

Feminist Ecologies and Environmental Grief in Indian Women's Writing: Gender, Climate Anxiety, and Slow Violence

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Abstract—The emergence of environmental problems in the contemporary world has spurred interest in the links between gender, environment, and inequalities among scholars. However, the mainstream discourse on environmental issues tends to present climate change as an equal experience for all people, without taking into account gender and social differences related to the impacts that ecological collapse leaves. This paper explores the role of labour, displacement, care, and embodiment in representing environmental trauma through the lens of Indian literature. Building on the theories of Rob Nixon's slow violence, Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality, eco-feminism, and environmental humanities, the paper explores the environmental tragedies reflected in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014), and Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007). Using qualitative textual analysis, the paper attempts to demonstrate that these literary examples provide a critical perspective on anthropocentric discourses about environmental destruction and its impacts on society. The paper shows that the selected novels do not view environmental collapse solely in material terms; rather, they highlight the emotional dimension of the problem such as grief, anxiety, displacement, and broken ties of care.

Index Terms—Ecofeminism, environmental grief, slow violence, trans-corporeality, climate anxiety, Indian literature, feminist ecologies, environmental humanities.

I. Introduction

Issues such as climate change, ecological degradation, and environmental disasters have been playing a pivotal role in shaping everyday experiences throughout the world. Environmental disasters are also not experienced in equal ways across social hierarchies such as gender, caste, class, ethnicity, and geography. Women belonging to marginalised sections of society are often disproportionately affected by ecological crises because of their role in caregiving, subsistence labour, collection of water resources, securing of food sources, and community sustainability in times of crisis. While environmental concerns have become more visible in the public domain, most of the mainstream climate discourse continues to use universalist approaches that do not reflect the unequal dynamics involved in the experiences of environmental disasters. Feminist ecocriticism has been challenging such perspectives by highlighting that the degradation of nature is inherently entwined within social hierarchies and structures of power. Indian fiction literature is instrumental in understanding these interrelations in light of the way they shape experiences of bodies, landscapes, labour, and memory in times of environmental crises.

The following essay explores the depiction of environmental grief within Indian literature as a gendered and embodied phenomenon. The essay makes an attempt to demonstrate that women experience ecological crisis differently since their obligations as carers increase alongside environmental disruptions. This makes them aware of the uneven distribution of risks. Based on readings of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, *When*

the River Sleeps, and Animals' People, the following essay attempts to demonstrate how the crisis creates new types of precarity but also ecological imaginings.

II. Research Objectives

This study will try to achieve the following objectives:

1. Study how Indian literature portrays environmental grief and climate anxieties.
2. Discuss the gender dimensions of ecological collapse in terms of work, care, and migration.
3. Discuss the association between environmental destruction and inequality in the Indian context.
4. Understand the use of feminist ecologies in modern Indian literature.
5. Discuss how alternative ecologies are possible in contemporary Indian literature.

III. Research Questions

1. What is the nature of female experiences of ecological collapses in contemporary Indian literature?
2. What are the gender dimensions of environmental catastrophes in relation to work, care, and migration?
3. How is environmental grief portrayed as an affective experience in literary texts?
4. How could feminist ecologies impact environmental humanities in India?

IV. Literature Review

Scholars of environmental humanities have pointed out that one major problem regarding the current environmental crisis has been that it is viewed as an absolute condition that does not concern itself with matters of power and inequality. According to ecofeminists, the domination of nature and the subordination of women can be seen as interrelated forms of domination. In this sense, modern feminist environmentalism has overcome essentialist connections between women and nature to investigate the socially constructed nature of vulnerability to the environment. Rob Nixon coined the term "slow violence" to refer to the gradual nature of violence that happens in the environment, and that cannot be easily recognised due to the long-time frame it takes place in.

The concept of trans-corporeality proposed by Stacy Alaimo is based on the idea that human bodies and non-human bodies are materially interconnected. Environmental degradation, pollutants, and climate change show us that there are no solid bodily borders but rather porous ones. In the field of Indian literary studies, environmental criticism has become an area of inquiry in which displacement, development, and ecological justice have come into focus. Yet, very little research has considered environmental grief, particularly from a gender perspective.

V. Theoretical Framework

Rob Nixon: Slow Violence

According to Rob Nixon, slow violence is characterised by the gradual nature of environmental degradation and its invisibility. In contrast to catastrophes, slow violence takes place on an extensive time scale due to processes such as contamination, pollution, deforestation, and displacement. Thus, one can analyse environmental degradation as a process rather than an event.

Stacy Alaimo: Trans-Corporeality

Trans-corporeality is Alaimo's concept that highlights the physical relationships between human bodies and the natural environment. Instead of considering people as isolated beings, trans-corporeality demonstrates that bodies are constituted through various relations to water, air, earth, chemicals, and other types of matter. Trans-corporeality reveals how environmental emergencies transform into embodied ones.

Ecofeminism

Modern ecofeminism investigates the links between environmental exploitation and gender oppression without appealing to stereotypes that presuppose inherent proximity of women to nature. In turn, ecofeminists consider gender inequalities in dealing with environmental threats.

Environmental Humanities

The environmental humanities approach suggests a multi-perspective interpretation of ecological crises through the combination of literary studies and ethical, social, and political factors. Environmental humanities prioritise storytelling as a means of investigating environmental changes.

Methodology

The present analysis involves a textual approach that is inspired by feminist ecocriticism and environmental humanities.

