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Toward 'Viksit Bharat': Eco-Conscious Narratives and Sustainable Aspirations in Contemporary Indian English Fiction

Dr. Nitinkumar V. Pithadiya

Lecturer in English,

Dr. Jivraj N. Mehta Government Polytechnic, Amreli (Gujarat).

Email: drnitinpithadiya@gmail.com

Abstract:

India's ambitious pursuit of 'Viksit Bharat' (Developed India) necessitates reconciling economic growth with environmental sustainability. This paper explores how contemporary Indian English fiction navigates this intricate relationship, focusing on Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). Drawing upon ecocritical frameworks and the concept of "ecological justice," the analysis reveals how these novels critique unsustainable development practices, champion the voices of marginalized communities, and envision an alternative sustainable future that prioritize ecological well-being alongside human progress. This paper argues that contemporary Indian English fiction plays a crucial role in raising awareness, fostering critical dialogue, and ultimately contributing to a 'Viksit Bharat' vision that prioritizes both prosperity and environmental responsibility.

Keywords: *Eco-consciousness, Sustainable Development, Contemporary Indian English Fiction, Viksit Bharat, Ecological Justice, Environmental Activism, Social Justice.*

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Introduction:

While the intricate link between nature and literature has transcended cultures and epochs, it has recently garnered renewed interest across diverse disciplines, prompting an emphasis on the interconnectedness of natural and social worlds. Literary criticism now delves into how authors 'textualize' this intricate relationship, with concepts like ecology and ecocriticism becoming crucial tools. In India, a nation boasting diverse ecosystems like the Himalayas, southern plateaus, Sundarbans, and Thar Desert, these landscapes face increasing threats from a growing population and unsustainable practices. It is within this context that Indian literature, traditionally rich in nature writing and diverse landscapes, becomes essential for understanding cultural perceptions of nature, historical environmental practices, and anxieties surrounding ecological degradation. By employing ecological and ecocritical frameworks, we can illuminate how Indian literature depicts ecological complexities, challenges anthropocentric viewpoints, and potentially fosters environmental awareness, making it vital to explore this dynamic relationship through the lens of both literature and critical environmental theories.

The delicate dance between humanity and the environment finds expression in two contrasting ecological philosophies: shallow and deep. Shallow ecology, rooted in anthropocentrism, views nature as a resource pool for human advancement. Its strategic use of natural resources prioritizes economic gain, exemplified by exploiting resources like coal, gas, and timber. However, deep ecology stands in stark contrast, questioning this exploitative approach. Drawing from Pramod K. Nayar's assertion in *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* (2016), it critiques the "human-centric" paradigm, urging a shift towards "eco- or biocentric" values (Nayar 335). This philosophical shift dismantles the hierarchy placing humans at the apex, instead emphasizing the intrinsic value of all life forms and their interconnectedness within the ecosystem. Each organism contributes to this harmonious balance, possessing equal rights to flourish.

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While literature has always mirrored contemporary issues, the pressing concerns of ecology and environmental threats have only recently garnered significant attention from writers. This rising awareness birthed ecocriticism, a burgeoning field of literary theory that delves into the intricate relationship between literature and the environment. Unlike traditional literary criticism, ecocriticism meticulously examines literary texts through an ecological lens, dissecting environmental issues woven into settings, plots, and characters. It transcends merely depicting nature as a backdrop, instead, recognizing it as a dynamic entity akin to human beings. Emerging in the 1970s and flourishing in the 1990s, ecocriticism challenged the traditional perception of nature as solely a scientific domain, instead, embracing literature as a powerful tool for highlighting environmental anxieties. It was William Ruckert who first coined the term in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* in 1978. Ecocriticism finds its core in two foundational works: Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) that offers diverse approaches, while Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) that emphasizes social justice within environmental analysis. Both shaped the field by establishing frameworks for examining literature through an environmental lens and fostering discussions on social equity and responsibility. Pioneered by William Rueckert and further propelled by Rachel Carson's exposé on environmental damage, ecocriticism found its roots in the Romantic era, but truly blossomed in the latter half of the 20th century. Today, contemporary scholars employ ecocriticism to scrutinize the interconnectedness of nature and society, unearthing environmental problems and ecological imbalances within diverse literary texts.

