural themes, especially those pertaining to impermanence and the cycle of life and death. For example, in *Where I Live*, the poem's reflection on the fleeting nature of existence is highlighted by the removal of natural symbols like the terrace garden and the sacred fig tree. These naturally occurring materials, which were once vibrant and growing, eventually give way to the passage of time, symbolizing the unavoidable changes that all living things must undergo.

Nayantara Sahgal is a well-known voice in this regard; her artwork frequently draws attention to the negative environmental effects of unrestrained industrialization and development. In *When the Moon Shines by Day*, Sahgal captures the profound sense of loss and alienation that comes with these shifts as she writes about the terrible effects of environmental

damage and deforestation on communities.

Another important author who tackles ecological mourning is Amitav Ghosh, especially in his critically praised book *The Hungry Tide*. Ghosh's story, which is set in the Sundarbans, examines the delicate mangrove forest environment, the hardships faced by its residents, and the looming threat posed by increasing sea levels. The work masterfully captures the grief and sense of helplessness that come with the slow disappearance of a special place.

Keki N. Daruwalla also frequently addresses the effects of human activity on the environment in his poetry, particularly in collections such as *The Map-maker*. His poetry evokes a profound sense of ecological melancholy in readers by capturing the sorrow of seeing once-thriving environments slowly deteriorate. These contemporary Indian English writers offer both a contemplation and a critique of humanity's part in this ongoing disaster through their poignant stories and poetry, adding to the increasing canon of writing that addresses the psychological and cultural effects of environmental destruction.

A number of contemporary Indian English writers have made ecological mourning a major issue in their works in recent years, which is indicative of public awareness of environmental deterioration and its effects on both human and non-human life. Their poetry and prose eloquently address this sadness, which is based in the loss of natural habitats and the drastic changes in landscapes brought about by climate change.

This study has explored the works of modern Indian poets Agha Shahid Ali, Arundhati Subramaniam, and Jayanta Mahapatra to understand the deep interconnection between ecological grief and poetic expression. It is evident that poetry functions as a compelling medium for mourning ecological loss and articulating the emotional and cultural consequences of environmental degradation. The poets' use of literary devices such as metaphor, imagery, and symbolism not only give voice to individual and collective grief but also evokes a different level of awareness on the fragile relationship between humans and nature.

The themes of endangered species, vanishing landscapes and climate anxiety reflect a growing ecological consciousness that is grounded in

both personal memory and traditional ecological knowledge. These poetic responses are not merely passive reflections but active engagements that prompt readers to contemplate the urgency of environmental issues and the moral responsibility of preservation. In doing so, the poets transcend the boundaries of literature, contributing to a broader environmental discourse that values empathy, introspection, and action. The study highlights the interdisciplinary potential of literary studies in environmental thought. Poetry, often sidelined in scientific discussions on climate change, emerges here as a vital cultural force that fosters environmental sensibility and social unity. By foregrounding ecological grief in Indian poetry, this research underscores the need to incorporate poetic and cultural narratives into sustainability discourses.

Finally, the paper affirms that poetry can serve as a powerful tool for ecological reflection and advocacy, rooted in emotion and enriched by cultural context. The voices of these Indian poets remind us that environmental healing begins not only with scientific solutions but also with a deeper emotional and cultural understanding of what it means to live in harmony with the earth.

## References

Frederick, Suresh. "Suicidal Motive: An Ecocritical Reading of Four Poems." *Essays in Ecocriticism*, Sarup and Sons, 2007.

## Author Details

**C. M. Lakshmi Nair**, Department of English, Nehru Arts and Science College (A), Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India, **Email ID:** lakshminaircm@gmail.com

**C. B. Ambili**, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Nehru Arts and Science College (A), Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India, **Email ID:** ambilicb90@gmail.com

- Glottfelty, Cheryl, and Harold Fromm. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Griffith, Ralph T. H. *The Hymns of the Atharvaveda*. Evinity Publishing, 2009.
- Griffith, Ralph T. H. *The Rig Veda*. Evinity Publishing, 2009.
- Hayes, Paula. "Wordsworthian Romanticism in the Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra: Nature and the Reflective Capabilities of a Poetic Self." *Vers eville*.
- Jain, Sangeeta. "Modern Indian Poetry: Reflections on Environmental Hazards." *New Academia: An International Journal of English Language, Literature and Literary Theory*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2018, pp. 310-21.
- Mishra, Santosh Kumar. "Paradigm of Longing: The Poetic World of Agha Shahid Ali." *Galaxy International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, vol. 2, no. 6, 2013, pp. 1-10.
- Poem Hunter. *Jayanta Mahapatra Poems*. 2012.
- Subramaniam, Arundhati. "Where I Live." *Poetry International*, 2005.
- Subramaniam, Arundhati. *On Cleaning Bookshelves*. Allied Publishers, 2001.
- Tripathi, Kiran Mani. "Reflection of Ecocriticism in Indian Poetry." *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, vol. 9, no. 6, 2024, pp. 336-41.