Primary texts examined in this paper are:

- The Ministry of Utmost Happiness by Arundhati Roy (2017)
- When the River Sleeps by Easterine Kire (2014)
- Animal's People by Indra Sinha (2007)

The areas covered under the analysis include:

1. Environmental grief and affect
2. Gendered work and caregiving
3. Displacement and ecological precariousness
4. Vulnerability and resistance

Environmental Grief and Gendered Care in The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

Ecological destruction in Arundhati Roy's **The Ministry of Utmost Happiness** is shown to be highly connected to political violence, militarisation, dislocation, and marginalisation. This novel explores the link between ecological disaster, state-sponsored development projects, and urbanisation, which leads to the dispossession and displacement of vulnerable communities. Thus, ecological disasters and other similar problems cannot be separated from politics in general terms. Ecological grief becomes possible when one is deprived of their homes, alienated from their land, and loses communal connection and identity. Women, as well as other gender-marginalised people, take on the role of ensuring daily functioning under harsh and difficult circumstances, providing emotional and material support in caring for others. Care becomes one of the primary tools of survival in this situation, thus going beyond traditional domestic roles. Roy shows how ecological breakdown exacerbates gender disparity by placing more caregiving responsibility on women. This novel provides a critique of anthropocentrism by presenting the complex relationship between humans and nature.

Indigenous Ecologies and Relational Belonging in When the River Sleeps.

In her novel **When the River Sleeps**, Easterine Kire presents an alternative vision of ecology inspired by Indigenous cosmology and traditional knowledge systems in Northeast India. In this story, the

author portrays the river, forest, mountain, and spirit worlds not as passive natural resources for human use, but as active agents with memories and spiritual meaning. While focusing on a male character as the main hero, Kire describes women in Indigenous societies as key players in maintaining ecological knowledge through childcare routines, oral history, storytelling, and manual labour that keep their links with nature intact. Environmental grief in the book arises out of the loss of such links amid the processes of modernity, resource extraction, and cultural dislocation. In her work, Kire deconstructs Western-centred environmentalist perspectives based on anthropocentric views of the relationship between human society and the natural world. The author advocates relational belonging as a model of interconnectivity between land, community, and identity, which is crucial to sustaining Indigenous ecological ethics.

Toxicity, Embodiment, and Slow Violence in *Animal's People*.

One can find a convincing account of slow violence in Indra Sinha's novel ***Animal's People***. The story takes place in Khaufpur, a fictional town based on the real Bhopal gas disaster in India, and describes the persistent aftereffects of the industrial accident on the environment, body, community, and economy. The toxic exposure in this case does not occur as one single incident but is presented as a continuous experience affecting the health and well-being of people through illness, disability, economic instability, and political neglect. While men suffer the effects of toxic poisoning, women are burdened with caring for their ill and disabled relatives, along with dealing with financial problems and social exclusion. One should note the relevance of Stacy Alaimo's idea of trans-corporeality regarding ***Animal's People***, as it shows how the poisoned environment gets materialised in people's bodies and turns ecological issues into body politics. Sinha proves that an environmental disaster lives on from generation to generation and becomes a shared experience of sorrow, vulnerability, and struggle for justice.

Climate Anxiety, Displacement, and Feminist Resistance.

Across the selected texts, environmental crises generate profound forms of climate anxiety characterised by uncertainty, grief, and the anticipation of precarious futures. Ecological disruption is represented not merely as environmental degradation but as a process that fractures relationships between people, places, and communities. Displacement extends beyond physical relocation to encompass the loss of cultural memory, ecological belonging, ancestral knowledge, and social networks. Women frequently emerge as custodians of environmental knowledge and primary caregivers during periods of crisis, assuming responsibility for sustaining families and communities despite the increasing pressures of ecological change. Yet their labour often remains invisible and undervalued within dominant environmental discourses. The texts reveal that feminist ecological resistance operates through everyday practices of care, storytelling, memory preservation, and community-building. Rather than romanticising a return to an idealised natural world, these narratives advocate for more equitable and sustainable relationships between humans and their environments, emphasising interdependence, environmental justice, and collective responsibility.

Toward Feminist Environmental Humanities

The inclusion of feminist perspectives in environmental humanities necessitates a shift away from the homogenization and universalising tendencies of climate change discourses, which assume that climate change is experienced similarly by everyone. In a feminist environmental humanities approach, it is recognised that the risks, vulnerabilities, and responsibilities associated with the environment are unequally distributed on account of differences of gender, caste, class, ethnicity, and geography. This approach draws attention to embodied and affective modes of knowing and experiencing that are typically sidelined in conventional environmentalism. Environmental grieving, therefore, is understood not only as an emotional response to the environmental crisis but also as a political emotion that is historically rooted in histories of dispossession and extractive development. Feminist ecologies, through a focus on the experiences of women, indigenous peoples, and Dalit communities, among others, point to the shortcomings of a

technocratic approach in addressing environmental problems by ignoring social justice considerations in favour of profit-oriented or technological solutions.

VI. Conclusion

Indeed, the selected readings are illustrative in showing that ecological decline is unevenly experienced and cannot be considered without paying heed to the intersections of gender, caste, class, and politics. In this sense, how Arundhati Roy, Easterine Kire, and Indra Sinha depict environmental grief, climate anxiety, displacement, and slow violence can help understand how environmental crises exacerbate social inequities while changing the relations between bodies, land, and communities. The way women are affected by environmental degradation is determined by their duties in caring for other people and ensuring their subsistence and survival. In turn, environmental crises become a caste and class issue in that they have different effects on people depending on their caste and class position. Using the theories of slow violence, trans-corporeality, ecofeminism, and environmental humanities, this research asserts that environmental grief can be considered a political and emotional reaction to ecological decline. Feminist ecologies offer important insights into climate change because they allow us to see it as a differentiated experience instead of a universal phenomenon.

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