Despite arriving later in India, ecocriticism resonated deeply with Indian authors like R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, and Kamala Markandaya, who seamlessly integrated ecological themes into their narratives. These authors skilfully crafted characters deeply entrenched in ecological realities, showcasing the intricate interplay between humanity and the environment. This trend continues with prominent writers like Amitav Ghosh, Kiran Desai, and Arundhati Roy, ensuring that ecological concerns remain at the forefront of Indian literature. In the face of contemporary environmental challenges, ecocriticism continues to

serve as a crucial tool for fostering awareness and prompting action, making it an indispensable field for literary analysis and environmental discourse.

This paper investigates how contemporary Indian English fiction grapples with the question of environmental issues and sustainable development within the context of 'Viksit Bharat,' India's ambitious drive towards developed nation status. Employing an ecocritical lens, the study dissects three prominent contemporary Indian English novels – Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) to explore how literature engages with themes of eco-consciousness, sustainable development, and the social and environmental implications of India's development trajectory.

Navigating Uneven Ground: Critical Engagements with Development:

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004):

Amitav Ghosh is one of the significant figures in Indian writing in English. His famous novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) is a perfect piece of eco-fiction. This novel transports us to the Sundarbans delta, a fragile ecosystem confronting both climate change and the encroachment of industrial development. Through contrasting narratives of a marine biologist and a local fisherman, the novel critiques large-scale projects that prioritize immediate economic benefits over long-term sustainability, echoing concerns about the true cost of progress. This aligns with the concept of "ecological justice," highlighting the need for development that acknowledges the inherent value of nature and ensures equitable distribution of resources (Schlosberg 75).

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* unfolds amidst the captivating, yet precarious, backdrop of the Sundarbans islands in the Bay of Bengal. This unique ecosystem pulsates with unsettling influences and extradition. Ever-present dangers lurk beneath the surface, from tidal floods that relentlessly disrupt life to the ever-present threat of tiger attacks. This volatile relationship between humans and nature forms the core thematic struggle of the novel. Ghosh, a vocal advocate for environmental justice, weaves a narrative that highlights the

precarious balance between human development and the preservation of this fragile ecosystem. He underscores the inherent dangers of the Sundarbans, stating, "At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. Every year, dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles" (*THT* 7). By portraying the constant threat of nature's fury, Ghosh challenges readers to re-evaluate their relationship with the environment, urging them to move beyond exploitative practices and embrace a more harmonious coexistence.

The narrative of *The Hungry Tide* centres upon two distinct protagonists: Kanai Dutt and Piya Roy. Kanai, a Delhi-based businessman in his forties, finds himself summoned to the remote Sundarbans Island of Lusibari by his aunt. Entrusted with managing the papers of his deceased activist uncle, Kanai's journey becomes more than just a bureaucratic formality. Meanwhile, Piya Roy, a Bengali American marine biologist in her twenties, arrives in India fuelled by a scientific quest to study the enigmatic Ganges River Dolphin. Drawn to the Sundarbans by her research, their paths converge amidst the complexities of this unique ecosystem. This initial introduction foreshadows their individual and intertwined journeys, highlighting the contrasting perspectives they bring to the Sundarbans: Kanai, grappling with family legacy and social responsibility, and Piya, driven by scientific curiosity and environmental concerns. By introducing these distinct characters and motivations, Ghosh sets the stage for a multifaceted exploration of nature, humanity, and the intricate connections between them.

In this novel, Amitav Ghosh masterfully navigates the "Green reading" dilemma identified by Jonathan Bate: the inseparable tension between appreciating nature's beauty (ecopoetics) and confronting its exploitation (ecopolitics) (Bate 266). This is exemplified by the clash between exploitative multinational corporations, manipulating genes for profit, and environmentalists advocating for sustainability. The novel tackles the real-world political complexities through the lens of the Morichjhapi massacre, where thousands of Hindu migrants were brutally evicted from the Sundarbans in 1979. Ghosh further exposes the facade of "ecological maintenance" used to justify displacement. In 2002, the West Bengal government, allegedly

colluding with a business house, displaced 10,000 residents from Jambudwip Island for a tourist resort, highlighting the hidden motives behind "beautifully maintained habitats." By weaving these narratives, Ghosh underscores the intricate ties between human actions and environmental consequences, urging readers to critically examine the true cost of unchecked development under the guise of sustainability.

Through the story of Piya or Piyoli Roy, Ghosh has crafted a character who has devoted her life to the study and preservation of nature. A woman, it is ironically believed by the eco-feminists in our times, is a better custodian of nature than man: "Women have been associated with nature, the material, the emotional, and the particular, while men have been associated with culture, the nonmaterial, the rational, and the abstract" (Davion 9). We find an interesting dialogue between Kanai and Piya on the issue of preservation of dangerous animals like tigers. While Kanai is a leftist who blames the Western 'patrons' who disregarding human cost that goes into protecting wildlife with the aid of Indian accomplices like him even as they themselves keep many animals in captivity, Piya is in favour of keeping the animals in their natural habitat. She says that it was intended so by nature:

> "Just suppose we crossed that imaginary line that presents us from deciding that no other species matters except ourselves. What'll be left then? Aren't we alone enough in the universe? And do you think it'll stop at that? Once we decide we can kill off other species, it'll be people next – exactly the kind of people you're thinking of people who're poor and unnoticed" (*THT* 301).

The Sundarbans become a microcosm of the complex tension between ecological preservation and human needs in this novel. While ecologists advocate for protecting the island's unique ecosystem, including its endangered tigers, the migrants who call it home desperately struggle for survival. The government's stance, prioritizing wildlife conservation over human habitation through initiatives like "Project Tiger," fuels Kusum's poignant critique. She questions the ethical implications of sacrificing human lives for animal welfare, asking Nirmal, "Who are these people… who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them?" (*THT* 261). Her words highlight the perceived disconnect between distant

conservation efforts and the immediate realities of displaced communities, sparking a crucial dialogue about balancing environmental protection with basic human rights. This conflict forces readers to confront the ethical complexities of conservation, particularly when it comes to marginalized populations who bear the brunt of its consequences.

Even though Ghosh examines the different theories propounded by J. Feurer regarding how the tigers turned into maneaters (*THT* 240), for the landless people the tiger becomes a symbol of the state which seeks to discipline them in the name of the tiger. Towards the end of the novel, when Piya finds the carcass of a dolphin, the circumstantial evidence and Fokir's testimony suggest that the careless official guards were responsible for its death: "…it was probably some kind of official boat, used by uniformed personnel – maybe from the coastguard or the police or even the Forest Department. It had one speeding down the channel, earlier in the day, and the inexperienced calf had been slow to move out of its way" (*THT* 346).

A powerful note is sounded with the nature overruling the human division of society based on class and leading to the union of Piya and Fokir at a time when a powerful cyclone strikes the area. Both must take shelter on the branch of a sturdy tree. She hugs the tree and Fokir sitting at her back too hugs her and both are tied to the tree with the help of Moyna's old sari: "She could feel the bones of his cheeks as if they had been superimposed upon her own; it was as if the storm had given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made them one" (*THT* 390). Overall, Ghosh gives a balanced treatment to various issues involved in maintaining the ecological balance.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006):

Another great novelist and Booker winner Kiran Desai's focus in her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) is on the geographical nature, apart from being an aesthetic embellishment, also forms an allied motif of home. If the consciousness of home lies at the deeper level in the novel, that of the habitat is felt at the surface level, at the level of allied motif. The idyllic description in the vein of pastoral representation of the hill station shows Desai's ecological leanings, which she has inherited from her mother Anita Desai, the well-known novelist. If

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Nanda Kaul merges with the atmosphere in *Fire on the Mountain*, in *The Inheritance of Loss*, it is the house that merges with the landscape: "When she looked back, the house was gone; when she climbed the steps back to the veranda, the garden vanished. […] The grey had permeated inside, as well, settling on the silverware, nosing the corners, turning the mirror in the passageway to cloud" (*TIL* 2).

Exotic details of nature (of flora and fauna and lush vegetation) at the foot of the Kanchenjunga present a veritable feast for the nature lovers. Even the solitude of the inhabitants of Cho Oyu has been described in terms of the giant squid spotted there on rare occasions: "No human had ever seen an adult giant squid alive, and though they had eyes as big as apples to scope the dark of the ocean, theirs was a solitude so profound they might never encounter another of their tribe" (*TIL* 2). The symbolic significance of the animal world is, of course, found in countless narratives produced in all times and climes. What stands out is the co-existence of the human and the animal world in that section of the Cho Oyu that is governed by the rustic cook and other servants. A saucer of milk and a pile of sweets is placed by the cook to pacify a pair of black cobras living in a hole. The archetypal cook, as his namelessness suggests, lives in harmony with nature believing that "the natural world exists in its own right and other beings have a will, a way of their own and their own stories" (Drengson 20).

However, as in *The Hungry Tide*, we find conflict in this novel also. The ethnic Nepalese Gurkha people are fighting for Gurkha-land, their homeland to be carved out of West Bengal, and Gyan, a Gurkha, gets drawn to the movement. It is a fact that environmental problems cannot be divorced from social problems like housing and agricultural land. There is the question of environmental justice and it "gives these positions a clear affinity with environmental justice movements that protest the common association of acute environmental degradation and pollution with poverty" (Garrard 20).

Sai gets emotionally involved with Gyan, her teacher of Nepalese origin, who lives in the poverty-stricken Bong Busti. Transcending the cultural barriers, nature brings them together as it did Ammu and Velutha in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Against the scenic

backdrop of the Delo Lake or by the shores of the Teesta River, they tell each other tales of themselves and their families. While nature brings them together thus, the cultural politics creates a gulf between the two lovers. The growing discontent among the Indian Nepalese takes the form of Gorkhaland agitation. Gyan joins this movement and is brainwashed so that he distances himself from Sai and even uses harsh words for her. There is a nasty quarrel between the two. Gyan places his geo-ethnic identity above everything else. He berates his beloved and mocks at the 'fake English accent' and 'powdered faces' of 'that fussy pair' at Cho Oyu. He now looks down upon them as encroachers on his homeland. However, nature does not make any living creature her permanent guest: "Even if a group has been here for several generations, the fact remains that it is true so far as the recorded history goes. One cannot make history a ground for claiming a piece of land in these postmodern times when any identity, leave aside the one based on settlement, is fluid and changeable" (Batra 170).

In this manner, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* expands the geographical scope, juxtaposing the wasteful consumerism of an Indian immigrant family in the US with the stark environmental degradation faced by a Nepali villager. This stark contrast exposes the inherent inequalities within current development models and challenges readers to envision alternatives that prioritize ecological balance and social well-being. The novel reminds us that the pursuit of 'Viksit Bharat' cannot come at the expense of marginalized communities and environmental integrity.

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017)

Arundhati Roy, a renowned Indian author, blends reformist zeal with rebellious spirit in her intricately crafted fiction. Her literary career began with the award-winning novel *The God of Small Things* (1997). Since then, her non-fiction works have established her as a passionate advocate for diverse socio-political causes. Characterized by factualness, naturalism, and a critical edge, Roy's literary activism tackles a wide range of issues - from the perils of globalization, consumerism, and environmental degradation to the complexities of communalism, the Kashmir insurgency, the Maoist struggle, and the evolving Indian democracy. Her novels, like *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), transcend mere

storytelling, weaving together rich symbolism, well-developed characters, and meticulously constructed plots to explore multifaceted themes. This epic-like narrative delves into the societal and political fabric of India, offering a nuanced understanding of its realities beyond mere factual reportage or political commentary.

A leading figure in environmental writing, Arundhati Roy consistently imbues her work with an uncompromising spirit driven by global ecological concerns. As evident in the epigraph of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* ("To, The Unconsoled") and its prologue, she acknowledges the suffering of those unheard and unseen. The prologue's stark beauty, exemplified by the "armies of flying foxes" emerging from the "old graveyard," juxtaposes its fairytale opening with the harsh realities of environmental degradation. Notably, the inclusion of critically endangered White-rumped vultures highlights Roy's direct engagement with specific ecological issues, demonstrating her literary contribution to raising awareness about environmental challenges.

The focus of the author then traverses across the cityscape i.e., Delhi, the capital of India. The city of Delhi with its historic past is personified as an old woman with "parchment skin," "wrinkle," "arthritic joint," "varicose veins," "withered tits," "aching feet," and "stiff old hips" (*TMUH* 96). Moreover, India's post-independence timeline hurtles towards the present, fuelled by a capitalist and political elite eager to transform Delhi into "the super capital of the world's favourite new superpower" (*TMUH* 96). Modernization, however, comes at a steep price. Eager to capitalize on economic gains, the narrative portrays Delhi undergoing a ruthless transformation driven by "mercenary motives" (*TMUH* 96). The novel paints a stark picture of globalization's impact: deforestation makes way for skyscrapers and factories, processed and canned food replaces traditional diets, and bottled water replaces rivers. Roy's chilling observation captures the devastating consequences: "Skyscrapers and steel factories sprang up where forests used to be, rivers were bottled and sold in supermarkets... Massive dams lit up the cities like Christmas trees. Everyone was happy" (*TMUH* 98). This facade of happiness masks the corroding impact on India's environment and health, as the ruling class remains oblivious to the destruction their 'progress' leaves behind.

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The narrative also critiques the damaging environmental impact of large-scale dams through the narrator's observation: "Massive dams lit up the cities like Christmas trees. Everyone was happy" (*TMUH* 98). This facade of progress obscures the ecological devastation these projects inflict, ruining ecosystems, harming aquatic life, and failing to deliver promised benefits to farmers. Displaced communities, forced to abandon their land and livelihoods, face neglect from authorities. This resonates with Roy's real-life activism against the Narmada Bachao Andolan, her support for which highlights the plight of communities facing displacement and environmental destruction. Gulabiya Vechania's dream poignantly reflects the harsh reality: his village submerged, traditions uprooted, and a once-vibrant river reduced to a stagnant reservoir. His dream becomes a collective one, representing the immense human cost of progress at the expense of the environment and marginalized communities. This critique urges reflection on the true price of development and the need for solutions that prioritize both human well-being and environmental sustainability.

Roy takes up the issue of quarry workers by articulating her concern through the mouthpiece of a major female character known as S. Tilottama, an unconventional and defiant architect. She wishes to "un-know" certain facts about the deaths caused by stone-dust due to which the victim's lungs "refused to be cremated" (*TMUH* 258). The quarry workers cope with life-threatening conditions at work and often die of silicosis. In addition to that, Roy's scathing portrayal of Delhi Zoo, voiced by Tilottama, exposes animal neglect. Empty cages, absent care, and harmful visitor interactions paint a grim picture. From a clinging Gibbon to a polluted hippo's pond, the zoo becomes a symbol of suffering, critiquing the disparity between its purpose and reality.

The narrator then travels across the city reaching a massive dumping ground where she observes, "miles of city waste, a bright landfill of compacted plastic bags with an army of ragged children picking through it" (*TMUH* 234). These dumping grounds have no waste recycling units to manage waste and the garbage keeps smouldering due to emission of methane from decaying waste products. These toxic gases poison the air and lead to heavy rain of smog. Moreover, the poor sanitation facilities coupled with deteriorating environmental conditions caused widespread illness and elevated the mortality rate. The state

authorities play a vital role in neglecting this widespread misery. In this regard Susan Comfort contends that, "As Roy attacks the patterns of uneven development within India and the state as an agent of this process, she also argues that these patterns are established in a transnational context as well" (Comforts 135). The state machinery does not work for the upliftment of the masses. On the one hand, common people are denied basic amenities by the state authorities, on the other the privileged few are allowed to avail all state-sponsored benefits and facilities.

In this way, Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* paints a multifaceted picture of contemporary India, where ecological struggles intersect with broader issues of social justice and human rights. The narrative foregrounds the plight of *Adivasi* communities displaced by "Pembangunan" (development) projects, underscoring the need for development models that respect indigenous knowledge and prioritize ecological equity. By amplifying marginalized voices and critiquing environmentally destructive practices, the novel advocates for an eco-conscious approach to development that upholds ecological justice and ensures equitable distribution of resources.

Envisioning Alternative Futures:

These novels go beyond mere critique, offering glimpses of alternative futures that prioritize ecological well-being. *The Hungry Tide* celebrates traditional ecological knowledge and community-based conservation efforts, suggesting a path towards development that respects local wisdom and ensures long-term ecological well-being. *The Inheritance of Loss* explores themes of degrowth and rediscovering simplicity, challenging readers to move beyond the dominant narratives of consumerism and envisioning a future where human well-being is decoupled from unsustainable consumption patterns. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* portrays grassroots activism and community resistance as pathways towards ecological justice, offering hope for a future where development serves the needs of both people and the planet.

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Conclusion:

By engaging with critical environmental issues within the 'Viksit Bharat' narrative, these novels do not offer simplistic solutions but rather spark crucial conversations about the future of development. They highlight the voices of marginalized communities, critique unsustainable practices, and envision alternative futures that prioritize ecological balance alongside human progress. Ultimately, these works contribute to a collective vision of a 'Viksit Bharat' that is not only prosperous but also just, equitable, and respectful of the ecological foundations upon which human well-being depends.

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